CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Sallie Bingham
369 Montezuma St.
Santa FE, NM 87501
505/988-9577
salliebingham@earthlink.net
3783 words

CAN YOUR HEAR ME?

My daughter Rose stands at my kitchen sink the morning after Thanksgiving, washing my dishes. Her arms tell me that she has been half-tamed since her marriage ten years ago to the Famous Poet; she wears rings and bangles he's given her that flash as she dips her hands in the water. I still call her husband the F.P., at first to make her laugh, then to remind her, once she'd stopped laughing, of the edge of wildness I think we both still share.

She says over a dripping blue-and-white platter, "I'm going to Hawaii next month, Miriam. Can you take Lillian?"

Horrified at the thought of my seven-year-old granddaughter swelling to fill my nights and days, I object, "I thought she had a father."

"Jack will have started the fall semester."

"He's only teaching one course. Three hours a week!"

"What about his writing?" She dries the platter meticulously and puts it back on the shelf, still filled with my former mother-in-law's china.

"What about your writing?" I ask.

"I'll write in Hawaii." She sinks another platter into the water. Her first book of poetry, published five years ago, was followed by an astonishing silence.

"Can't you write here?"

"Not really," she says.

“Is that why you want to go to Hawaii, Rose?”

“Tom O’Connor offered me a job there.”

“The mad Irishman.” I‘ve seen him many times, drinking at Rose's kitchen table.

She nods. “Tom and I talked it over.” She goes on, expanding to fill my silence. “You know his wife is an invalid.”

“Emily does spend a lot of time in bed.”

“Tom needs help running their house in Hawaii. Just the usual stuff—cooking, errands. They have a cleaning woman. And then in the evening after Emily goes to bed—she has to go to bed very early—we’ll read poetry. It’ll be like a tutorial.”

“What’s he going to pay you?”

“Two hundred a week, plus room and board.”

“Hardly princely. Why do you suddenly need more money?”

“I don’t need more money, I need my own money,” Rose says, herding glasses to the sink. “Jack is generous to me. Right now I’m sick of generous.”

“I tried to warn you.”

“Yes. And you were right. Now I’m going to change the rules. Of engagement,” she adds with a slight smile.

At the sink, she turns her back to me. It is nearly as narrow as a child’s. “Darling,” I ask, “how old are you?”

She looks around at me, annoyed, wiping a wisp of fair hair off her cheek. “What kind of question—“

“Thirty-two. Old enough to know better.”

"I can't imagine what you mean." She sounds as stiff as my own mother who, as she said regretfully kicked against the pricks all her life and died when I was thirty.

I say, "You know these poets, you live with one. Age means grabbing. It has to mean grabbing."

"Well, Tom's not going to grab me. He knows my boundaries," Rose says. "It's a job for a month, till they go back to the mainland."

"And for that you're willing to leave your daughter."

"Come on, Miriam, you left me when I was three months old."

"Of course. I was chasing a man. And a dream. And now you're getting ready to do the same thing."

"It's a job," she repeats, full of conviction, and I know there is nothing more for me to say.

"All right. I'll take Lillian."

"Thanks," Rose says, as breezily as though I've offered her a glass of water.

But there is more I must do. I know my daughter; her bones are still soft. Tom O'Connor will grind them to make his bread.

That evening I call Emily, Tom's wife. I know her in the way wives of luminaries know each other, by the gleam from their husbands' light.

Emily has been invalided, or at least sidetracked. Thirty years ago, she was the promising poet, but then the rain of prizes and fellowships began to fall on Tom, and Emily, slowly retreating, now appears as though through the wrong end of the telescope.

She answers the telephone, refusing the avoidance devices all the rest of us cherish. Answers in her own voice, as herself. There are certain advantages to a lack of status.

"When are you leaving for Hawaii?" I ask.

"Next Tuesday—" five days off. Five days for my campaign.

"Rose tells me Tom's asked her to go with you."

Emily's silence tells me this is news.

"As a sort of helper. Paid," I add.

"We could use a hand. The house is too big now with the children gone and the garden is wild. "Tristes Tropiques"," she adds to remind me that we both read the same books in college.

I know she is sitting in her flowered peignoir (as she calls it) at a telephone table so small and rickety it would hardly hold up a stamp. Tom mines her genteel Louisburg Square past for his images of corruption—cracked porcelain teapot, bruised sachet, broken hothouse flower—but Emily still lives among them.

I launch in boldly, "I don't think Rose should go."

Feathers ruffling, Emily asks, "Why ever not?"

"Rose has a daughter. And a husband, last time I heard."

"This is a job!"

"Of course it's a job, but you know where this kind of job leads."

"I resent your insinuation," she says, haughty as a grandmother.

"What about Helen Varnum? What about that other one, Eloise— "

"Foolish, foolish girls," she interrupts with asperity. "I assume Rose has boundaries."

"That's what she claims, but all boundaries tend to fall under the onslaught of Tom's charm."

I realize that I sound too knowledgeable; it is as though Emily is staring at me down the telephone line. I add quickly, "I've never been susceptible. I was married to a genius for thirty-three years. Enough."

Emily's silence does not forgive or forget. And yes, there have been flirtatious moments with Tom at faculty drinking parties, but that, as they say, is meaningless. In such moments, my daughter will crisp as though in a fierce flame.

"Rose will be at risk," I say.

"I don't see that as my concern.

"It will be if everything comes tumbling down."

"You give Rose a lot of credit."

After an ominous pause, I say goodbye with affection. Since I departed the ranks of academia after Frank's death five years ago, I've developed a good deal of admiration for women like Emily who soldier on.

What, after all, are the alternatives? After the first rush of divorce liberation, a restored maidenhood, a little withered, in a small rented apartment on the fringes of the Back Bay, a season ticket to the symphony, a devoted gay man to tea, perhaps a summer weekend on the Cape with a daughter who through her marriage "has means."

We all make the decisions we have to make. Very few sixty-five year old women have enough money to live alone. But we can no longer believe, as our mothers did—not mine—that our marriages are all life has to offer. And so the quandary of our dependency with all its cruel financial and emotional questions remains unsolved.

In any event, it is settled: Rose will go in five days and I will take care of my granddaughter.

Lillian comes by taxi in the early morning; Rose drops her off on her way to the airport. I haven't seen the child for a month. During that time, she has grown taller, thinner, and to my eyes, more homely, all knobby wrists and knees, shown to disadvantage in a blue dress (a dress!) she has outgrown.

I know my part; I hold out my arms. She drops her backpack on the hall floor and flies to me.

I clasp that little body, those scarecrow arms, and catch the faint sour smell of unhappiness. She is my own.

Taking her by the hand, I lead her to my little white guest bedroom where her mother's shabby teddy bear waits beady-eyed on the pillow.

She stares at the bear, and I wonder if possibly she remembers the night I walked the floor with her, that bear wedged under one arm, while her mother was throwing up in the bathroom, possessed by a pregnancy she wisely aborted. Lillian was a long handful even then in a damp flannel gown .I thought I would refuse night duty after that but I've been swept into it several times because of minor domestic crises.

“Lets' get you settled,” I say, sliding the backpack off her thin shoulders and unzipping it. A mass of faded underwear and a few crumpled jeans tumble out.

Lillian watches me, alight with anxiety. “How long will Mom be gone?”

“She told me a month.”

“I don’t think she’s ever coming back.”

Then I’m on the floor and she is in my lap, snuffling, rubbing her tears off with the backs of her dirty hands.

I fasten my arms around her, feeling again her bony fragility. “However long she’s gone, you’re staying with me.”

Shocked by my own words, I realize, with horror, that the crack in my heart is opening. Loving this child will expose me, again, as I’ve never wanted to be exposed. It only happened once. After that, I papered over the crack but I knew all along the covering was only paper, growing more brittle with time. Now it is splitting.

“What about school?” Lillian asks. “Mom didn’t give me time to get my books.”

“We’ll fetch your books, and I’ll drive you to school.”

“But you don’t like to get up in the morning, Miriam,” she reminds me sternly.

“When I have a good reason to get up, I get up, and you are a good reason. Go wash your hands and we’ll have a snack.”

It's eight A.M.—probably this should be breakfast, but I don’t keep breakfast food; there's something dreary about eggs sitting forlornly in their plastic cases and

cereals trapped in boxes. I generally go to the coffee shop on the corner for a croissant and a cappuccino and to goggle at strangers.

We go down the stairs hand in hand; she pushes her thumb into my palm. Cool late summer sunlight pools on the faded carpet. I hardly housekeep, I do not repair or renovate; as we go into the kitchen, I hear the defective faucet dripping as it has for weeks and see the battered linoleum as Lillian perhaps sees it. She is climbing onto a stool at the counter, slyly and shyly hopeful.

I open my refrigerator and study its bare interior. "What would you like? Maybe some cheese?"

That first night, I fall asleep easily then wake up every hour. Finally I let myself get up to check on Lillian. It's a warm night, and she has kicked off her sheet and summer blanket; her long arms and legs, free of covering, look stranded. I pull the sheet over her, holding my breath. What will I do if I wake her? I must get back to my bed, back to my sleep.

Tucking myself in, I think, I'm a selfish old woman. I've done all the caretaking I'm ever going to do; Rose, her two brothers, and their father used it all up. Now I want to hold those words with both hands, stones to shore against my ruins.

They used me up, but only in the way everyone uses up the people who love them, not with demands—demands are fruitful—but with obliviousness,

withdrawal, distraction, the wavering focus that allows cold air to rush in, to fill all our gaps with damp chill hopelessness, what some people call reality.

I don't call it reality. I call it one version of human frailty, and my retreat into my aloneness after Frank died is my version of this condition. I exist in my aloneness like a stone at the bottom of the sea.

And now here comes this child.

I'm terrified of loving her, terrified of being jerked up from the chill depths. Already I'm planning to rush out at seven A.M. when my neighborhood grocery opens to buy eggs, bacon, butter, bread and three kinds of jam for Lillian's breakfast. Instead, I force myself to sleep, and my refrigerator is still empty when Lillian creeps in to wake me. She is like a moth assaying sunshine. "Miriam?" Her voice is barely a peep.

"I'm awake," I lie, and I see her startle as I rise up from the chaos of my bed.

Lillian is hugging her arms, chilled, despairing.

"Come here," I say.

Very slowly, she walks across the rug, her bare feet smaller and whiter than the rug's moon flowers.

I gather her in.

Picture, then, the days passing in the flat routine of love, the routine that was always alien to me even when I reinforced it rigorously for the sake of Frank and our

children. It never occurred to me to ask if they wanted me to provide, provide, but since they all left me as soon as they possibly could (even Frank's heart attack, the doctor said, was premature), it seems what I provided lacked savor.

Does all routine lack savor? As soon as love is housebroken, does it die?

It seems to me what human beings want—the only thing we really want—is warmth: the fire at the back of the cave, the skin robe, the arms that briefly enfold us.

And warmth is what I derived from Lillian's deprived little body, and warmth is what she drew from my bones.

But there was also the parent-teacher conference, the deadly drives through the rain to get her to school on the other side of the city ,the sobs over math homework, her tears spotting the page. There was the wretched day when her cough wracked me as though it was stripped from my own lungs. And there was her green-growing defiance when she stood, skinny arms akimbo, and announced savagely, "I won't and you can't make me!" My hatred and admiration drained my memory of whatever it was I'd wanted her to do—take a shower, get dressed—and my fingers itches to grab her, shake her, strangle her chicken neck.

Which of course I did not do. But the energy of that impulse terrified me. Would the day come when my impulse would rise up like a twenty foot wave and swamp me in stinging, roaring, bone-chilling water?

After the first week, Lillian's devotion to her vanished mother began to rankle me. Rose called every day, always in the half hour of peace I had before I

needed to start breakfast. At the first ring, Lillian tore into my bedroom to snatch the phone out of my hand.

“Mom? Mom!” Quaking and quavering as though the thin line was breaking under the weight of the Pacific Ocean.

And then they would talk for what seemed like hours while I trundled down to the kitchen to prepare those eggs, that bacon, that toast with butter and three kinds of jam that Lillian, kindled by her mother’s voice, almost never ate, and I slammed the whole mess into the garbage.

Need made me underhanded. On the eighth day, I turned off the ringer, claiming that Rose’s phone call wakened me too early although I was always awake, lying stiff in my rage. So then they started to speak on my cell phone. On the eleventh day, I told Lillian the cell phone was broken and it was going to take me at least a week to get a new one.

She stared at me. "There's the real phone," she said.

When we only had five days left, I did the most despicable thing of all: I told Lillian the land line had stopped working.

Well, by then it had. I'd snatched the cord out of the wall while she was at school, stuffed it all into a garbage bag and shoved the whole thing into what had once been a coal bin in the basement.

My narrow house is an old house. The scent of age is everywhere, hanging like dust motes in the stale indoor air.

My rage ignited those motes; they flared, and flew to the ceiling. One fell, a red hot spark and burned away what was left of the paper over my heart crack.

I knew what was coming. I went out to walk on the Common.

Walk. Walk. The steady beat of my boots on the path kept me fastened as the crack opened wide and I plunged into it, into the ooze and trickle of what I had finally managed to forget.

The Greek poets knew we never chose Apollo.

His face. That came first. The lean jaw, tall forehead, pronounced widow's peak (he hated for me to call it that),narrow nose slightly bent from barroom brawls, narrow lips tight above a small goatee.

Then his shoulders, the muscles I kneaded with both hands on the rare occasions when he allowed me to touch him, muscles built by years of house-building yet with the elegance he'd learned years earlier from lifting a ballerina.

Narrow chest I longed to cover with the warmth of my kisses because his shaded skin seemed too thin to keep out the cold.

Hips angled, nearly fleshless, the bones smooth in my hands, deeply indented stomach, dark hair from which sprouted his small penis.

Buttocks that fit my palms with the dark egg sack between and the asshole I knew he had given to many, in prison and out.

My dark one, the savage in me.

He lied to me from the beginning although in his strange honorableness he let me know he was lying. He kept all his women on strings he jerked or dangled, and one man was fastened firmly to his belt. At first I denied it all, I coated reality with my ordinary sweetness, the learned sweetness of a woman long married to a too-worthy man whose gut outweighed his worthiness. When my raging began—

"You never listen to me!"—my sweetness peeled away in coarse layers. There were rocks underneath.

In bed, he mastered me perfectly. The perversions, as I called them, would come next.

Slowly, by my forefinger, he led me into his kingdom until my own rage and fear ignited and I fled.

It took me five years to paper over that, years when I drove by his house to see whose car was parked in front, begged friends for gossip, called him and hung up when he answered and slowly, very slowly, the paper covered the crack, filling in from the edges as a road puddle freezes first along the rim.

And now the child without even meaning to do it had stomped through and I was five years down.

Walk. Walk. The steady beat of my boots on the pavement. I will not run mad, foam at the mouth, shriek as long as I can hear my boots.

Dim river, roiled with currents, striking through under the old streetcar bridge, and then the narrow sculls with their bent rowers, tuned to the shout of the small man crouched in the prow.

Narrow trees, desiccation of our city and its furniture: trash barrels, defunct water fountains, unused benches. Above it all, the bleached New England sky.

Finally I had to go back. I had to pick up Lillian at school.

Trembling with indignation—why must I betray myself?—I hitched the telephone cords to their sockets and turned on my cell phone. Rose was ranting on

the other end, in front of backed-up messages that seemed to prove that I occupied a place on the earth.

That evening Lillian and I made popcorn and ate it in front of the television.

In the morning I woke in the dark, the telephone receiver already in my hand when it began to ring. I told Rose, “I want to keep her.”

“Well, you can’t.”

Like a fool, I asked her to give me her reasons, and she did, in full, the long buried past with its recriminations laid out before me like the map of an abandoned city.

“I’ve changed,” I told her.

She didn’t believe me. Why should she? Claiming to change is a wheedle, a tease. I didn’t think I had changed. Only, my split had opened and I was desperate.

I knew I had to negotiate, I who have never negotiated in my life. Men, friends, work—they have all come to me easily as though they were my unearned due. But that would never again be the case. I was scraping the bottom of the barrel.

“Two weekends a month,” I pleaded.

“One. Lillian needs to spend more time with Jack.”

“But she hates him!”

“I guess you’ve been fueling that.,”

“We never mention him.”

Rose started to ask how I knew anything about Lilian's feelings for her father, then wisely bit off the thread.

“One Sunday afternoon a month is the best I can do for you,” Rose said. “I never expected you to fall in love.”

That afternoon I packed Lillian’s suitcase. The next day she was gone. At the front door she was stiff and cold as she had been at the beginning. When Rose came up the front steps, Lillian flew to her as she had flown to me.

But I do have hope. Rose, as I’d prophesied, has fallen in love with Tom O’Connor although they’ve not yet, she told me, “consummated.” She is waiting for him to leave Emily.

Perhaps he will. I can’t know. But I do know he has already told Rose, “No children.”

And I know whom she will chose.
