

The Headless Horseman

For Halloween that year – the year my sister was two – I dressed up as the Headless Horseman. Before, I'd only ever been ghosts and fat ladies, both of which were easy: all you needed was a sheet and a lot of talcum powder, or a dress and a hat and some padding. But this year would be the last one I'd ever be able to disguise myself, or so I believed. I was getting too old for it – I was almost finished with being thirteen – and so I felt the urge to make a special effort.

Halloween was my best holiday. Why did I like it so much? Perhaps because I could take time off from being myself, or from the impersonation of myself I was finding it increasingly expedient, but also increasingly burdensome, to perform in public.

I got the Headless Horseman idea from a story we'd read in school. In the story, the Headless Horseman was a grisly legend and

also a joke, and that was the effect I was aiming for. I thought everyone would be familiar with this figure: if I'd studied a thing in school I assumed it was general knowledge. I hadn't yet discovered that I lived in a sort of transparent balloon, drifting over the world without making much contact with it, and that the people I knew appeared to me at a different angle from the one at which they appeared to themselves; and that the reverse was also true. I was smaller to others, up there in my balloon, than I was to myself. I was also blurrier.

I had an image of how the Headless Horseman was supposed to look. He was said to ride around at night with nothing on top of his shoulders but a neck, his head held in one arm, the eyes fixing the horrified viewer in a ghastly glare. I made the head out of papier mâché, using strips of newspaper soaked in a flour-and-water paste I cooked myself, as per the instructions in *The Rainy Day Book of Hobbies*. Earlier in my life – long ago, at least two years ago – I'd had a wistful desire to make all the things suggested in this book: animals twisted out of pipe cleaners, balsa-wood boats that would whiz around when you dropped cooking oil into a hole in the middle, and a tractor thing put together out of an empty thread spool, two matchsticks, and a rubber band; but somehow I could never find the right materials in our house. Cooking up paste glue was simple, however: all you needed was flour and water. Then you simmered and stirred until the paste was translucent. The lumps didn't matter, you could squeeze them out later. The glue got quite hard when it was dry, and I realized the next morning that I should have filled the pot with water after using it. My mother always said, "A good cook does her own dishes." But then, I reflected, glue was not real cooking.

The head came out too square. I squashed it at the top to make it more like a head, then left it down by the furnace to dry. The drying took longer than I'd planned, and during the process the

nose shrank and the head began to smell funny. I could see that I should have spent more time on the chin, but it was too late to add on to it. When the head was dry enough, at least on the outside, I painted it what I hoped was a flesh colour – a wishy-washy bathrobe pink – and then I painted two very white eyeballs with black pupils. The eyes came out a little crossed, but it couldn't be helped: I didn't want to make the eyeballs grey by fooling around with the black pupils on the damp white paint. I added dark circles under the eyes, and black eyebrows, and black enamel hair that appeared to have been slicked down with brilliantine. I painted a red mouth, with a trickle of shiny enamel blood coming down from one corner. I'd taken care to put a neck stub on the bottom of the head, and I painted this red – for where the head had been severed – with a white circle in the middle of the bottom part, for the neck bone.

The body of the Horseman took some thought. I made a cape out of a piece of black fabric left over from a now-obsolete puppet stage of mine, gathering it at the neck end – designed to sit on top of my head – and sewing buttons down the front, and cutting two inconspicuous holes at eye level so I'd be able to see out. I borrowed my mother's jodhpurs and riding boots, left over from before she was married – she hadn't ridden a horse since her wedding day, she was in the habit of saying, proudly or regretfully. Probably it was both. But I didn't pay much attention to my mother's tone of voice, then: I had to tune it out in order to charge full speed ahead with what I myself was doing.

The riding boots were too big, but I made up for that with hockey socks. I safety-pinned the jodhpurs around the waist to keep them from falling down. I got hold of some black winter gloves, and improvised a horse whip out of a stick and a piece of leather I'd scrounged from the box of archery materials. Archery had once

been popular with my father, and then with my brother; but my father had given it up, and the box had been abandoned in the trunk room in the cellar, now that my brother had to study so much.

I tried on the entire outfit in front of my mirror, with the head held in the crook of my arm. I could scarcely see myself through the eyeholes, but the dark shape looming in the glass, with two sinister eyeballs staring out balefully from somewhere near the elbow, looked pretty good to me.

On the night itself I groped my way out the door and joined my best friend of the moment, whose name was Annie. Annie had done herself up as Raggedy Ann, complete with a wig of red wool braids. We'd taken flashlights, but Annie had to hold my arm to guide me through the darker patches of the night, which were numerous in the badly lit suburb we were traversing. I should have made the eyeholes bigger.

We went from door to door, shouting, "Shell out! Shell out!" and collecting popcorn balls and candy apples and licorice twists, and the Halloween toffees wrapped in orange and black-waxed paper with designs of pumpkins and bats on them of which I was especially fond. I loved the sensation of prowling abroad in the darkness – of being unseen, unknown, potentially terrifying, though all the time retaining, underneath, my own harmless, mundane, and dutiful self.

There was a full moon, I think; there ought to have been one. The air was crisp; there were fallen leaves; jack-o-lanterns burned on the porches, giving off the exciting odour of singed pumpkin. Everything was as I'd imagined it beforehand, though already I felt it slipping away from me. I was too old, that was the problem. Halloween was for little children. I'd grown beyond it, I was looking down on it from my balloon. Now that I'd arrived at the moment I'd planned for, I couldn't remember why I'd gone to all that trouble.

I was disappointed, too, at the response of the adults who answered the doors. Everyone knew who my friend Annie was portraying – “Raggedy Annie!” they cried with delight, they even got the pun – but to me they said, “And who are you supposed to be?” My cape had a muffling effect, so I often had to repeat the answer twice. “The Headless Horseman.” “The headless what?” Then, “What’s that you’re holding?” they would go on to say. “It’s the head. Of the Headless Horseman.” “Oh yes, I see.” The head would then be admired, though in the overdone way adults had of admiring a thing when they secretly thought it was inept and laughable. It didn’t occur to me that if I’d wanted my costume to be understood immediately I should have chosen something more obvious.

However, there was one member of the audience who’d been suitably impressed. It was my little sister, who hadn’t yet gone to bed when I’d made my way through the living room en route to the door. She’d taken one look at the shambling black torso and the big boots and the shiny-haired, frowning, bodiless head, and had begun to scream. She’d screamed and screamed, and hadn’t been reassured when I’d lifted up the cape to show that it was really only me underneath. If anything, that had made it worse.

“Do you remember the head?” I ask my sister. We’re in her rickety car, driving over to see our mother, who is now very old, and bedridden, and blind.

My sister doesn’t ask, “What head?” She knows what head. “It looked like a pimp,” she says. “With that greaser hair.” Then she says, “Smart move, Fred.” She talks out loud to other, inferior drivers when she’s driving, a thing she does adroitly. All of the other drivers are named Fred, even the women.

“How do you know what a pimp looks like?”

“You know what I mean.”

“A dead pimp, then,” I say.

“Not completely dead. The eyes followed you around the room like those 3-D Jesuses.”

“They couldn’t have. They were sort of crossed.”

“They did, though. I was afraid of it.”

“You played with it, later,” I say. “When you were older. You used to make it talk.”

“I was afraid of it anyway,” she says. “That’s right, Fred, take the whole road.”

“Maybe I warped you in childhood,” I say.

“Something did,” she says, and laughs.

For a while after that Halloween, the head lived in the trunk room, which contained not only two steamer trunks filled with things of my mother’s from her previous life – tea cloths she’d embroidered for her trousseau, long kid gloves she’d saved – but also a number of empty suitcases, and the metal box of fly-tying equipment, and the archery materials, and an assortment of miscellaneous items I used to rummage through and pilfer. The head was on an upper shelf, the one with the battered skates and the leather boots – my father’s, also my mother’s. Foot, foot, foot, foot, head, foot, foot, foot – if you weren’t ready for this arrangement and happened to glance up at it, the effect could be disconcerting.

By that time we had a second phone in the house so I could talk with my boyfriends, or go through what passed for talking, without exasperating my father too much – he thought phone conversations should be short, and should convey information. The door to the

trunk room was right beside the phone. I liked to keep that door closed while I was talking; otherwise I could see the head staring out at me through the gloom, blood dribbling from the corner of its mouth. With its sleek black hair and minimal chin, it looked like a comic-book head waiter who'd got into a fight. At the same time it seemed malignantly attentive, as if it was taking in every word I said and putting a sour construction on my motives.

After its period of retreat in the trunk room, the head migrated into my sister's dress-up box. By now, I was fifteen and my sister was four. She was still an anxious child – if anything, she was more anxious than ever. She didn't sleep through the night – she'd wake up five or six or seven or nine or ten or eleven times, according to my mother. Although I had the room right next to hers, I never heard her plaintive calls and frightened wailing. I slept through it all as if drugged.

But sleeping mothers hear the cries of their own children, we've been told. They can't help it. Studies have been done. My mother was no exception: she'd hear the little voice calling to her across the blankness of sleep, she'd half-wake, then stumble into my sister's room, soothe her mechanically, bring her drinks of water, tuck her in again, then go back to bed and fall asleep, only to be awakened once more and then once more and then once more. She'd grown thinner and thinner in the last four years, her skin pale, her hair brittle and greying, her eyes unnaturally large.

In actuality, she'd caught a disease of the thyroid from the hamster we'd foisted on my sister as a pet in the vain hope that the sound of it creaking round and around on its exercise wheel at night would be calming to her. It was this disease that accounted for my mother's scrawniness and staring eyes: once diagnosed, it was easily cured. But that detail tended to get sidelined during the later

recountings of this story, both by my mother and by me. The fairy child, the changeling who didn't follow the convenient patterns of other children, who sucked up its mother's energy in an uncanny and nocturnal manner – this is a theme with more inherent interest to it than a hamster-transmitted thyroid disease.

My sister did look a little like a fairy changeling. She was tiny, with blond braids and big blue eyes, and a rabbit way of nibbling on her lower lip as if to keep it from trembling. Her approach to life was tentative. New foods made her nervous, new people, new experiences: she stood at the edge of them, extended a finger, touched gingerly, then more often than not turned away. *No* was a word she learned early. At children's parties she was reluctant to join in the games; birthday cake made her throw up. She was particularly apprehensive about doors, and about who might come through them.

Thus it was probably a bad idea of my father's to pretend to be a bear, a game that had been a great success with his two older children. My sister was fascinated by this game as well, but her interest took a different form. She didn't understand that the bear game was supposed to be fun – that it was an excuse for laughing, shrieking, and running away. Instead, she wanted to observe the bear without being spotted by it herself. This was the reason she'd snipped two holes at eye level in my mother's floor-to-ceiling drapes. She'd go in behind the drapes and peek out through the holes, waiting in a state of paralyzed terror for my father to come home. Would he be a bear, or would he be a father? And even if he looked like a father, would he turn into a bear without warning? She could never be sure.

My mother was not delighted when she discovered the holes cut in her drapes. They were lined drapes; my mother had pleated and hemmed them herself, not because she liked sewing but because it

was a good deal cheaper that way. But there was nothing to be done. With a child like that, punishment was beside the point: the poor little thing was in a constant state of suffering anyway, over one thing or another. Her reactions were always in excess of the occasion for them. What was to be done? What was to be done, in particular, about the waking up at night? Surely it wasn't normal. My sister was carted off to see the doctor, who was no help. "She'll grow out of it," was all he would say. He didn't say when.

Because of her sensitivity, or perhaps because my mother was so worn down, my sister was allowed to get away with things I would never have been allowed to do, or so I felt. She spent most meal-times underneath the table instead of on a chair drawn up to it, and while down there she tied people's shoelaces together.

Remember the shoelace thing?" I say to her. "We never knew exactly why you did that."

"I hated sitting at the dinner table," she says. "It was so boring for me. I didn't really have a brother and a sister. I was more like an only child, except with two mothers and two fathers. Two and two, and then me."

"But why the shoelaces?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was a joke."

"You weren't very joke-prone at that age."

"I wanted the two of you to like me. I wanted to be funny."

"You are funny! We do like you!"

"I know, but that was then. You didn't pay much attention to me. You always talked about grown-up things."

"That's hardly fair," I say. "I spent a lot of time with you."

"You had to," she says. "They made you do it."

"They had this idea that I was good with you," I say. "That's what they used to say: 'You're always so good with her.'"

"Way to go, Fred, you moron!" says my sister. "Did you see that? Nobody ever signals. Yeah, well, it let them off the hook."

"I made you those moss gardens," I say defensively. These had been a special thing for her: I put them together in the sandbox, with moss for the trees and bushes, picket fences made of sticks, wet sand houses trimmed with pebbles. Paths paved with flower petals. She'd watch, enraptured: her face would brighten, she'd become very quiet, as if listening. The real garden had that effect on her too. It was at its height then. She'd stand among the irises and poppies, stock-still, as if enchanted. "Moss gardens," I say. "And gardens with little shells in them – you loved them. I made those too."

"Not at the dinner table, though," she says. "It's okay, the light's green, you can go! And then after dinner you used to shut me out of your room."

"I had to study. I couldn't play with you all the time."

"You just didn't want me messing up your stuff. Anyway you weren't always studying. You were reading Perry Mason books and trying on lipstick. And then you left, when I was eight. You abandoned me."

"Nine," I say. "I didn't *abandon* you. I was twenty-one! I left home and got a job. That's what people do."

"It's no left turn before six, Fred, you creep! I wish I had a camera. The thing is," says my sister, "I couldn't figure out who you were supposed to *be*."

My sister had a friend who was a lot like her – another quiet, shy, anxious, big-eyed fairy child, dark where my sister was fair, but with

the same china fragility. Leonie was her name. They both insisted on wearing flouncy skirts instead of jeans, they both chose *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* as their favourite story. They longed to have me doll them up in outfits improvised from the dress-up box: I'd pin up their hair and put lipstick on them and let them wear my clip-on earrings. Then they'd prance around solemnly in my high-heeled shoes, holding up their too-long play skirts, keeping their red mouths prim.

"Remember the cut velvet?" my sister says. We're in her car again, going to see our mother again. We prefer to do it together. The rundown house with its flaking paint, the tangle of weeds that used to be the garden, our shrivelled mother – we can deal with these better together. We both have soggy raisin-studded muffins in paper bags and takeout coffees in evil Styrofoam cups: we buy ourselves snacks and bribes, we need to be bolstered up.

"She should never have let us have that," I say. "She should have saved it."

The cut velvet was an evening gown, black, white, and silver in colour, dating from the 1930s. Why had our mother given it to us? Why had she cast away such a treasure, as if abdicating from her former life – her life as a young woman who'd enjoyed herself and had adventures? We'd each admired this gown in turn; we'd each ruined it in the course of our admiration.

"We wouldn't have done that," I say. "Wasted it."

"No. We wouldn't. We'd have been selfish. Just throw the garbage in the back seat, I keep it strewn with trash back there to deter burglars."

"I wouldn't call it selfish, as such," I say.

"Not that they'd want to steal this rust bucket. Hoarding, then. We're going to be those old ladies they find in houses full of stacks of newspapers and pickle jars and cat-food tins."

"I'm not. I have no interest in the cat-food tins."

"Old age is the pits," says my sister. "I kept a piece of it."

"You did?"

"And that skirt of yours with the big red roses – I kept some of that. And a bit of your blue brocade formal. I thought it was so glamorous! I thought everything you did was glamorous. Fred, you asshole! Did you see how she cut me off?"

"What about the pink tulle?"

"I think Mum used it for dusters."

"No great loss," I say. "It looked like a cake."

"I thought it was great – I was going to have one just like it when I grew up. But by the time I got to high school, no one went to formal dances any more."

My sister and Leonie played decorous games together in which life was agreeable, people were gentle and fastidious, and time was divided into predictable routines. They adored miniatures: tiny glass vases with midget flowers in them, eensy-teensy cups and spoons, minute boxes – anything small and dainty. Stuffed-bunny tea parties and doll-dressing absorbed them. All the stranger, then, that they found the Headless Horseman's head in the trunk room, and got it down from the boot shelf, and adopted it.

There it would be, eyes crossed, mouth drooling blood, set in its place between the flop-eared white bunny and the rubber-skinned Sparkle Plenty doll that had led a far riskier and more disreputable life when it had been mine. The head looked out of place but comfortable: everything was done to make it feel at home. A table napkin would be tucked around its neck stump, and it would be served cups of water tea and imaginary cookies just as

if it had a body. Better still, it answered when spoken to — it said, “Thank you very much” and “Could I have another cookie, please” and replied to the white bunny and the Sparkle Plenty doll when they asked it if it was having a good time. Sometimes it was made to nod. When the party had been too tiring for it, it was put to sleep in the dolls’ bed, with a crocheted quilt pulled up over its receding chin.

Once, I discovered it propped up on my sister’s pillow, its neck wrapped in one of our mother’s best linen dishtowels. Cookie fragments on dolls’ plates were laid out around it, mixed with berries from the prickly-berry hedge, like offerings made to appease an idol. It was wearing a chaplet woven of carrot fronds and marigolds that my sister and Leonie had picked in the garden. The flowers were wilted, the garland was lopsided; the effect was astonishingly depraved, as if a debauched Roman emperor had arrived on the scene and had hacked off his own body in a maiden’s chamber as the ultimate sexual thrill.

“Why do you like it so much?” I asked my sister and Leonie. I still took some interest in the head: it was, after all, my creature, though I’d been so young — it seemed to me now — when I’d made it. I regarded it critically: the thing was really unconvincing. The nose and chin were way too small, the skull too square, the hair too black. I should have done a better job.

They gazed up at me with distrust. “We don’t *like* him,” said my sister.

“We’re taking care of him,” said Leonie.

“He’s sick,” said my sister. “We’re the nurses.”

“We’re making him feel better,” said Leonie.

“Does he have a name?” I asked.

The two little girls looked at each other. “His name is Bob,” said Leonie.

This struck me as funny. I tried not to laugh: my sister was affronted when I laughed at anything to do with her. “Bob the Head?” I said. “That’s his name?”

“You’re not supposed to laugh at him,” said my sister in an injured tone.

“Why not?” I said.

“Because it’s not his fault,” she said.

“What’s not?”

“That he’s got no, got no . . .”

“Got no body?” I said.

“Yes,” said my sister in a stricken voice. “It’s not his fault! It’s only the way he is!” By this time the tears were trickling down her cheeks.

Leonie gave me an indignant stare; she picked up the head and hugged it. “You shouldn’t be so mean,” she told me.

“I know,” I said. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be so mean.” But I had to go into my room and close the door, because I had to either laugh or choke.

Yet at other times the two of them demanded meanness from me. They’d pester me ceaselessly because they wanted me to play a game called *Monster*. I was supposed to be the monster — stalking around the house and out into the yard, legs and arms stiff like a zombie’s, calling in a toneless voice, “Where *are* you? Where *are* you?” while they held hands and ran away from me, and hid behind the shrubs or the furniture, twittering with fright. When I got home from school they’d be waiting; they’d turn their delicate little

pansy-eyed faces up to me and plead, "Be a monster! Be a monster!" Their appetite for my monstrosity was boundless; as long as the two of them were together, holding hands, they could tough it out, they could escape, they could defy me.

Sometimes my sister would be alone when I got home. By "alone," I mean without Leonie, for of course my mother would be there. Not for long, however: she'd grab the opening provided by my arrival and be off like a shot, heading for the grocery store or some other equally spurious destination, leaving me as impromptu babysitter. Really she wanted the open road; she wanted speed and exercise, and her own thoughts. She wanted to be free of us — all of us — if only for an hour. But I didn't recognize that then.

"Okay," I'd say. "I have to do my homework. You can play over there. Why don't you have a dolly tea party?" But no sooner would I have settled myself with my books than my sister would start up.

"Be a monster! Be a monster!" she would say.

"I don't think it's a good idea. Leonie isn't here. You'll cry."

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will. You always do."

"I won't this time. Please! Please!"

"All right," I'd say, though I was quite sure how it would end. "I'll count to ten. Then I'm coming to get you." I said this last in my flat monster voice. By the time I'd reached ten, my sister would already have shut herself into the front hall closet with the winter coats and the vacuum cleaner, and would be calling in a muffled voice, "The game's over! The game's over!"

"All right," I would say in a reasonable but still eerie tone. "The game's over. You can come out now."

"No! You're still being a monster!"

"I'm not a monster. I'm only your sister. It's safe to come out."

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop the game!"

"Stop what? There isn't any game."

"Stop it! Stop it!"

I shouldn't have done that. A sister pretending to be a monster, or a monster pretending to be a sister? It was too much for her to decipher. Small children have trouble with ill-defined borders, and my sister had more trouble than most. I knew perfectly well, even while I was speaking in my duplicitous voice, what the results would be: sobbing and hysteria and then, many hours later, nightmares. In the middle of the night, screams of terror would issue from my sister's bedroom; my mother would be dragged from unconsciousness, hoisting herself grimly out of bed, shuffling across the hall to mollify and soothe, while I slept through it all, conked out like a slug drowning in beer, evading the fallout from my crimes.

"What did you do to her?" my mother would say when she got back from her shopping excursion. My sister would still be in the front hall closet, weeping, afraid to come out. I'd be sitting at the dining-room table, placidly doing my homework.

"Nothing. We were playing Monster. She wanted to."

"You know how impressionable she is."

I'd shrug and smile. I could scarcely be blamed for being obliging.

Why did I behave this way? I didn't know. My excuse — even, on some level, to myself — was that I was simply giving in to an urgent demand, a demand made by my little sister. I was humouring her. I was indulging her. Of more interest to me now is why my sister made the demand, again and again. Did she believe she'd finally be able to face down my monster self, deal with it on her own terms? Did she hope that I would finally — at last — transform myself, on cue, into who I was really supposed to be?

Why did you like the monster game?" I say to her.

"I don't know," she says. "Drop dead, Fred, the light was red. Do you want lunch before Mum, or after?"

"If we have it before, we'll get depressed with no treat to look forward to. On the other hand I'm starving."

"So am I. Let's go to Satay on the Road."

"Or we could go to Small Talk. They have good soup."

"I make a lot of soup at home. I need some of that peanut sauce. Should I dye my hair red? I'm getting a lot of grey."

"It looks good," I say. "It looks distinguished."

"But what about red?"

"Why not?" I say. "If you like. I could never handle red, but you can."

"It's bizarre, because we're both yellow/orange, according to the colour charts."

"I know. You can do lime green too. It makes me look bloodless. You used to agitate and agitate for that monster game and then shut yourself up in the front hall closet as soon as it began."

"I remember that. I remember that feeling of being completely terrified. Warm wool, vacuum cleaner smell, terror."

"But you kept on wanting to do it. Did you think you could make it come out differently?"

"It's like saying, 'Tomorrow morning I'm going to get up early and work out.' And then the time comes and you just can't."

"Mother used to think it was her fault," I say.

"What, me hiding in the coat closet?"

"Oh . . . and other stuff," I say. "The whole picture. Remember when you were going through that total honesty period?"

"I've stopped?"

"Well, no. I never went in for it, myself — total honesty. I preferred lying."

"Oh, you never lied much."

I duck that one. "Anyway, you were halfway through high school when you really got going on the honesty. You were going to tell Mum and Dad about drugs, and skipping school, and kids your age having sex, because you thought Mum and Dad led a protected life and were too repressed."

"Well, they did and they were," she says. "I did tell them about some of it. I told them about taking LSD."

"What did they say?"

"Dad pretended he hadn't heard. Mum said, 'What was it like?'"

"I didn't know you took LSD."

"I only took it once," she says. "It wasn't that great. It was like a really long car trip. I kept wondering when it would end."

"That's what happened to me too," I say.

When my sister was sixteen and I was twenty-eight, my parents called me home. This had never happened before: it was in the nature of an SOS. They were becoming increasingly desperate: my sister had added anger to her repertoire of emotions. She still cried a lot, but she cried from fury as well as from despair. Or she'd go into thick, silent rages that were like a dense black fog descending over everyone. I'd witnessed these at family Christmas dinners — events I now tried to avoid as much as possible.

My parents persisted in their belief that I was particularly good with my sister — better than my brother, who did not take emotional outbursts seriously. They themselves certainly weren't good

with her, my mother told me. They wanted her to be happy – she was so bright, she had such potential – but she was so immature. They just didn't know what to do. "Maybe we were too old to have another child," my mother said. "We don't understand these things. When I was that age, if you were unhappy you kept it to yourself."

"She's a teenager," I said. "They're all like that. It's hormones."

"You weren't like that when you were a teenager," said my mother hopefully.

"I was more furtive," I said. I didn't go on to say that she could hardly have any idea of what I'd been like then because she'd been in a coma most of the time. I'd done a lot of things she'd known nothing about, but I wasn't going to reveal them now. "She's right out in the open," I said.

"She certainly is," said my mother.

My parents had wanted me to come home because they had a chance to go to Europe – it was some sort of group trip, it wouldn't cost much – and they had never been there. They wanted to see castles. They wanted to see Scotland, and the Eiffel Tower. They were like excited kids. But they were afraid to leave my sister on her own: she took things too hard, and she was going through a bad period. ("Over some boy," said my mother, with slight contempt. As a young woman she'd have let herself be boiled in oil before admitting to a bad period over some boy. The thing then was to have lots of beaus, and to treat them all with smiling disdain.)

They'd only be gone for two weeks, said my father. A little more than that, said my mother, with a mixture of guilt and anxiety. Eighteen days. Twenty, counting the travel.

I didn't see how I could deny them. They were getting old, or what I thought of as old. They were almost sixty. They might never have another chance to see a castle. So I said yes.

It was the summer – a Toronto summer, hot and humid. My parents had never bothered with air conditioning or fans – physical discomfort didn't mean much to them – so the house got progressively warmer as the day advanced, and didn't cool off until midnight. By this time my sister was living in my former bedroom, so I found myself in hers.

Our days fell into a strange pattern, or lack of pattern. We got up when we felt like it and went to bed at irregular hours. We ate our meals here and there around the house, and let the dirty dishes pile up on the kitchen counter before doing them. Sometimes we took our lunches down to the cellar, where it was cooler. We read detective stories and bought women's magazines, which we leafed through in order to rearrange ourselves, though only in theory. I was too tired to do much of anything else; or not tired, sleepy. I'd fall asleep on the chesterfield in the middle of the day, sink down into cavernous dreams, then wake up groggily toward suppertime, feeling hungover. Ordinarily I never took naps.

Once in a while we'd make forays into the blazing-hot garden, to water it according to the meticulous instructions left by our parents – instructions we did not follow – or to yank out the more blatant weeds, the deadly nightshade vines, the burdocks, the sow thistles; or to snip fragments off the exuberant prickly-berry hedge, which was threatening to take over the entire side border. The phlox was in bloom, the dahlias, the zinnias: the colours were dizzying. We made an effort at mowing the lawn with the elderly push mower that had been around forever. We'd left it too long: the mower blades got clogged with crushed grass and clover.

"Maybe it's time they entered the twentieth century and got a gas mower," I said.

"I think we should mow the whole garden," said my sister. "Flatten it right out."

"Then it would all be lawn. More to mow. Let's anyway trim the edges."

"Why bother? It's too much effort. I'm thirsty."

"Okay. So am I." And we'd go inside.

At unpredictable moments, I heard many instalments about a boy called Dave, who played the drums and was unobtainable. It was always the same story: my sister loved Dave, Dave didn't love her. Maybe he'd loved her once, or had begun to, but then something had happened. She didn't know what. Her life was ruined. She could never possibly ever be happy again. Nobody loved her.

"He sounds like a drip," I said.

"He's not a drip! It was so great once!"

"I'm just going by what you told me. I didn't hear about any great parts. Anyway, if he's not interested, he's not interested."

"You're always so fucking logical!" My sister had taken up swearing at a much earlier age than I had, and was fluent in it.

"I'm not, really," I said. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to say."

"You used everything up. You used up all the good parts," said my sister. "There was nothing left over for me."

This was deep water. "What do you mean?" I said carefully. "What exactly did I use up?"

My sister was wiping tears from her eyes. She had to think a little, pick something out from the overflowing pool of sadness.

"Dancing," she said. "You used up dancing."

"You can't use up dancing," I said. "Dancing is something you *do*. You can *do* whatever you want."

"No, I can't."

"Yes, you really can. It's not me stopping you."

"Maybe I shouldn't be on this planet," said my sister grimly. "Maybe I should never have been born."

I felt as if I were groping through brambles in a night so dark I couldn't see my own hands. *At my wit's end* had been, before this, merely an expression, but now it described a concrete reality: I could see my wits unrolling like a ball of string, length after length of wits being played out, each length failing to hold fast, breaking off as if rotten, until finally the end of the string would be reached, and what then? How many days were left for me to fill – for me to fill responsibly – before the real parents would come back and take over, and I could escape to my life?

Maybe they would never come back. Maybe I would have to stay here forever. Maybe both of us would have to stay here forever, trapped in our present ages, never getting any older, while the garden grew up like a forest and the prickly-berry bush swelled to the size of a tree, blotting the light from the windows.

In a state of near-panic I suggested to my sister that we should go on an excursion. An adventure. We would go to the town of Kitchener, on the Greyhound bus. It was only about an hour. Kitchener had some lovely old houses in it; we would take pictures of them with my camera. I'd been taking a lot of pictures of architecture around that time – nineteenth-century Ontario buildings. It was an interest of mine, I said, not lying very much. Oddly enough, my sister agreed to this plan. I'd been expecting her to refuse it: too complicated, too much effort, why bother?

We set off the next day supplied with oranges and digestive biscuits, and made it to the bus station without incident, and sat through the bus trip in relative calm. Then we ambled around in Kitchener, looking at things. I took pictures of houses. We

bought sandwiches. We went to the park and watched the swans.

While we were in the park, an older woman said to us, "Are you twins?"

"Yes," said my sister. "We are!" Then she laughed and said, "No, we're not. We're only sisters."

"Well, you look like twins," said the woman.

We were the same height. We had the same noses. We were wearing similar clothes. I could see how the woman might have thought that, supposing she was a little nearsighted. The idea alarmed me: before that moment, I'd viewed the two of us in terms of our differences. Now I saw that we were more alike than I'd imagined. I had more layers on, more layers of gauze; that was all.

My sister's mood had changed. Now she was almost euphoric. "Look at the swans," she said. "They're so, they're so . . ."

"Swanlike," I said. I felt almost giddy. The afternoon sun was golden on the pond where the swans floated; a mellow haze suffused the air. Suffused, I thought. That was how I felt. Maybe our parents were right: perhaps I alone had the magic key, the one that would open the locked door and free my sister from the dungeon that appeared to be enclosing her.

"It was great to come here," she said. Her face was radiant.

But the next day she was more unhappy than ever. And after that it got worse. Whatever magic I thought I might have — or that everyone thought I might have — proved useless. The good times became fewer, the bad times worse. They became worse and worse, for years and years. Nobody knew why.

My sister sits on the bottom step of my stairs, biting her fingers and crying. This doesn't happen once, but many times. "I should just

leave," she says. "I should just check out. I'm useless here. It's too much effort." She means: *getting through time*.

"You've had fun," I say. "Haven't you? There's lots of things you like."

"That was a while ago," she says. "It's not enough. I'm tired of playing the game. This is the wrong place for me to be."

She doesn't mean my house. She means her body. She means the planet Earth. I can see the same thing she's seeing: it's a cliff edge, it's a bridge with a steep drop, it's the end. That's what she's wants: *The End*. Like the end of a story.

"You aren't useless, you shouldn't leave!" I say. "You'll feel better tomorrow!" But it's like calling across a wide field to a person on the other side. She can't hear me. Already she's turning away, looking down, looking down over, preparing for dark flight.

She'll be lost. I will lose her. I'm not close enough to stop her.

"That would be a terrible thing to do," I say.

"There's no other door," she says. "Don't worry. You're really strong. You'll handle it."

We turn a corner and then another, pass a willow tree and then a weeping mulberry, pull into the driveway of our mother's house. "Look at Fred," says my sister. "Parked right in the middle of the street. If I was a snowplow, I'd plow him right into the prickly-berry hedge."

"That's the spirit," I say. We clamber out of the car, which is getting harder for me to do. Something happens to the knees. I stand, one hand on the car, stretching myself, surveying the ruined garden. "I need to tackle that yew tree," I say. "I forgot my pruners. There's deadly nightshade vine all through it."

"Why bother?" says my sister in full honesty mode. "Mum can't see it."

"I can," I say. "Other people can. She used to be so proud of that garden."

"You worry too much about other people. Was I a really horrible child?"

"Not at all," I say. "You were very cute. You had big blue eyes and little blond braids."

"According to the stories I whined a lot."

"It wasn't whining," I say. "You had a sensitive nervous system. You had an enhanced reaction to reality."

"In other words, I whined a lot."

"You wanted the world to be better than it was," I say.

"No, that was you. You wanted that. I just wanted it to be better than it was for *me*."

I sidestep that. "You were very affectionate," I say. "You appreciated things. You appreciated them more than other people. You practically went into trances of rapture."

"But I'm all right now," she says. "Thank God for pharmaceuticals."

"Yes," I say. "You're all right now."

She takes a pill every day, for a chemical imbalance she was born with. That was it, all along. That was what made the bad times for her. Not my monstrousness at all.

I believe that, most of the time.

Now we're at the door. The persistence of material objects is becoming an amazement to me. It's the same door — the one I used to go in through, out through, year after year, in my daily clothing

or in various outfits and disguises, not thinking at all that I would one day be standing in front of this very same door with my grey-haired little sister. But all doors used regularly are doors to the afterlife.

"I lost track of that head," I say. "The Headless Horseman head. Remember when it lived in the trunk room? Remember all those boots, and the archery supplies?"

"Vaguely," says my sister:

"We'll have to go through that stuff, you know. When the time comes. We'll have to sort it out."

"I'm not looking forward to it," says my sister.

"Where did it go, in the end? That head? Did you get rid of it?"

"Oh, it's still down there somewhere," says my sister.