

HAMLET



Katherine Hubbard



Here I am, happy baby, eleven months old.

Thirty-six hours after being admitted to Bellevue, my sister decided to give me her cat. I didn't want the animal, I hated pets of all sorts, but you don't say no to a person whose left arm is bandaged wrist to armpit. The cat had been mewling non-stop, according to Mrs. Kinder who followed me up the stairs as I climbed toward my sister's studio.

"The only reason I found your sister was that cat," she said. Apparently, Mrs. Kinder, who lived below Victoria, had gone to investigate why the cat never shut up. The studio door was open and that's how she found my sister sitting in a corner of her apartment with the x-act knife and a nice amount of blood on the floor. Victoria had been slicing herself for a while. "Death by a thousand cuts," is how she'd put it that morning in her usual wry way, just as she was slipping off into a haze of lithium.

Victoria's apartment was in a neighborhood close to Tompkins Square Park, a place where junkies on the stoop knew your name and looked out for you if you were, as my sister was then, twenty-three, blue-eyed and blond, arms and legs thin as pick-up sticks: one false move and her whole construction would be over.

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Sylvia shifted her weight to the other hip, and I took that moment to push by her and bring the cat into the living room where I put it on the couch, from which it immediately leapt to the windowsill then to the top of the bookcase. I looked at the cat. Hamlet. What a stupid name for a cat. Hamlet looked down, insouciant, then rolled over and turned its back to me.

"Well?" Sylvia said.

"I was gonna lock him in the bathroom, but now I don't know. We didn't even have a kitchen chair I could pull over to reach him with."

Sylvia put her hand on my shoulder. "I know you've been going through a lot with your sister and everything, but I really don't want to have to deal with a mess when I get home, so maybe you can, like, get a cat box now and deal with it this morning instead of later?" Then she picked up the briefcase her father had presented to her the day she got her job at Putnam. "By the way, you better close the window in the bathroom," she said. Then she was gone for the day, it being by this time close to six thirty a.m. and her boss being the kind of bastard that wants a fresh cup of coffee the minute he walks in the door. I shut the window.

I decided to call in sick. This was something I rarely did, unlike my sister who called in sick at the drop of a hat. For me, a stomachache could be made believable. There was a pet store three blocks south, and after I'd brushed my hair and put on a clean shirt, I went over there and bought a bag of litter, a pan with a dome and a filter, and a box of Friskies dry cat food. In one morning this cat cost me a token and twenty-seven dollars worth of supplies. I didn't have this kind of money, and I felt the familiar resentment toward Victoria spread like a vine from my core to my limbs. It wasn't like she was going to pay me back. Who knew how long she'd be in that hospital, who knew if she'd get her job back—or if she'd even be able to keep her apartment, squalid as it was.

I walked toward First. New York was such a strange place sometimes. On my way to the store, the streets had been crowded with men and women marching toward the subway or waiting for and then

filing onto busses. Now the streets were quiet, maybe a shopkeeper or two sweeping, an occasional cab or car, but gone were the bustle of crowds I'd had to fight not fifteen minutes before. Above me the sky was a line of clear blue, no clouds even. Made me wonder how Victoria was. She hated blue sky. She hated spring and those sudden days of blue and sunlight that dazzled skyscraper windows. It hurt her eyes, she said.

She worked as a bartender in a dive on 8th and Avenue A, down from the line of Indian restaurants where the rats ran freely from kitchen to kitchen. The bar's owner was a wanna-be punk who wore safety pinned T-shirts unironically and played nothing but the Ramones on the sound system. Apparently, Victoria was a little in love with him, which I didn't get at all, there being a suspicious unwashed quality to his physique. I also suspected he was from Long Island, partly because of the Ramones, but also because he ended most of his sentences as if he were backing them up into his nose. In those days I was particularly contemptuous of Long Island and New Jersey—bridge and tunnelers, we called them. I didn't know if Victoria's recent foray back into suicidal ideation was because of this guy. I didn't know if he was just an excuse. Safe to say she no longer had a job, though, and walking down the street in the dazzling sunshine, I found myself worrying once again if Victoria would have to move in with me, how I'd support her, myself, and that cat, on what I made.

Then again, Victoria had a way about her that made people want to give her things. Several years before, when we were still in high school, Victoria fed us by going from bodega to bodega, flirting with the guys behind the counters, acquiring cold cuts and day-old potato salad or cole slaw, which we ate with plastic spoons. She had a deal with one of the early morning bagel guys, and we'd walk down from 108th Street at one in the morning to the bagel shop where her friend would give us a dozen seconds—misshapen bagels still hot from the line, which were so tender it was tough not to eat all of them before we got home. "They'll never be this good again," Victoria always said.

That guy, the bagel guy, was named Samuel. "Victoria! Victoria!" he'd cry, batting his lashes at her when we opened the door. In the dead of winter boys should not wear thin white T-shirts stretched tightly across chest and biceps, stained with sweat and butter. Boys should not smell warmly of yeast, have hair thick and long as a woman's and held by an elastic at the nape of the neck. I never knew where to look when my sister and Samuel flirted and touched: at the yellowed posters of Israel on the wall near the cash register, at the chips in the black and white linoleum floor, at the mysterious machinery behind the swinging doors. Often there was no one else in the shop but the three of us. I always wore sneakers; I put my hair back in a net when we got there. I held down the fort until three a.m., selling baker's dozens to the few people who ventured in. It was lonely work. One night a yuppie woman, clearly stoned, came in asking for raisin bagels. Victoria and Samuel could be heard in the back. While I bagged her bagels she said in a sniffy way, "I'm only here because H&H was packed."

"Yeah?" I said. I stuffed a few more bagels in her bag. "I'm only here because my sister likes to screw the bagel guy." Like magic, Samuel and Victoria emerged from behind the wall pulling on their shirts just as I handed the yuppie woman her bag.

"I got some fresh ones for you in the back," Samuel said, which struck the three of us as incredibly funny. The woman turned and left without her bagels, even though she'd already given me a twenty. Since the bagels were left behind, I stuck the money in my pocket, nobody the wiser. So sometimes Victoria and her shenanigans were profitable to me.

When I got home from the pet store the little nubbin on the answering machine was blinking red and the cat was still asleep on the top of the bookshelf. There were four messages, three for Sylvia from a variety of men hoping to score. The last was my mother. Not unexpected but not welcome either.

"Darling!" my mother said in her breathy way. She'd been calling people darling since she was cast as a mental patient in a Jean Seberg

film in 1963 when she was barely sixteen, still living in Los Angeles, and from which she was, the story goes, cut. Sure, her face never appeared on screen, but she continued to fancy herself an actress and free spirit.

"I belong on Broadway," she told Victoria and me each afternoon when she sat at her makeshift vanity, applying dime-store false eyelashes to go hostess at the Howard Johnson's on the corner of 46th and Ninth. Victoria sucked all that stuff in, believed her until finally she didn't. I was always dubious of my mother's history.

"Of course you've heard about Victoria," her voice went on as if I were on the other end of the line, as if I didn't live in an apartment with another girl from whom I preferred to keep the details of my business private.

"The hospital is asking me to come down there, and Eleanor, darling, oh..." There was a pause, and I could envision her sitting on the little chair by the telephone in that miniscule Hell's Kitchen apartment, lighting her first cigarette of the day. "I don't think I can manage it. I talked to Claude last night and he believes I should give you power of attorney over Victoria. Perhaps you could become her guardian? In any case, Eleanor, you must go down there today, tell me how she is, and whether they are treating her in a respectful way. Remind them of who she is."

Who the hell is she, I thought. The daughter of a failed actress? The sister of an assistant editor? The Bellevue folks already knew Victoria was crazy, so I couldn't quite put together who my mother thought I should remind all those doctors and nurses Victoria was.

I set the cat box up beneath the ironing board, found a cleanish bowl, and dumped in a bit of Friskies. Hamlet was suddenly at my feet eating loudly and shaking bits of cat food around with each bite. When I put down some water the cat ignored it, and when it was finished eating, it dashed back up the bookshelf. I hoped it would find the litter box when it needed to.

Then I washed my face and put on some eyeliner, a white Brooks Brothers button-down shirt I found in the laundry basket, my Keds, and some leggings. I wore the shirt and leggings in small defiance of

my mother who always said, whenever she saw me in leggings, that wearing clothes that tight was just asking for it. To which I always said, Asking for what, Mother? To be raped? Do you think women dress asking to be raped? These were the kind of nonsensical arguments my mother and I had on a regular basis, which is why my mother preferred Victoria, even though Victoria didn't visit our mother once a week to make sure she and Claude had eaten at least one meal that included meat and vegetables or that otherwise wasn't known as Dewar's.

Before I left, I went over to the bookshelf where Hamlet was draped.

"Hamlet?" I said. I held out my hand as if he were suddenly a gentleman who'd take it and hold it to his lips. Hamlet stretched his paw toward me, lightly tapped my fingertips, then sneezed, meowed, stood, turned around, and lay back down.

The Bellevue psych ward was not as grim as people always made it out to be. Sure there were bars on the windows, and the doors were all locked, but this time Victoria's room had a nice view of the East River. Not that Victoria was doing much more than lying in bed.

She looked asleep. All those times when we were little and we shared a room and we talked and pretended to leap from bed to bed, to avoid the crocodiles in the swamp that we'd turned the rug into, all the times we ran around the city in the middle of the night because we were bored, bored, bored, all those times we made breakfast out of a few bagel nubs and slices of American cheese: those were the times I thought about. "I miss you," I whispered. She rolled toward me and stretched out her unbanded arm. We held hands while she drifted back and forth between sleep and not sleep.

"We can't keep her more than a week," Dr. Lipton said, looking down at his chart. "Probably less, actually, as it doesn't look like Medicaid is going to cover much of hospitalization."

"All that stupid cutting," I said. Ironically, if she'd actually sliced a vein she'd be able to stay, but chronic cutting, no dice. We were sitting in his office, which wasn't much bigger than a patient's room, but which at least had a little art on the walls and a rug underfoot.

Dr. Lipton nodded. He had one of those annoying clacker things on his desk, steel balls lined up in a row. Every time I sat in his office I spent the majority of the time resisting my urge to slam them into each other.

"Small cuts don't make you a slasher; small cuts make you a cutter. Not exactly a suicide plan, more like pain management." He picked up a small pencil, the kind you get when you play mini golf, and made some notations in Victoria's chart. The window was open, and outside I heard children shouting and several dogs barking. I thought about Hamlet and the twenty-seven dollars I'd wasted just to see him go back to Victoria in a week or less.

"I don't know what to do with her," I said. And Dr. Lipton nodded again.

"Bring her home. I don't know what to tell you. Before Reagan we could have kept her a month, but now? We have too many coming in and out. We will need her bed. I'll give you prescriptions, but they're expensive. I'm pretty sure Nancy has enough samples to tide you over for a month, but after that you're going to have to figure it out."

He stood up, so I stood up.

"Eleanor," he said, coming around the desk and taking both my hands in his. His hands were small, dry, and much too warm. He didn't wear a ring. Unfortunately I was trembling, which his touch made worse. It had been so long since anyone, man or woman, lover or friend, had touched me in any way at all. We were almost the same height; his eyes were amber, and one iris seemed larger than the other. I wanted him to hug me, to pull me to him, I wanted to feel the stethoscope he wore pressed against my collarbone, the rectangle name tag attached to his lab coat against my breast.

"I wish your mother were here. We need to make a plan for Victoria." He squeezed both my hands then let them go, his absence then like a scoop of water from a bucket immediately refilled with all of my resentment.

Hamlet stayed on top of the bookshelf for two days. At least he was on the top of the bookshelf whenever either of us came home, but

he must have gotten down because the cat box seemed, well, used. I had no idea a cat could poop as often or as secretly as Hamlet. Sylvia refused to come into the apartment until I cleaned it. The cat litter made me sneeze large gasping sneezes, which caused more sneezing and dust. I had to carry the bag down the stairs five floors to the back alley because the building didn't officially allow pets. There was a small dumpster about a yard from the door which was putrid and dripping with dissolving organic matter.

Then, on the third night, I dreamed I couldn't breathe, only to wake and realize Hamlet was lying on my chest, one paw outstretched and resting gently on my nose. I opened my eyes and he began to purr. Carefully I placed my hand on his back and he just as carefully stood up, stretched, and draped himself over my head, which was stifling and comforting at the same time.

Throughout the day, Hamlet followed me constantly. When I was in the bathroom putting on makeup, he sat on the toilet seat, a fat Buddha, eyes slitted but not closed. In the bedroom, he stretched himself on my pillow as I dressed. On the couch he lounged in my lap or curled across the back of my neck. He seemed to have no interest in Sylvia at all. Only me. Sylvia, ever the killjoy, remarked that Hamlet "certainly knew what side his bread was buttered on," an awkward construction I would have edited had I seen it in print. Sylvia wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer—her goal in life back then being to get a boob job when she'd saved enough money.

But Hamlet was smart. He knew when I got home and met me at the door, meowing and purring and rubbing himself against my leg. When Sylvia came home he ignored her. I woke each morning, his soft weight on my chest, his small paw on my chin. At night, when I put my book down and turned out the light, he curled about my head, gently kneading my hair with his paws. It felt so good. His little warm body, just the right weight for comfort.

Medicaid granted Victoria a ten-day stay, and every day, for five of those ten, I went down to Bellevue after work to sit on the small metal chair in her room and watch her snore. My mother couldn't handle

coming to see her, but on the fifth night she and Claude waited for me in the diner across the street. I bought them a hamburger and a salad and a beer each and watched them eat.

After each bite, Claude dabbed his chin with his napkin. A dapper man, though his suit was old, it was well taken care of. Mother had met him at the dry cleaners on the corner when she'd gone in one day to see if the owners would give her a few wire hangers. Claude took one look at my delicate mother with her false eyelashes, cherry red Maybelline lipstick, her hair curled below her ears and at the nape of her neck, the Pucci miniskirt and white blouse she'd had since her turn as an actress before we were born, and, presumably, fell in love. They got drinks at the Howard Johnson bar and Claude moved in two weeks later. It's what she did in those days, my mother. That recklessness she and Victoria shared was enraging, was contemptible to me then, a twenty-two-year-old girl living among uptight yuppies looking for some measurable stability, unable to manage anything but those two people in my life who eclipsed everything else.

That evening Claude and my mother were dressed as if they were going to a show, which of course they weren't, no money between them, the minor amount Claude saved all his years as a tailor dwindling, my mother unable to wait tables anymore due to the corns on her feet. Mother had on a caftan Claude tailored for her from a larger one a woman never picked up from the cleaners. He had on a Bermuda wool three-piece suit, much too much for the time of year. His pocket square and his tie matched. Once the food was gone, and the table cleared, my mother reached across the table and held out her hand palm up, like she did when we were little, when she said she needed courage for the long shift ahead at the HoJo's bar, when we took her hand and she'd pull us to her and tickle us, Victoria first, then me.

I kept my hands in my lap, so my mother picked up her napkin instead and pretended to cough into it. She looked to Claude and Claude said, "We grant you power of attorney over your sister."

"You can't just say it, you have to get a lawyer to write it down," I said.

My mother sighed, "Darling, we know that. Claude, tell her about the gentleman." Claude was radically altering a tuxedo for a lawyer; in exchange he would write up the papers. They would have them in a few days.

"Okay," I said. I didn't believe them. My mother made dramatic pronouncements like this all the time.

The diner was noisy. Waitresses in black slacks and white tops clattered dishes and silverware, a woman in the booth behind us talked loudly and laughed fakely, the coffee smelled burned, the seat was sticky, and when I looked across the table at my mother, there was a wateriness to her, like I was seeing her from far away, and her image kept shimmering through the heat of the room. Like she might cry. And there was, too, a shakiness within me; my body felt barely held together by the thin membrane of my skin, in danger, in danger, one breath could rupture it all. I wanted to love her, I wanted to feel safe and protected by her the way I must have once.

I took the subway home, and Hamlet was at the door, and when I sat in front of the television he crawled across the sofa back and curled around my shoulders.

Some things Hamlet did the nine days he lived with me:

Leapt from the windowsill to the top of the bathroom door and stood there calmly while the door teetered back and forth.

Knocked a cracker with tuna on top of it from Sylvia's hand as she brought it to her mouth. He ate the tuna before she finished saying, "Fucking cat!"

Opened the cabinet beneath the sink where I kept the dry food and dragged the box out and spilled cat food all over the floor, none of which he ate.

Knocked all the shampoo bottles from the shelf in the shower to the floor while Sylvia and I watched *Ally McBeal*, scaring the bejesus out of both of us.

Stuck his head in a bag of Fritos and pulled out a chip, which he did eat. Then coughed up.

I thought all of it was funny. He was smart, he knew what he was

doing, and he was deadpan about all of it. Even Sylvia could see the humor in the way he liked to hang out on top of the bathroom door.

On her eighth day at Bellevue, Victoria was sitting up on the edge of her bed, her absurdly thin legs tucked beneath her. She looked like a child. She looked like *my* child, not at all like a woman, not at all like we were related. Just a few days in the hospital and her collarbones were too sharp, her scapulae pointed wings. When she spoke I could see not just the muscles that moved her mouth but the actual jaw hinge. Even so, she was beautiful. I knew that if she walked out of the hospital that day, walked through Kips Bay south toward her Avenue A apartment, men would still stop and stare at her as she moved past them, entranced by her too large eyes, the blond hair, her hips that curved despite her near emaciated state. Frankly I wanted nothing more than to leave her, take the 6 train back to my apartment, curl up with Hamlet, listen to him purr.

"How is Hamlet," she said, as if she had reached into my mind and plucked him from it. I looked at the blank wall above her head.

"He's fine." The door to Victoria's room was open, a number of orderlies walked past, wheeling carts or patients.

"You can't have him back," I said, my heart slamming away at the bones of my chest. Victoria shrugged. "I don't want him anyway," she said. "He's too meowy and he's kind of clingy. It's annoying." The moment she said these things I knew them to be true. But still. Hamlet.

"Listen," Victoria said, leaning closer to me. Her pupils were so dilated they obscured the blue of her eyes. "I need you to go down and talk to that asshole Jimmy and get my money."

"What money?"

"My paycheck, stupid. He owes me six weeks. Plus tips. Don't let him skimp on the tips." She sat back against the wall, stretched her legs out in front of her. I looked at my watch. Seven p.m. Victoria stared at me. Every single thing in that room was white and shiny including Victoria herself. I didn't want to go downtown, I didn't want to argue with her boss, I didn't want to do anything except go home and sleep. *Now is the hour of lead*, I thought.

Victoria mistook my silence for pouting. "I'm sorry I called you stupid," she said, "it's all this shit they've got me on." She plucked at the bandage on her arm like a child wearing a shirt that was too tight. "But I really need that money."

I stood up. "It's okay. I'll go do it." I'd do it because I wasn't going to give Victoria that money no matter how much she supposedly needed it. I was going to keep it for myself. I was going to put it in my own meager checking account and use it to pay for her meds, or Hamlet's cat food, or my rent. I knew what she made in tips. Six weeks could be a lot of money. It might be enough for a while.

I walked over to Madison and took the subway down to Houston. The train was crowded and slow, though I managed to find a seat next to a young man who moved his backpack for me. We sat thigh to thigh, and once the train got going he took my hand from off my lap and said directly in my ear, "Why so sad, beautiful girl?"

I was flabbergasted. I turned to him, opened my mouth, but the train lurched to a stop, slammed me against him, then dumped me to the floor on the feet of two yuppie men who instantly bent to help me, each grasping an arm, one of them putting his hand on my waist to steady me.

"You okay?" he said, but I couldn't answer, the words dammed behind the monster lump that formed in my throat. Hand on my hand, whisper in my ear, the warmth on my waist, like phantom limbs that create longing. I moved to the other side of the car, away from those men, and allowed myself to be submerged by the current of passengers disembarking the train.

Jimmy's bar was ridiculously called Joey R's, probably named in the sad hope that some Ramone would walk by it one day and, flattered, come in for a beer. Despite the name above the door everyone called it Jimmy's bar. It was eight o'clock, and the bar was almost completely empty except for three guys all bunched at the end of the room watching a TV with a coat-hanger antenna. The place smelled like stale Budweiser with undertones of urine. Peanut shells crunched underfoot, making every step slippery and precarious. I didn't want

to fall again. My butt still hurt. My mind was still confused by those men on the train.

Jimmy was leaning up against the bar in back watching the game too, and looking significantly less greasy than the last time I saw him. Low-slung jeans, Marlboro belt buckle, tight black tee. And his hair seemed actually clean, held in a topknot with what seemed to be a shoelace. From the door I could actually see what Victoria found pleasing about him. When I asked for her money, he squinted at me like he couldn't quite place me, even though he'd met me many times over the last six months when I'd come to hang out with Victoria while she worked.

"Eleanor?" he finally said. "You look good, girl!" and then pulled me into a hug, which I didn't return. He smelled like that Armani cologne all the men wore back then. It was girly, but it was sexy, and my heart beat against his a few rounds before he let me go. Then he quieted. "How's Vic?" he said, almost gently.

I shrugged and told him she was okay, that she wanted her money. "No problem." He turned, walked to the back. I followed, and when he ushered me into the office he shut the door behind me.

"Hang tight. It's in the safe."

So I stood by the door while he dialed the combination, and when he walked over, he gave me the envelope, then ran his hand up my body from my waist to my shoulder. The other hand he ran down in the opposite direction. I was already feeling twitchy from the men on the train. I didn't move, but I didn't say no.

"Whaddaya think?" he asked, touching his forehead to mine. I'd had sex with exactly one person, a boy in college I was mostly friends with. College was the only place I wasn't compared to my sister, where she wasn't known, where I was judged on my own merits. Still, after that one time, the boy and I stopped being friends and I went back to being lonely.

Jimmy kissed me on the nose, slipped a hand to my waist. I decided I was okay with this and kissed him on the lips, because, why not? Why was I always the one who stood by while my mother and my sister flirted and kissed and fucked. I put the envelope with Victoria's

money in my back pocket and put my hands up Jimmy's shirt. In kind, he put his hands up mine, then took it off. Through the closed door I could hear the few men in the bar behind us howl like dogs at the game they watched on the fractured TV.

When I got home, I counted the money. Two thousand dollars. I was definitely keeping it. I put it in my purse and hooked my purse to my bedpost. It was late and Sylvia was already asleep snoring through whatever dreams girls like Sylvia have. I took off my clothing and got under the sheets in my underwear. The sheets were cool against my skin, like water, like the sea. It was difficult to calm my mind after Jimmy. Plus, I was drunk. I wanted to sleep naked, but thought the better of that, and got up and put on the sweatpants and shirt I'd left on the floor that morning. I tried to wait for Hamlet to come curl around my head, but was exhausted and fell asleep too quickly.

I'm a sound sleeper. Wake me too soon and I will spend the rest of the day in a half dream state walking into walls and making bad decisions. Ask my sister, she will back me up. Once, when we were about four, after being woken up by a particularly loud garbage truck, I became convinced the only way we'd get back to sleep was for me to take some of the little orange pills Mother gave us when we had done too much during the day and our legs and arms hurt and she wanted us to go to sleep. So I climbed out of my bed, pulled open each dresser drawer in succession, and climbed to the top. By this point Victoria was sitting up in bed, so I shared. Our mother came in after work to kiss us, found the empty bottle and me on my back on the floor sleeping deeply. Suddenly we were in an emergency room, nurses and doctors crowding above us. Maybe this is where Victoria got her taste for emergency rooms, I don't know. She blames me a lot. "My sister tried to kill me when we were little," she enjoys saying in bars to men who look interested.

And so, when Sylvia woke me by screaming, "What the fuck," over and over, I was not my best. Suddenly she was standing over my bed wielding a hairbrush that was dripping brown goo. Shit. Literally. It was shit from my cat, though it smelled a lot worse than the run-of-

the-mill cat poop. I turned on my light and realized there was diarrhea all over my bed, and my heart lurched.

Hamlet was lying under the ironing board, runny poo leaking from his butt. Behind me Sylvia stomped around the apartment saying, "Holy fuck, Eleanor." Hamlet's shit was on everything, the couch, the rug, not even the TV was spared. This is bad, I thought, this is bad, this is bad. I had to take him somewhere. The only place I could think of was the Humane Society clinic down on 59th, so I picked him up, wrapped him in a towel, shoved my feet in sneakers, grabbed my purse off the bedpost, and was out the door. He was limp, as limp as he was that first day I brought him home from Victoria's. A million cabs barreled up First, but not one stopped for me. I turned and ran to Second; more cabs, but no matter how hard I waved no one stopped. A bus pulled up to the stop across the street and I ran wildly to it, tried to climb the steps, but the driver threw me off.

"You can't bring a cat on here without a carrier!"

Hamlet began to squirm, then began to howl a strange deep-throated howl I'd never heard him make before. I held him tighter and ran back across the street to a bodega where two guys were unloading boxes of bananas. "I need a box! I need a box!" I screamed. One of the guys, seeing my cat, dumped the bananas from a box. The other guy took it from him and cut holes with a box cutter. I put Hamlet in, but he immediately became frantic, fighting the lid and trying to get out. "Wait!" one of the guys said, and he ran into the store and brought out duct tape. He taped Hamlet in while I cried and thanked the men, and apologized to Hamlet, who immediately stuck both paws out of the holes in the box and howled louder.

The next bus let me on. Hamlet howled, the yuppies stared hatefully, and I felt some small satisfaction at ruining their Friday morning. I got off at 59th and ran as quickly as I could, stumbling in my untied sneakers to the clinic, Hamlet still howling, trying desperately to get out.

Once inside, the nurse took him, and asked me our names and to describe the problem, then sat me in a chair with forms. All I could think of was Hamlet, and I couldn't concentrate. I knew cats got dehydrated

fast, I knew cats were more fragile than people think, that he could die, that without him I'd be thoroughly and completely alone. The space on my chest where he usually slept felt hollow. Finally a veterinarian came out: worms and ear mites, he told me. Maybe another parasite; they'd have test results in a few days.

"Where did you find him?" the vet asked. I had no idea. Victoria had found him, maybe rescued him from some alley. "I don't know, he's my sister's cat," I said.

They had to keep him a few days, so the vet took me back to see him. Hamlet was in a small cage, lying on a clean white towel. The doctor opened the door for me and I stuck my head in, nose to nose with my cat. He looked straight at me, and I was afraid to touch him because there was an I.V. coming out of the back of his neck, so I kissed him on the nose and he licked my chin. Tears ran down my cheeks. I wasn't even crying, it was just tears running down my face, puddling my collarbones, drenching the edge of my sweatshirt. The veterinarian patted my back awkwardly, but it meant nothing to me. I went home, called in sick, opened the windows, cleaned the apartment. Sat on the couch, listened to the water drip from the faucet and the hum of the refrigerator and the noise of the city that pulsed in from outside.

That night Sylvia asked me to move out, which I understood. It made sense to me. Anyway, Victoria would be out in a day, and I wasn't in the position to ask Sylvia if Victoria could come stay. On Monday I'd quit my job and go waitress somewhere near Victoria's place. Maybe Jimmy'd give me her job. What the hell, we'd done it, maybe he'd be nice to me. Maybe he wouldn't want Victoria to know that. Maybe I could use that to my advantage.

That night, without Hamlet, I couldn't sleep, my bed felt unmoored. At six thirty a.m. my mother called. "Darling!" she shouted through the answering machine while I lay in my bed, too tired to get up. "Victoria is to be free today! Would you meet me and Claude at the usual diner so we can take her home?"

"Oh my god," Sylvia moaned from the other side of the room. "I can't wait till you're gone."

The subway was empty. I had to wait a while for a train. Before I

left, I'd packed some clothing and my favorite books into a Dress Barn bag. I hung both Victoria's fringed hippie purse and my own, with the money shoved deep inside it, securely across my body. Mother and Claude were at the diner when I got there so I left the shopping bag with them while I went to release my sister.

Dr. Linton met me at the nurse's station. He was still kindly, and he shook my hand, but I no longer felt the gratitude or the comfort I had from him last week. I signed papers; he gave me a manila envelope filled with medication samples, told me what and when to medicate my sister, wished us luck. Victoria was pushed toward me in a wheelchair. I watched her come toward me from the far end of the hall, and it was like I was in a glass bubble that no one but me could see, and everything was distorted and muffled.

When I led Victoria into the diner, my mother and Claude stood up, clucked lovingly with arms outstretched, and gathered Victoria to them. Mother cooed and ahed and held Victoria's face and kissed it again and again. I sat down in the booth, the same booth, the vinyl still sticky, and ordered coffee from the waitress who stood behind Claude tapping her pencil against her teeth.

My mother had on the Marimekko shift she'd been wearing to special occasions since I was a kid. Claude was his usual impeccable self, waistcoat, an ascot today instead of a tie. Victoria wore the dress she'd been brought to the hospital in, which was stained with blood and hung on her loosely and made her look twelve.

The first thing Victoria said to me once she sat down and ordered her food was, "Where's my money?"

"What money?" my mother said.

"Work money." Victoria was next to me on the bench. My mother leaned forward and stretched out her hand, and Victoria took it. Claude beamed. "It's so lovely we are all together," he said. I smiled at him. He really was a nice man. I think about him all the time now, though he died a while ago, at least twenty years, because it happened not that long after I got to Miami. He moved out when Victoria moved in with our mother. She'd see him in her neighborhood buying groceries and he was always kind to her despite everything.

I shook a bag of Sweet 'n' Low, opened it, and added it to my coffee.

"Your money's in a bank," I said.

"What do you mean it's in a bank? I need it now."

"You can't have it now."

My mother looked back and forth at both of us. "Do you think that's really your decision, darling?" she said to me.

"You're the one that gave me power of attorney."

"You gave her power of attorney? Over me?" My sister withdrew her hand, turned to face me. "What the hell is wrong with you," she said. Her pupils were still huge; I could see my tiny self reflected there. Across the table my mother started to cry. Claude patted her back and my mother put her head on his shoulder. I just felt sorry for all of them.

"And where's my cat," Victoria said.

I could have kept him. He felt like mine. But then again, she'd found him. She'd had him first. He kind of saved her life, I thought, dramatically. Or not so dramatically: if he hadn't meowed himself hoarse Mrs. Kinder would not have found my sister, and who knows what would have happened. She might have become tired of cutting and slashed instead of sliced. So I told her he was sick but that he'd be okay. I told her he was at the clinic on 59th. I said she could pick him up tomorrow but she had to take better care of him.

"I was just kidding about the bank thing," I said, too, opening my purse. And then she hugged me, and for once, I hugged back. Beneath my hands I could feel her vertebrae; her body against mine was so light, it was like holding nothing at all.

The waitress came with our eggs and bagels. We asked for more coffee. The diner smelled overwhelmingly like bacon, and it was hot and fairly crowded for eight thirty on a Saturday morning. Outside, cabs and black sedans, delivery trucks and busses drove north. Horns honked, an ambulance sped by and briefly lit the four of us in its whirling light. Pedestrians moved in tandem on the sidewalk, those going uptown on the right, those going south to the left, in unspoken arrangement, and I thought about all the life and lives in my city, all the people I greeted, worked with, paid, thanked, directed, helped

sometimes, all the people I brushed up against daily, all those people I would never know.

