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Our Little Vesuvius

By Dulcie Leimbach

We walked the king and queen of boulevards, Fifth Avenue, in October, a late-cresting morning consisting of hot and cool sun as my socks, lavender colored, kept falling down.

We lingered in front of Lord & Taylor, where we lurked last Christmas, our mother's old boyfriend, Joe, with us as we stood in a winding line to gaze at the window scenes, so remotely warm on that icy night, softening the wind that skittered under our coats and lashed at our legs, covered in thin tights that did not, I recalled, fall down. Our mother's face, flush from the December slap and the jazz of the city, contrasted with her black-rabbit fur hat and charcoal-black Chesterfield, its velvet collar worn to the bone. I read in her forced good cheer the unease she could barely tamp down with the man she told us she couldn't love.

My eyes traced the Lord & Taylor script that fall visit to the city almost a year later, the writing's leggy arches reminding me of Aunt Betty, her dancer's body length enabling her to model for Bamberger's in Newark when she was young, we were told, before she got married and had seven kids. I had tried copying the Lord & Taylor signature at home in a notebook after our visit that Christmas, perfecting the ampersand like a proud parent of a smart studious girl. I recorded lists of names in the notebook as well, ones I would bestow on my children when the time came, all ten of them, I hoped. The names were mostly girls, however, as if I had a choice: Natalie, Colette, Liza: far better than Enda, my name, unpronounceable to strangers and friends alike.

The stroll uptown on the broad sidewalk invigorated us under the autumnal light, no longer garish like the summer or brief and dolorous in the winter but a calm spectrum in between. Our mother began to fret and moan in a way that she never allowed herself when Joe was around, as if she held it all in until they ended their "friendship" last spring, wiping her hands of him, she'd said. Her high heels, her standard form of torture, crimped her feet, particularly the pinkies, leaving them rough as barnacles.

She had no sneakers, refusing to wear such sensible shoes, calling them orthopedic and spinsterish, like the school nurse at Nathan Hale. I appreciated her scorn for the unfashionable practicalities of life.

"We'll have to hop on a bus, I'm afraid," she said to Izzy and me, as if admitting defeat at Waterloo, realizing that the buses on Fifth Avenue traveled in the opposite direction in which we were headed. Moving over one avenue never came up, it was never considered. "I don't dare splurge for a cab."

Our destination happened to be a place far more elegant than Lord & Taylor, if that could be possible. DePinna's was one of the most famous stores on the Avenue, the only street, in my mind, that existed in the city if not the northern hemisphere. (Who cared about the south?) When you entered DePinna's, our mother told Izzy and me, you could hear the whispering hush.

"As sacred as a church," she said, increasing our nervousness, "as silent as a confessional on Saturday afternoon." I had not been to confession in a year, dreading the awkward give and take with the mumbling priest, inevitably making up tales to fill the empty darkness of the booth, for I was a perfect human, couldn't he tell? Last time, though, I'd invented a story about stealing a plank of wood from a neighbor's back yard, unable to answer why I'd done so when the priest cross-examined me, as I wallowed mud-deep in my lie, unable to crawl out, sentenced to five Hail Marys and five Our Fathers.

Was DePinna's really a store or a place of worship, I wondered to myself. We were not the right people for DePinna's, after all – we sinned too much, we screamed too much, we resented and hated people! Then again, we were not the right people for many places – fatherless, penniless strivers – yet we had traipsed into Manhattan from our mother-daughter house on the Gold Coast for a day's outing to a department store shrine and mixed blessings. God would not have approved; or would he have cheered us on?

"Let's take a break at Schrafft's," our mother said, relying on food to solve most problems, including aching feet and the willies. We had stopped at Schrafft's on the holiday trip with Joe, squeezing into a red-leather booth barely fit for all five of us: Izzy, Helene and me on one side, my mother and Joe on the other, their shoulders touching, adult legs rubbing. I had marveled at the black-and-gold grillwork of the restaurant, the filigree decorations copied from the old, withered estates growing ancient in Huntington Bay, their long-ago beacons of wealth showing wear and tear over the decades, though still sending messages of pride that belied any dirty links to money. Instead, the mansions, grown over with ivy and wisteria and sometimes more flimsy clematis, felt like souvenirs

dropped from heaven, gifts bestowed that could, I surmised, land on me if I played my cards right, my most important game. “I sure could go for a pick-me-up. Do you know what I mean, jelly bean?”

Our mother was not used to getting up so early on a Saturday, let alone rushing off on a jaunt to New York, where she labored five days a week on another avenue, Madison, just a block away, yet it might as well have existed in Tasmania. Saturday was her day to sleep in and let her crow’s feet, she was fond of quipping, take a rest too — her natural facelift method, she called it. But she had wanted to make this trip, riding the double-decker train to the city — the most fun we’d managed in months. Helene we left behind because she had too much homework, trig and biology and something else I couldn’t grasp. A 3D art project? She would have raised the ticket price for our trip on the LIRR, and our mother decided to be selective.

On the train, we sat in a lower-level seat first; then Izzy and I switched to the upper halfway there, in Mineola, leaving our mother alone to complain about her ungrateful daughters. Izzy returned next to her, as I mulled over my sister’s little betrayal and ruminated over whom she loved most, certain that the answer would not please me.

Schrafft’s clattered with the sound of thick china knocking against each another like chimes, how Charleston Gardens clanged away at Altman’s on Lower Fifth, our main pit stop when we traveled into New York, about twice a year. The clamoring reassured me, despite Schrafft’s Hollywood aura, a scary contrast with Charleston Gardens, which I decided then and there was the preferable restaurant because it catered to people like us, a mother and her girls, parading around with mild airs but big motives. Noting Schrafft’s soaring ceilings and marble columns, its ballroom atmosphere belied its dainty but stern clientele as nearly all the women dining there were dressed with white gloves and dark hats and strands of pearls hugging their necks. I couldn’t help thinking that the setting was too much, that the restaurant – our mother called it a glorified coffee shop – gave our out-of-town status away easily. The women would have looked out of sorts at Mass at St. Patrick’s back home, on the other hand, where everyone wore Lily Pulitzer’s or similar straightforward fashions despite the vicinity of God and the Holy Ghost, Mary the Virgin Mother, who surely deemed each one of us vainglorious and destined for hell. At Schrafft’s, the women probably did not go to church, I concluded with sorrow and disgust, certain their lives had been already wasted.

Our mother, whom I called Lee Harrington to myself and not Mom, out of amusement and spite, winced about her feet again. She had waltzed right to the counter at Schrafft’s, pretending she

owned a red stool there. Occasionally, I savored her ability to put on such an act, a skill that I lacked but tried to cultivate in school and at church, at shops in town and as I rode my bike around the private drives of Huntington Bay. Mostly, I was a girl who worked hard to convey something other than myself, clamping down my emotions and foibles even as they tumbled out, breaking high to low to high again like ocean waves.

"What were you girls lollygagging for? You'd think you'd stumbled onto the wrong address," she said, pointing for us to take the stools on either side of her. "Never let anyone intimidate you, including a restaurant full of single, desperate women. Grab a stool before some other ninny does."

In New York, you had to be quick and shrewd, and though I did not get to see my mother operating in the big city often, I glimpsed a different person when we ventured into Schrafft's, a woman who trotted out an exalted image of herself to satisfy her ego and the audience around her, especially in elaborate settings away from home. Yet underneath this fakery lay the person my sisters and I braved at home, the Lee who was prone to weepy, bitter recriminations, questioning her reason for living while counting the Green Stamps as she licked them into the blank pages of the booklet.

"No drinks, only water, and don't pick anything over a dollar," she instructed, orders that did not need voicing, as we gravitated to the least expensive items on all menus -- trained from the dawn of time, which in our case began in 1960, the year our father died from walking pneumonia. He had entered the emergency room on New Year's Eve and never came out alive, a painful but riveting truth that I recited in my head in case anyone asked – but no one had the courage to try. I held the menu, its plastic-coated pages flipping like giant cards, the lists of entrees and appetizers and desserts set in curlicue type that swam before my eyes like the creepy creatures in the Sound. I read and reread a section called "streamliner suggestions," aware of such necessities as cottage cheese but wondering who on earth would deign to such blandness in a restaurant. And what was a side car? Could it be a sand dune?

"Izzy, you and I can split an egg-salad sandwich," our mother said, dashing my sister's hopes for an ice cream sundae, her standard request during all dining adventures. Schrafft's ice cream could be called the crème de la crème, the dreamiest dish in America, so when I looked at my sister's face collapsing into near tears, her grief struck me close, as if the two of us were attending a funeral of a dear person but distant acquaintance. She lay on her stomach on the stool to drag out her disappointment, her hair hanging over the seat, mopping.

"You're embarrassing me, young lady," our mother said, tugging Izzy up. I loved my sister, but her stubborn qualities could be vexing, able to raise the temperature in a room, including one as cavernous as Schrafft's, the china pings like yodels in the Swiss Alps. The waitress appeared with a pad, ignoring my bratty sister, having witnessed such a performance before, no doubt. Her hair wrapped in a snug bun held with a mesh net, the waitress could have passed for a character in a TV show, her lips done in red so much more brazen than our mother's that it astonished me such boldness could look so good so soon in the day, testaments that habits in the city never ceased to astound me, New York so removed from our calm port on the rolling hills of the North Shore that I understood my mother's exhilaration when she came home from work at night, electrified but depleted, pouring herself a glass of Scotch, crunching the ice with a spoon, splattering the bits on the counter and the floor for someone else to clean up.

I picked a tuna sandwich from the menu, eager to devour the pickles, wary about ordering something new, while our mother, contrary to her command about no drinks, ordered a Sanka for herself. She heaped in sugar, confiding, "It's free and I need to keep going."

Eyeing the club sandwich the waitress whisked to the lady next to me, I studied the oozing Pisa of bacon, mayo, turkey, tomato and lettuce, the fried pork aroma taunting my nose, my stomach growling like a tiger. An ice cream soda accompanied the woman's BLT so she could wash the sandwich down. My mother whispered again, "If your grandmother were a nice person, we'd be ordering bacon and sodas, too."

Geg and our mother, despite the miles between our house and hers – she lived in a former summer bungalow on the other side of the Hudson, in the State of New Jersey, above a lake – had their claws in each other for so long that the mere mention of her name could sour stomachs. "Who needs her measly bucks?" our mother said, sipping her Sanka, leaving a lipstick mark on the rim, how the woman next to me sullied her straw as well. "At least we know how to relish life, to have a zest for living. Who would think we could manage to end up in the lap of luxury, good old Huntington Bay, without a pittance to our name? And here we are now, a trio of ragamuffins, dining in style and off to DePinna's. To heck with her Persian lamb coat."

She paused before heading in another direction, more vehement but just as dry and bitter. "Daisy dined in Schrafft's," she said, mentioning the name of a woman who felt more authentic, like our mother's other idol, Liz Taylor, than pretend. "This is where single women eat after a night with their

lovers, a married man, of course. It's like a club, where they can go and not feel seen and wish their lives had turned out differently. I splurge for lunch here on Wednesdays, when I'm not sure I can get through the rest of the week."

Our mother's job as an ad-agency receptionist she got right after being fired from Avis, changes that occurred in the same time she cut off Joe. I liked picturing her during the middle of the week perky at the Schrafft's counter, revived from a slump at the office, her feelings tinged by some slight —usually from a man who had forgotten to flirt with her or to offer her half of his roast-beef sandwich. Even though I never saw her in action in the city during the week, I wanted to imagine her happy-go-lucky, charmed by glances from men passing by.

"Daisy, as in 'Great Gatsby,'" she continued, nodding at the woman nibbling the club sandwich, the insides littering her plate. "You've heard Helene on the topic of Gatsby. Well, this is where Daisy licked her wounds, out of sight of the man she was determined to destroy."

I studied the Daisys around us. The sandwich of the woman next to me had collapsed, dropping onto the plate like ashes, a collection that I wanted to dab my finger in, the bacon salty against my tongue, the fat squelching soothing all desires. The women in Schrafft's, I agreed, appeared worn along the edges, abandoned like stray cats, similar to our own Samantha, whom we rescued at the supermarket parking lot two years ago back in Oyster Bay, swayed by her dappled calico fur, a coat she cleaned obsessively, how Geg cared for her upholstery, vacuuming and polishing it to a divine sheen. Helene was infatuated with the Fitzgerald book; she read it a half-dozen times and recited the last line when we least expected: on the way to church, to our grandparents via the Lincoln Tunnel, getting gas at the Sinclair station – "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." She also recited lines from Faulkner and Hemingway and Dickinson and Wallace, so that I felt I never had to read these works myself. The more she drew sustenance from them, the better I absorbed them, convinced of my own inadequacies, resigned to not getting through the dense pages of tiny type without experiencing some sort of trauma, like near suffocation. Helene read to me scenes of Faulkner in her long-abiding quest to share her ardor for him, hoping that his Southern stream of consciousness would lift me like a boat to a higher tide, so I would become sage and smart and rise to the head of my class, playing my cards right, but the riverine sentences induced nausea, resembling those drives in the car, dragging me down on our annual visits to New Jersey and Geg's. I was so bound to the belief that what the author was saying hung so far from my radar that I couldn't begin to listen, unready for Helene's pop quiz afterward about the meaning of what she had read, the author's intentions. How did I

know what Faulkner wanted to say? I had forced myself through “Tom Sawyer” as a concession to Helene, deeming it boyish, though “Huck Finn” had a right-on depiction of an orphan, hitting against my own feelings of self-pity and the urge to rebel and kick my mother in the head. Both books had been recommended by Helene (and even by my teacher) to help me soar above my well-off, yacht-club-belonging classmates, to cast me into the mold of a young, able Simone de Beauvoir, but the stories that gratified my sister failed to captivate me, not least because she nailed them on like a hammer.

“The day is toasty, thank God,” our mother said, staring at Schrafft’s large plate-glass window, providing a streaming view of the city’s single flow, a motley and classy ribbon of humans striding by so fast that I guessed how their socks stayed up, while others meandered as if lost in thought, untethered from all anchors. “It’s the perfect kind of day. No clouds in sight, ‘So we beat on,’ ” she said, laughing, “against the . . . how does it go? The mooring? Oh, I wish Helene were with us.”

True, Helene would know the last line from “Gatsby,” but her presence would also ruin my sense of feeling in charge for a change, the small attentions my mother bestowed on me, however reluctant and pining for my older sister. And yes, it was a royal day, no disputing that. “What I wouldn’t do for some adult male company,” Lee went on. “Joe got my jokes. Helene tries.”

We beat on as the check arrived, an ominous second looming as our mother heaved and sighed, coughed and inhaled, a reaction we counted on when we ate out, her eventual chuckling as she dug in her pocketbook, feigning illness and poverty. “Izzy, dearheart, do you think they will let us wash the dishes?”

Izzy, who had sucked at the mayo in her corner of the egg-salad sandwich and prayed for ice cream, shook her head, mummified. How would she get through the day without eating, I worried, my concerns over my younger sister as constant and assailing as the north wind. We would not have enough money to stop again; she would blacken the trip, a dinghy smashing against the current.

“You don’t think my joke was funny?” our mother said, rubbing Izzy’s cheek, where mayo had left a glistening mark. “I think I’m funny. I think I’m hilarious, in fact. I’m worth a million bucks.”

Our mother was addicted to “Johnny Carson,” and on Friday nights, she’d stay up to savor his jokes as if she had been granted a private date with him, hitting her bare leg at his humor, which escaped me no matter how much I searched for ways to laugh along. Ha-ha-ha. Our mother wanted to marry Johnny, she talked about chasing him down at NBC, where he would spot her in the audience or

on the street and leave his wife at once, scooping our mother from oblivion, ignoring the rest of us. Helene thought this fantasy worth stoking, and as we'd left that morning for the train, she yelled from the door, "Say hello to Johnny!"

Finding her wallet, which bulged with dollar bills, our mother laid a chunk down under the check and we pushed the revolving door to join the pulse outside, our mother's head held unnaturally high, forgoing a tip. "I don't think she deserved it. She was awfully snooty and did not treat us as if we were special. She didn't even smile at Izzy."

We walked northward, guided by an internal light, reinforced by lunch, the concrete boardwalk tough and caustic but not unlike, I thought, an errant wave in the Sound, pitching and rolling us out of the main current, a sojourn complicated by my knee socks creeping to my ankles every few feet. We had many blocks to go, and I chastised myself for my lousy choice of leg wear, admitting that the socks, although they matched the heather tone in my purple-plaid skirt, never worked at home, so why did I think they would fare better in the city?

The sun throbbed against our backs at a low but direct shot as shafts of yellow light left brilliant corridors to pass through as if preserving us in amber. The other side of the avenue lay tented in shadow, while the fronts and sides of the tall gray buildings seemed to extend their arms toward winter, as we forged ahead on our mission to live beyond our means. Our father, gone at 36, had been a lawyer but left his will in his parents' name, the stingy but dedicated Geg and Pop. And this funny traitorous move is what I pondered as we walked against the traffic. Above, the skyline stretched broad but pierced by thorny skyscrapers, their silver peaks as gleaming as knives, grabbing the upper remnants of the most desirable heat. Although I had reveled in spending a day in the city and nothing could be more important than buying a dress on a Saturday afternoon, I couldn't shake the sensation that I'd rather be lying in the solemn cove of the evergreens that lined the edge of our front acre, hearing the branches' creak and groan, the blue jays and cardinals and robins diving for sustenance, the sky a bleeding forever blue.

Approaching Saks, where we'd also window-shopped the year before with Joe, the man my mother couldn't stand because he had a pitted nose and baggy eyes and could not fulfill my mother's unending needs, the store stood towering like a lighthouse at 50th, as I counted two more blocks to De Pinna's, where I planned on taking them off if I could gather my wits and ignore any sidelong glances at my bare legs in the middle of fall. Izzy had recovered from her lack of ice cream, sustained by the dollop

of egg and mayo, but I could detect her wheels spinning, her stomach rumbling, her mind conniving for more food. She held my mother's hand as we carried on, leery of the crowds, the strangers knocking into us or caught up beside us like burrs, people I had no urge to meet.

"Jews favor Saks," our mother said as we paused at the windows, the mannequins lean as corn stalks on a dog-day afternoon, reminding me of the farm stands outside Huntington, the flat brown and green acres run by Polish families with consonant-laden names. "All the nouveau riche from Long Island and New Jersey shop at Saks as if it's the promised land." We were going to a store with more refined clientele; we didn't bother with Saks, where I pictured the mothers of the two Jewish boys in school, my heartthrobs, Scott and Seth, buying loud jewelry, their mothers' platinum beehives giving their roots away. "My mommy always said that if you had to shop at one store, it would be DePinna's."

Our maternal grandmother most assuredly never shopped at DePinna's because this was the first time our mother ever said the store's name in connection with her mother, who had been dead since the early 1940s, right in the middle of the war, succumbing to a cerebral hemorrhage as the air-raid sirens bleated outside in New Jersey, a death my mother never recovered from, a fact that she was the first to declare, as if the event were so recent you could touch it. I felt sure that DePinna's did not exist during my mother's childhood and that she made such things up to satisfy a dark corner in her mind. Her family had lived in Short Hills, in a white-clapboard Cape with black shutters, the house built on a triangle corner lot behind a tiny brook, the house sagging inside and out with the absence of my mother's mother and where Grandpa Harry smoked his cigarettes, not offering us a dime as we endured money shortages that sometimes meant broken-down cars and hunger pangs. In Short Hills, Bonwit's beckoned on our annual foray to pay our respects to our mean-spirited grandfather, the sales racks rewarding us with bargains that made up for our two days in his gray house and coping with his peeping Tom antics.

"Or I think that's what she said," our mother claimed, correcting herself about her mother's supposed advice, hoping God would forgive her fibs and betrayals. She probably meant Bam's, which Gibby patronized in Newark and where Aunt Betty, our mother's leggy sister, modeled before she married and had seven boys and girls. As I thought of Short Hills and the roomy department stores there, so otherworldly compared with our small shops in Huntington, I realized my mother made up things more than I cared to count; that she was capable of telling tales that sounded convincing but close up appeared fuzzy and that the remark about DePinna's could be tacked on to a long line of fantasies that kept Lee's imagination brewing.

“Gosh, I miss Joe sometimes,” she said as we picked up speed past Saks, our legs aloft from gusts of wind that suggested the bleak days of November, my mind veering to Scott and Seth again, the rabble-rousers that tested my flirtatious abilities in school, honing my rapport with them and their devilish ways, addicted to their tugs of war on the playground at recess, the delightful, guilty springs of their touch, fingers on my back or legs or near my tits. A new boy had been added to my objects of affection, an older boy with a Navajo nose and chestnut-brown eyes, a mystery person for me to decipher and decode at the bus stop each morning.

“I miss him like a thorn in my side,” our mother said, her voice muffled by the honking and shouting and bass din. I decided that when she talked about Joe, she might have been confused with our own father, because she missed him more than anyone, including her own mother. Our father had been named Joe as well, so such a coincidence could be possible for anyone, especially our mother, given that she erupted with out of the blue comments all the time, often about Joe or her mother or her awful father. But as we moved beyond Saks and the memory of her boyfriend Joe in the city with us the year before, everyone hunkered against the smacking wind that December, I recalled his arm linked with hers, how she grinned as if she were being pinched on her heinie.

But in April she called him, explaining to us before she dialed the number in Nassau County that she could no longer “keep up the charade.” She did not love him and never could, she confessed, as if waiting for us to absolve the errors of her ways. “I’ve done the decent thing, which is to let him go, so he can find a woman who can care for him through and through.”

It had not gone well, the call and the breakup. He rang afterward for months, and she sobbed on the phone with him and later played “Madame Butterfly” on Helene’s Zenith, refilling her glass of Dewar’s. She had qualms about her decision; she asked aloud if she’d made the right choice, turning to Helene, who would say, “He’s not a bad sort, Mom. He took you to the opera.”

But for now, I told myself to stop thinking about him – for he and I had barely tolerated each other, unable to say hello when he came to our house to steal my mother — so I scanned the crowds for the chance sighting of the mothers of Scott and Seth, roaming the avenue like us. I would stare at them from afar if I spotted them, forgetting about my mother’s misery and how she laid it on us day after day, night upon night.

That was when she struck out ahead, as if reading my anger, coursing through the throngs to reach DePinna’s to massage her toes, Joe no longer front and center but sporadic in her mind and mine.

The store, housed in a squat limestone building, was not what I had expected, and the sight of it, sterile and aloof, sent my bowels churning as we crossed Fifth on the light, the traffic reprieve giving me a minute to gather my wits, to take a deep breath as I did in the swimming races every summer at the beach club in the Sound, winning blue ribbons to the cheers of all the parents, who forgot for an instance my fatherless status. We approached De Pinna's double-glass doors, their exclusivity bringing to mind the Huntington Bay Yacht Club, jutting proud on a pier over the harbor, a sign at the driveway, Members Only, pressing me open and shut whenever I rode my Schwinn past. We neared the store now as if marching to the guillotine, swept by the madding crowd, the austere décor glimpsed through the windows, my bowels reacting more acutely as I tightened my sphincter muscles to fend off total collapse. We swung the doors open, fighting the centrifugal force, halting to take in the hush, as our mother predicted, as the green flash in "Gatsby" wended its way into my deepest synapses, the line that Helene recited as she climbed into bed, her incantation: "So we beat on . . . ," forgoing the rest.

The stillness imprisoned us in the marbleized lobby; struck, I likened it, by lightning and stunned by the rooms cordoned off by geometric angles, offending our little sense of self. I gave my mother my trademark evil eye, detecting stray bits of hesitation leaking out, tremors building to hysteria, cognizant that she had never been inside DePinna's until now, my mother's penchant to conjure things never ceasing to amaze my sisters and me.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" she whispered, grabbing my arm, unsure of what to do or where to go, the outside safer than the inside and the susurrus notes, a lone D strung out on a bassoon, the muteness of the store encasing us in a low-lying cloud. Although we were relieved to be out of the eddies and whirlpools of Fifth Avenue, the rooms spread before us sea-wide and fathomless, cleaved by glass display cases joined in the shape of a large Y, displaying strands of gold and silver jewelry resting on black-velvet mounts, ornaments and icons that we would bypass, pretending to be bored or engaged on an urgent task. Dazed and blindsided, Izzy and I waited for our mother to take the next step, gliding swanlike past the square black columns that could have been props in a Bond movie, Goldfinger about to pop out from a dressing room, his top hat boomeranging toward my neck.

"I don't like that look on your face one iota," our mother hissed as we made it to the elevator bank, resolved to buy two dresses for the holidays, clothes meant to last for years and to help us stand out in school in the incorporated village of Huntington Bay; the Harrington girls worthy of such an address. "Your behavior is unforgivable," she glowered, refusing to reassure me amid the store's overhead lights. I reached for Izzy's hand, seeking sustenance, but she had turned into a zombie again,

zoning out to survive. We stood there, unable to back down against the appraising saleswomen, who could have nodded at us in a friendly gesture but held themselves back, too. Izzy dropped her hand from mine, signaling a meltdown. She must have been wildly hungry, though it was too late to resolve that here. Not a morsel in sight at DePinna's! I felt shipwrecked, a piece of driftwood left without my common sense, dumber than Samantha and her yearly pregnancies. How could we get out of this? How did we get into this? The saleswomen, top to bottom in black from turtlenecks to black tights and the soles of their shoes, could tell that my mother was really a black spider, feared by our neighbors for her good looks and predatory impulses, for her incessant glimpses at husbands during Mass and at restaurants in town, on the lookout for someone, anyone, to rouse her spirits. Yet we lived down the road from the Sound; mansions rose like blossoms from the woods, tennis courts sat dormant on fall mornings, waiting for a ball. Who were the DePinna salesladies to snub us?

It took centuries for the elevator to land as we posed with a make-believe nonchalance, counting the minutes till we could cower behind the closed doors never to see these monsters again. In the elevator, I noticed the crow's feet radiating from my mother's eyes and in her blue pupils her fierce determination, the trait I inherited but disdained because it got her into trouble and would infect me that way, too.

We had no idea where the children's section was located and refused to ask, but the elevator man stopped at the right floor. The store lacked the jazziness of Altman's and Lord & Taylor, but I allowed myself to be sucked in, the pussy-willow-beige carpet light as the crust of a soufflé, quieting the clickety-clacks of my mother's heels, my knee socks inching down.

The children's section, barely filling a corner, was so unlike White's in town that I thought the clothes might not be for sale. The minimal selection seemed bent on flummoxing, taunting us to find something that we could afford. I clammed up tighter, shaking my head at our mother's fatal moves, her losing battle to slip us into places where we could never belong.

"This is where Jackie Kennedy shops for Caroline and John-John. This is where classy people go to be left alone as they browse. These are tailored clothes that last beyond the grave. Italian, French, tailored and hand-sewn. Never question my choices, young lady."

I considered her words as if she read them from the gospel, her faulty proverbs brimming with idiocy and truth. Although the variety of dresses was few and slim, a sorry low tide, I navigated the racks as a saleslady came toward us, prim and demure as a librarian. My mother told her in no uncertain

terms that we were fine, thank you, as the woman strolled away to resettle herself behind a glass counter, this one in the shape of an L, resting her arms above cases of white-cotton collared blouses as pure as the body and blood of Christ wafers. We were fine, I repeated to myself, as Izzy curled up on the carpet, nestling under an S-shaped rack.

"Let her remain there," our mother said, soothed now, matching the decibel in the store. "She's offending no one, and I want to keep her from imploding. Our little Vesuvius."

We browsed the racks with a steady composure, numbering six to seven styles of dresses in total, no bonanza. The dresses did not so much wow but sent a tiny thrill through my arms and legs and medulla oblongata – how I loved that two-worded name – as I fondled their downy wool or cotton weave, a row of brushed thoroughbreds in their stall. I stroked a camel's-hair coat festooned with a fluffy raccoon collar, as if the fur had been slit from the animals that rummaged in our garage at night.

"We're here for a dress, Enda Marie," my mother said, warning me from such a coat, using my middle name to signal intense warnings. We reverted to the S-shaped rack, and as I espied an artful dress, a daffodil among the dandelions, as Geg would say, I hunted for a label in the neckline, a twitch I developed in my earliest shopping days. The label, at last, merged from the seam like a secret tablet, and I traced the script as if examining it under a microscope: the D in the "De" oversize and posh, written how the Huntington Bay matrons addressed the cotillion invitations at the yacht club, which I had never received; the P for "Pinna" wide and quirkier, the dot of the "i" circled like a tadpole snagged in a net. Underneath "De Pinna," the words "Fifth Avenue New York" stood up tall, so that we'd never be humbled.

"I told you, this store is Rembrandt personified," my mother said, watching me eyeball the label, amused by my awe. "You didn't trust me. You were afraid to go in. You thought I'd lost my mind. But I haven't and I never will. And I left him for a good reason: because I'm Catholic and couldn't keep using him and keep going to church."

I took the dress into the changing room, the lights pinkish and cunning, the saleslady leaving us to our own devices, my mother's admission about Joe disturbing because it was not only out of place but also because she spoke as if she'd left him the other day. Unzipping the back of the dress, I spun it round and round, gratified that I'd found the juicy plum in the lot, a flair-hemmed shift of horizontal stripes set against an off-white background simple as a Mondrian, groovy as Barnaby Street, its wrist-length sleeves and short cowl collar new for my wardrobe, the dress's most attractive feature – the

narrow lines of loud blue, green, yellow, red, orange and pink – delectable as ice cream layered in hot fudge sauce.

"Parfait," my mother said, nodding as I stared in the three-way mirror outside the dressing room, the girl in the glass serene as a goddess capable of being snatched away. "You'll definitely be in vogue on the North Shore of Long Island. All you need are some sunglasses and a Gucci scarf to complete the picture. A convertible would do, a Mustang, but for that you need a Goldfinger."

I checked myself in a side view, no budding breasts in sight, my nose a relic from my father that I could either accept or reject, a decision I put off year after year although nothing about it changed. If anything, it grew longer.

"Here's a matching one for little britches, but I'm not going to ask her to try it on," my mother still whispered about Izzy, who was twirling her hair, spread-eagled under the S rack. The dress for her was a miniature version of mine but with a fiery red background. I liked it more than my dress but held my tongue; where would complaining get me? Our mother might begin about Joe again, why she could not abide him. When she broke the news on the phone to him, sitting on the couch in the living room, her tears had fallen into the receiver and I fretted about electrocution.

Besides, Izzy's dress sleeves reached three-quarter length, so they wouldn't hide the black moles on my arms, the ones the boys pointed at, the ones Dr. Moriarty said could change into cancer someday. "The dresses have rayon in them, the fabric these days," my mother sighed, resigned to such state of affairs.

They were mostly wool, however, so we would have to wash them by hand, unable to afford the cleaner's. I was keen to flaunt the dress – to strut to the altar during Communion – although it hung, I discovered, below my tartan-plaid coat, a hand-me-down from Helene's and Best's, its Scottish origins grubby but precise, the wool everlasting as sheep.

The dresses bought, our mother's check processed by the stony saleslady, we skipped outside and hopped on a bus to travel back down Fifth to 34th Street and the LIRR as the day's shadows stalked with a hint of foreboding and menace: the sun wanted to set. Jumping off at a coffee shop, a genuine greasy spoon, we stationed ourselves at the counter, a must for Izzy's long-awaited vanilla and a cup of Lipton for me, my mother watching her waistline, she professed, unwilling to say that she was actually watching her pocketbook: "I don't want to be a fatso Fogarty." No one spoke as we ate and drank, our

faces repeated back to us in the mirror behind the counter, the lyrics “from the shores of Tripoli” ringing in my tired head. My socks souped at my ankles, but I no longer minded them or anything else, like my mother’s wisps of lonely banter that seeped out at this time of day as the waiter sized her up, making, as she might say, “goo-goo eyes.” I clutched the De Pinna bag, envisioning myself at the bus stop on Monday morning, where the new boy with the hawkish nose, who moved a week ago into the three-story brick mansion up the hill, a year older than me and much wiser, taking note of my remarkable taste.

At Mass, girls observed my dress as I unbuttoned my ratty coat; mothers elbowed their daughters to discuss the dress later in their cars home. I could not concentrate on what the priest said, but I heard pieces pass by as I sat there, my butt against the pew: God is with you, which is why, I added to myself, I had been fortunate to find this dress, for he had gone into DePinna’s and sent me to the rack and given us the strength to shop in such a store and withstand the odds against us.

On Monday morning, I put on the dress again, disappointed that the white background had grown slightly sullied in the two days since Saturday. What lurked most was how Hilly, the new boy whose father happened to be a psychiatrist, would react to my dress, for he was canny and insightful, having assessed me on his first day by calling me the Hayley Mills of Huntington Bay.

“I can see you climbing out the window to the apple tree to escape the wicked aunt,” he said, referring to the moment in “Pollyanna” where Hayley inches herself on to a tree branch, how I shinnied out my own bedroom window once to escape Helene’s rage. “Or you riding a horse, your hair flying under a National Velvet helmet.”

He had fallen for me so fast that by that Monday morning, my body shook, giving away my poor nerves under the coat. October was about to cede to November, and the modish stripes of the dress, an early birthday present, blotted out the gray mist at the bus stop, where Izzy, a cardinal in her new red dress, and I stood shivering as Hilly sauntered toward us, his hands in the pockets of his Levi’s, his head cocked to the right — like my father, I thought, young and assured before he grew up and left us. Although I had enough savvy not to wear the purple socks again, I had opted for a pair of sheer green stockings that my mother had picked up on sale for no other reason than their bargain price.

They matched the green stripe in the dress, a lucky coincidence, but as Hilly came upon us and a sliver of my dress stole out from my coat, he saw only the tights.

"Oh, my God," he shouted, loud as a grackle, Izzy leaning into me like one of the birches bent along the sides of the allee to our mother-daughter house. "Where on earth did you get those? Halloween is Wednesday, for Chrissake. Did you check the calendar before you got dressed this morning? Have you lost your mind?"

I choked out a mild guffaw, like Johnny Carson's and my mother's, the morning having gone so wrong that I retraced his words to uncover the reason behind my awful decision, my grave mistake in wearing these tights. I could blame my mother for this stupidity, but she had skedaddled off to Madison Avenue in her nude pantyhose, no chance at her attracting ridicule in New York. This painful encounter with Hilly, a bottomless pit, was so flabbergasting that as I steered my gaze to the stand of trees on his acreage fringing the bus stop, his smirk penetrating my coat and dress, his hunky looks now as hideous as a gargoyle's, I braced myself for something worse, a final piercing insult. But as the bus drew up and we climbed on, Izzy taking her front seat, me hunkering in the middle and Hilly joining the sassy lads in the back, I heard nothing else.

I avoided him at school – he was a grade ahead – but I could not forget his rant about my green stockings, which aligned with the green stripe in my dress so neatly that I congratulated myself for my good eye, despite his criticism. As the day stirred past lunch and the yacht-club girls asked about the dress and I name-dropped DePinna's, I couldn't stop the mad jolt that hit me when I spotted Hilly in the hallway, forgiving his insults in my eagerness for attention.