KEEPING FAITH

Jodi Picoult

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone:(61 2) 8425 0100
Fax:(61 2) 9906 2218
Email:info@allenandunwin.com
Web:www.allenandunwin.com

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FOR LAURA GROSS—

Ten years ago you believed in me so strongly that you managed to convince the publishing world I was worth the risk, too. Here's to another forty or fifty years of business, and friendship. *Now* do you see why I couldn't dedicate this to Padre Pio?

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prologue

August 10, 1999

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, Faith and I should not be home when my mother calls and invites us to come see her brand-new coffin.

'Mariah,' my mother says, clearly surprised when I pick up the phone. 'What are you doing there?'

'The grocery store was closed.' I sigh. 'The sprinklers in the produce section had a flood. And the dry cleaner had a death in the family.'

I do not like surprises. I live by lists. In fact, I often imagine my life like a September loose-leaf binder—neatly slotted and tabbed, with everything still in place. All this I attribute to a degree in architecture and my fervent intent to not turn into my mother as I grow older. To this end, every day of the week has a routine. Mondays I work on the frames of the tiny dollhouses I build. Tuesdays I build the furnishings. Wednesdays are for errands, Thursdays for housecleaning, and Fridays for tending to emergencies that crop up during the week. Today, a Wednesday, I usually pick up Colin's shirts, go to the bank, and do the food shopping. It leaves just enough time to drive home, unload the groceries, and get to Faith's

one o'clock ballet class. But today, due to circumstances beyond my control, I have entirely too much time on my hands.

'Well,' my mother says, in that way of hers. 'It seems you're fated to come for a visit.'

Faith suddenly bounces in front of me. 'Is it Grandma? Did she get it?'

'Get what?' It is ten o'clock, and already I have a headache.

'Tell her yes,' my mother says on the other end of the phone line.

I glance around the house. The carpet needs to be vacuumed, but then what will I do on Thursday? A heavy August rain throbs against the windows. Faith spreads her soft, warm hand over my knee. 'Okay,' I tell my mother. 'We'll be right over.'

My mother lives two and a half miles away, in an old stone house that everyone in New Canaan calls the Gingerbread Cape. Faith sees her nearly every day; stays with her after school on days I am working. We could walk, if not for the weather. As it is, Faith and I have just gotten into the car when I remember my purse, sitting on the kitchen counter.

'Hang on,' I tell her, getting out and cringing between raindrops, as if I might melt.

The phone is ringing by the time I get inside. I grab the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Oh, you're home,' Colin says. At the sound of my husband's voice, my heart jumps. Colin is the sales manager for a small company that manufactures LED exit signs, and he's been in Washington, D.C., for two days, training a new rep. He is calling me because it is like that with us—tied as tight as the lacing on a high-top boot, we cannot stand being apart.

'Are you at the airport?'

'Yeah. Stuck at Dulles.' I curl the telephone cord around my arm, reading between the round vowels of his words for all the other things he is too embarrassed to say in a public venue: *I love you. I miss you. You're mine.* In the background

a disembodied voice announces the arrival of a United flight. 'Hasn't Faith got swimming today?'

'Ballet at one o'clock.' I wait a moment, then add softly, 'When will you be home?'

'As soon as I can.' I close my eyes, thinking that there is nothing like an embrace after an absence, nothing like fitting my face into the curve of his shoulder and filling my lungs with the scent of him.

He hangs up without saying good-bye, which makes me smile. That's Colin, in a nutshell: already rushing to come back home to me.

It stops raining on the way to my mother's. As we pass the long soccer field that edges the town, vehicles begin pulling onto the road's narrow shoulder. A perfect, arched rainbow graces the lush grass of the playing field. I keep driving. 'You'd think they'd never seen one before,' I say, accelerating.

Faith rolls down her window and stretches out her hand. Then she waggles her fingers in front of me. 'Mommy!' she yells. 'I touched it!'

Out of habit I look down. Her fingers are spread and streaked with red and blue and lime green. For a moment, my breath catches. And then I remember her sitting on the floor of the living room just an hour before, her fists full of Magic Markers.

My mother's living room is dominated by an unappealing Naugahyde sectional couch the color of skin. I tried to talk her into leather, a nice wing chair or two, but she laughed. 'Leather,' she said, 'is for *goyim* with *Mayflower* names.' After that, I gave up. In the first place, I have a leather couch myself. In the second, I married a *goy* with a *Mayflower* name. At least she hasn't coated the Naugahyde with a protective plastic wrap, the way my grandmother Fanny did when I was little.

But today, walking into the living room, I do not even notice the couch. 'Wow, Grandma,' whispers Faith, clearly awed. 'Is someone in it?' She falls to her knees, knocking at the highly polished mahogany rectangle.

If things had gone according to plan, I'd probably be choosing cantaloupes at that moment, holding them to my nose for softness and sweetness, or paying Mr Li thirteen dollars and forty cents, and receiving in return seven Brooks Brothers shirts, so starched that they lay like the torsos of fallen men in the back of the station wagon. 'Mother,' I say, 'why do you have a casket in your living room?'

'It's not a casket, Mariah. See the glass on the top? It's a coffin table.'

'A coffin table.'

My mother sets her coffee mug on the clear plate of glass to prove her point. 'See?'

'You have a coffin in your living room.' I am unable to get past that one sticking point.

She sits on the couch and props her sandaled feet on the glass top. 'Well, I know that, honey. I picked it out.'

I cradle my head in my hands. 'You just went to Dr Feldman for your checkup. You know what he said: If you take your blood pressure medication religiously, there's no reason to believe you won't outlive us all.'

She shrugs. 'This is one less thing for you to do, when the time comes.'

'Oh, for God's sake. Is this about the new assisted-living community Colin mentioned? Because I swear, he only thought you'd—'

'Sweetie, calm down. I don't plan to kick the bucket anytime soon; I just needed a table in here. I liked the color of the wood. And I saw a piece on *Twenty/Twenty* about a man in Kentucky who was making these.'

Faith stretches out on her back beside the coffin. 'You could sleep in it, Grandma,' she suggests. 'You could be like Dracula.'

'You've got to admit, the craftsmanship is to die for,' my mother says.

In more ways than one. The mahogany is exquisite, a smooth, glossy sea. The joints and bevels are neat and defined, the hinges bright as a beacon.

'It was a real bargain,' my mother adds.

'Please don't tell me you got a used one.'

My mother sniffs and looks at Faith. 'Your mommy needs to loosen up.' For years now, my mother has been telling me this in one form or another. But I cannot forget that the last time I loosened up, I nearly came apart.

My mother gets down on the floor with Faith, and together they yank at the brass pallbearer's handles. Their blond heads—Mom's dyed, my daughter's fairy-white—are bent so close I can't tell where one ends and the other begins. Their horseplay manages to jerk the coffin a few inches toward them. I stare at the flattened hollow left in its wake in the carpet, then try as best I can to fix it with the edge of my shoe.

Colin and I are luckier than most. We married young, but we've stayed married—in spite of some fairly intense bumps in the road.

But there's a chemistry involved, too. When Colin is looking at me, I know he's not seeing me with ten pounds left behind from pregnancy or the fine strands of gray in my hair. He pictures my skin creamy and tight, my hair hanging down my back, my body a college student's. He remembers me at my best, because—as he says every now and then—I'm the best thing he can remember.

When we go out to dinner occasionally with his colleagues—the ones who have collected trophy wives—I realize how fortunate I am to have someone like Colin. He puts his hand on the small of my back, which is not as tanned or slender as those on some of the younger models. He proudly introduces me. 'This is my wife,' he says, and I smile. It is all I've ever wanted to be.

'Mommy.'

It has started to rain again; the road is swimming in front of me, and I've never been a very confident driver. 'Ssh. I have to concentrate.'

'But, Mommy,' she presses. 'This is really, really important.'

'What is really, really important is getting to your ballet lesson without getting us killed.'

For one blessed moment it is quiet. Then Faith begins kicking the back of my seat. 'But I don't have my leotard,' she whines.

I swerve onto the side of the road and turn to look at her. 'You don't?'

'No. I didn't know we were going there straight from Grandma's.'

I feel my neck redden. We are all of two miles from the dance studio. 'For God's sake, Faith. Why didn't you say something before?'

Her eyes fill with tears. 'I didn't know we were on our way to ballet until now.'

I slam my hand against the steering wheel. I don't know if I am angry at Faith, at the weather, at my mother, or at the damned sprinklers in the grocery store, all of which have managed to screw up my day. 'We go to ballet every single Tuesday after lunch!'

I pull onto the road and make a U-turn, ignoring the prick of guilt that tells me I'm being too hard on her, that she's only seven. Faith begins to shriek through her tears. 'I don't want to go home! I want to go to ballet!'

'We're not going home,' I say through clenched teeth. 'We're just going to pick up your leotard, and then we'll go to ballet.' We'll be twenty minutes late. I envision the eyes of the other mothers, watching me hustle Faith through the doors in the middle of a class that has already started. Mothers who've managed to get their children to class on time in the middle of this flash flood, mothers who do not have to work hard to make it look so easy.

We live in a century-old farmhouse, which is bordered on one side by a forest and on the other side by a meticulous stone wall. Our seven acres are mostly woods, tucked behind the house; we're close enough to the road that at night the headlights of passing cars sweep over the beds like lighthouse beacons. The farmhouse itself is full of opposites that still attract: a sagging porch backed by brand-new Pella windows, a claw-foot tub with a Shower Massage, Colin and me. The driveway dips, rising at the end near the road and again near

the house. As we turn down it, Faith gasps in delight. 'Daddy's home! I want to see him.'

So do I, but then I always do. No doubt he's taken an earlier flight and come home for lunch before returning to the office. I think about the other mothers already in the parking lot of the ballet studio, and then of seeing Colin, and suddenly being twenty minutes late seems entirely worthwhile. 'We'll say hi to Daddy. Then you get your leotard, and we've got to go.'

Faith bursts through the door like a marathon runner at the ribbon finish. 'Daddy!' she calls, but there is no one in the kitchen or the family room, nothing but Colin's briefcase neatly centered on the table to prove that he is here. I can hear water running through the old pipes. 'He's taking a shower,' I say, and Faith immediately heads upstairs.

'Hang on!' I shout after her, certain that the last thing Colin wants is to be surprised by Faith if he's strolling around the bedroom naked. I rush behind her, managing to get to the closed door of the master bedroom before Faith can turn the knob. 'Let me go in first.'

Colin stands beside the bed, wrapping a towel around his hips. When he sees me in the doorway, he freezes. 'Hi.' I smile, going into his arms. 'Isn't this a nice surprise?'

With my head tucked up beneath his chin and his hands loosely clasped around my waist, I nod to Faith. 'Come on in. Daddy's dressed.'

'Daddy!' she cries, barreling straight for Colin at groin level, something that we've laughed about often and that has him moving into a protective crouch, even as he holds me.

'Hi, cupcake,' he says, but he keeps looking over Faith's head, as if expecting to find another child waiting in the wings. Steam rolls from the seam of the closed bathroom door.

'We could put on a video for her,' I whisper, leaning close to Colin. 'That is, assuming you're looking for someone to wash your back.'

But instead of answering, Colin awkwardly untangles Faith's arms from his waist. 'Honey, maybe you should—'

'Should what?'

We all turn toward the voice coming from the bathroom.

The door swings open to reveal a damp, dripping woman, half wrapped in a towel, a woman who assumed that Colin's words were meant for her. 'Oh, my God,' she says, reddening, retreating and slamming the door.

I am aware of Faith running from the bedroom, of Colin going after her, of the water in the shower being turned off. My knees give out, and suddenly I am sitting on the bed, on the wedding-ring quilt Colin bought me in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after the Mennonite woman who crafted it told him that the symbol of a perfect marriage was an endless circle.

I bury my face in my hands and think, *Oh, God. It is happening again.*

Book I

THE OLD TESTAMENT

one

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth
Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS I do not talk about.

Like when I was thirteen, and I had to take my dog and have her put to sleep. Or the time in high school that I got all dressed up for the prom and sat by the window, waiting for a boy who never came. Or the way I felt when I first met Colin.

Well, I talk a little about that, but I don't admit that from the beginning I knew we were not meant to be together. Colin was a college football star; I'd been hired by his coach to tutor him to pass French. He kissed me—shy, plain, scholarly—on a dare from his teammates, and even muddled by embarrassment, it left me feeling gilded.

It is perfectly clear to me why I fell in love with Colin. But I have never understood what made him fall for me.

He told me that when he was with me, he became someone different—a person he liked better than the easy-going jock, the good ol' fraternity boy. He told me that I made him feel admired for what he was instead of what he'd done. I argued that I wasn't a match for him, not tall or stunning or sophisticated enough. And when he disagreed, I made myself believe him.

I don't talk about what happened five years later, when I was proved right.

I don't talk about the way he could not look me in the eye while he was arranging to have me locked away.

Opening my eyes is a Herculean effort. Swollen and grainy, they seem resolved to stay sealed shut, preferring not to risk the sight of something else that might turn the world on end. But there is a hand on my arm, and for all I know it might be Colin, so I manage to slit them enough that the light, sharp as a splinter, comes into view. 'Mariah,' my mother soothes, smoothing my hair back from my forehead. 'You feeling better?'

'No.' I am not feeling anything. Whatever Dr Johansen prescribed over the phone makes it seem as if there's a foam cushion three inches thick around me, a barrier that moves with me and flexes and manages to keep the worst away.

'Well, it's time to get moving,' my mother says, matter-of-fact. She leans forward and tries to haul me from the bed.

'I don't want to take a shower.' I try to curl into a ball.

'Neither do I.' My mother grunts. The last time she'd come into the room, it was to drag me into the bathroom and under a cold spray of water. 'You're going to sit up, damn it, if it sends me to an early grave.'

That makes me think of her coffin table, and of the ballet lesson Faith and I never did manage to get to three days ago. I pull away from her grasp and cover my face, fresh tears running like wax. 'What is the matter with me?'

'Absolutely nothing, in spite of what that cretin wants you to believe.' My mother puts her hands on my burning cheeks. 'This is not your fault, Mariah. This isn't something you could have stopped before it happened. Colin isn't worth the ground he walks on.' She spits on the carpet, to prove it. 'Now sit up so that I can bring Faith in here.'

That gets my attention. 'She can't see me like this.'

'So, change.'

'It's not that easy—'

'Yes, it is,' my mother insists. 'It's not just *you* this time, Mariah. You want to fall apart? Fine, then—do it after you've

seen Faith. You know I'm right, or you wouldn't have called me to come over here and take care of her three days ago.' Staring at me, she softens her voice. 'She's got an idiot for a father, and she's got you. You make what you want of that.'

For a second I let hope sneak through the cracks in my armor. 'Did she ask for me?'

My mother hesitates. 'No . . . but that's neither here nor there.'

As she goes to get Faith, I adjust the pillows behind my back and wipe my face with a corner of the comforter. My daughter enters the room, propelled by my mother's hand. She stops two feet from the bed. 'Hi,' I say, bright as any actress.

For a moment I just delight in seeing her—the crooked part of her hair, the space where her front tooth used to be, the chipped pink Tinkerbell polish on her fingernails. She folds her arms and sets her colt's legs and mulishly presses her beautiful bow of a mouth into a flat line.

'Want to sit down?' I pat the mattress beside me.

She doesn't answer; she barely even breathes. With a sharp pain I realize that I know exactly what she's doing, because I've done it myself: You convince yourself that if you keep perfectly still, if you don't make any sudden moves, neither will anyone else. 'Faith . . .' I reach out my hand, but she turns and walks out of the room.

Part of me wants to follow her, but a larger part of me can't muster the courage. 'She's still not talking. Why?'

'You're her mother. *You* find out.'

But I can't. If I have learned anything, it is my own limits. I turn onto my side and close my eyes, hoping that my mother will get the hint that I just want her to go away.

'You'll see,' she says quietly, laying her hand on top of my head. 'Faith is going to get you through this.'

I make her think I am asleep. I do not let on when I hear her sigh. Or when I watch, through narrowed eyes, as she removes from my nightstand an X-acto knife, a nail file, and a pair of embroidery scissors.

• • •

Years ago when I found Colin in bed with another woman, I waited three nights and then tried to kill myself. Colin found me and got me to the hospital. The ER doctors told him they had been able to save me, but that isn't true. Somehow that night, I got lost. I became another person, one I do not like to hear about, one I would certainly not recognize. I could not eat, I could not speak, I could not command enough energy to throw the covers off my body and get out of bed. My mind was frozen on a single thought: If Colin didn't want me anymore, why should I?

When Colin told me that he was having me committed to Greenhaven, he cried. He apologized. Still, he never held my hand, never asked me what I wanted, never stared into my eyes. He said I needed to be hospitalized so that I would not be left alone.

Contrary to what he thought, I wasn't alone. I was several weeks pregnant with Faith. I knew about her, knew she existed before the tests came back and the doctors altered the course of treatment to meet the needs of a pregnant, suicidal woman. I never told anyone there about the pregnancy, just let them figure it out themselves—and it took me years to admit that was because I was hoping to miscarry. I had convinced myself that it was Faith, a small ball of cells inside me, who made Colin turn to another woman.

Yet when my own mother says that Faith is going to keep me from getting so deeply depressed that I can't claw my way out, she may not be far off the mark. After all, Faith has done it before. Somehow, during those months at Greenhaven, being pregnant became an asset instead of a liability. People who would not listen to what I had to say when I was first committed stopped to remark on my swelling belly, my glowing cheeks. Colin found out about the baby and came back to me. I named her Faith, a real *goyishe* name according to my mother, because I so badly needed something to believe in.

I am sitting with my hand on the bridge of the phone. Any minute now, I tell myself, Colin is going to call and tell me it was a run of dementia. He will beg not to be held respon-

sible for this small bit of insanity. If *I* do not understand something like that, who will?

But the phone does not ring, and sometime after two in the morning I hear a noise outside. It is Colin, I think. He's come.

I run to the bathroom and try to untangle my hair, my arms stiff and aching from disuse. I swallow a capful of mouthwash. Then I rush into the hall with my heart pounding.

It's dark. There's no one moving about; nothing. I creep down the staircase and peer out the sidelight that frames the front door. Carefully I ease the door open—it creaks—and step onto the old farmer's porch.

The noise that I thought was my husband coming home to me is a pair of raccoons, thieving around the trash can. 'Go!' I hiss at them, waving my hands. Colin used to snare them in a Hav-A-Heart trap, a rectangular cage with a levered door that didn't cause harm to the animal. He'd hear one screaming after being shut in and would carry it off to the woods behind the house. Then he'd walk back, the cage empty and neat, with no sign of the raccoon's having been there. 'Abracadabra,' he'd say. 'Now you see it, now you don't.'

I retreat inside, but instead of heading upstairs I see the moon reflecting off the polished dining-room table. In the center of the oval is a miniature replica of this farmhouse. I made it; it is what I do for a living. I build dream houses—not out of concrete and drywall and I-beams, but with spindles no bigger than a toothpick, squares of satin that fit in the palm of my hand, mortar based with Elmer's glue. Although some people ask for an exact replica of their house, I have also created antebellum mansions, Arabian mosques, marble palaces.

I built my first dollhouse seven years ago at Greenhaven, out of popsicle craft sticks and construction paper, when other patients were making God's-eyes and origami. Even in that first attempt there was a spot for every bit of furniture, a room to suit each personality. Since then I have built nearly fifty others. I became famous after Hillary Rodham Clinton asked me to make the White House for Chelsea's sixteenth birthday—complete with an Oval Room, china in the display

cabinets, and a hand-sewn United States flag in the Executive Office. Customers have asked, but I do not make dolls to go with the houses. A piano, however tiny, is still a piano. But a doll with a beautifully painted face and finely turned limbs is always, at its heart, made of wood.

I pull out a chair and sit down, gently touching my fingers to the sloping roof of the miniature farmhouse, the pillars that hold up its porch, the small silk begonias in its terra-cotta planters. Inside it is a cherry table like the one this dollhouse sits upon. And on that miniature cherry dining-room table is an even smaller replica of this dollhouse.

With the flick of a fingertip I shut the front door of the dollhouse. I brush my thumb along the stamp-sized windows, sliding them down. I secure the shutters with their infinitesimal latches; I shelter the begonias beneath the Lilliputian porch swing. I close up the house tightly, as if it might need to stand through a storm.

Colin phones four days after leaving. 'This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen.'

Presumably, by this he means that Faith and I weren't supposed to interrupt. Presumably, we had forced his hand. But of course I do not say so.

'It's not going to work with us, Mariah. You know that.'

I hang up the phone while he is still talking, and pull the covers over my head.

Five days after Colin has left, Faith is still not speaking. She moves around the house like a silent cat, playing with toys and picking out videos and all the time watching me suspiciously.

My mother is the one who manages to plumb through the muteness to figure out that Faith wants oatmeal for breakfast, or that she can't reach the Playmobil village on the top shelf, or that she needs a drink of water before going to bed. I wonder if they have a secret language. I don't understand her; she refuses to communicate, and all in all it reminds me of Colin.

'You have to do something,' my mother repeats. 'She's your daughter.'

Biologically, yes. But Faith and I have little in common. In fact, she might as well have skipped a generation and come straight from her grandmother, so close are those two. They have the same grounding in whimsy, the same rubber resilience, which is why it is so strange to see Faith moping around. 'What am I supposed to do?'

My mother shakes her head. 'Play a game with her. Go for a walk. At the very least, you could tell her you love her.'

I turn to my mother, wishing it were that simple. I've loved Faith since she was born, but not the way you'd think. She was a relief. After first wanting to miscarry and then months on Prozac, I'd been certain she'd appear with three eyes or a harelip. But the easy, normal birth gave way to the reality of a baby I could not make happy, as if my punishment for thinking the worst of her were to be disconnected before we ever had a chance to bond. Faith was colicky; she kept me up all night and nursed with such a vengeance my belly cramped at each feeding. Sleep-deprived and unsettled, I would lay her on the bed at times, stare at her wise, round face and think, *What on earth do I do with you?*

I figured that motherhood would be something that descended naturally, the same way my milk came in—a little painful, a little awe-inspiring, but part of me now for better or for worse. I waited patiently. So what if I didn't know how to use a rectal thermometer on my child? So what if I tried to swaddle her and the blanket never tucked tight? Any day now, I told myself, I am going to wake up and know what I am doing.

It was sometime after Faith's third birthday that I stopped hoping. For whatever reason, being a mother will never come easily to me. I watch women with multiple children effortlessly settle everyone in place in their vans, while I have to check Faith's safety belt three times, just to make sure it's really snapped tight. I hear mothers lean down to speak to their children, and I try to memorize the things they say.

The thought of trying to get to the bottom of Faith's stubborn silence makes my stomach flip. What if I can't do

it? What kind of mother does that make me? 'I'm not ready,' I hedge.

'For God's sake, Mariah, get over yourself. Get dressed, brush your hair, act like a normal woman, and before you know it, you won't be acting anymore.' My mother shakes her head. 'Colin told you you were a shrinking violet for ten years, and you were stupid enough to believe him. What does he know from nervous breakdowns?'

She sets a cup of coffee in front of me; I know that she considers it a triumph to have me sitting at the kitchen table, instead of holed up in bed. When I was committed, she was living in Scottsdale, Arizona—where she'd moved after my father died. She flew in after my suicide attempt and went home when she felt assured that the danger was over. Of course, she hadn't counted on Colin's having me institutionalized. When she discovered what he had done, she sold the condo, returned here, and spent four months overturning the legal writ so that I could be released of my own volition. She never believed Colin was right to have me sent to Greenhaven, and she's never forgiven him. As for me, well, I don't know. Sometimes, like my mother, I think that he shouldn't have been deciding how *I* felt, no matter how unresponsive I was at the time. And sometimes I remember that Greenhaven was the one place I felt comfortable, because there nobody was expected to be perfect.

'Colin,' my mother says succinctly, 'is a schmuck. Thank God Faith takes after you.' She pats my shoulder. 'Do you remember the time you came home in fifth grade, with a B-minus on your math test? And you cried like you thought we were going to put you on the rack—but we couldn't have cared less? You did your best; that's what was important. You tried. Which is more than I can say for you today.' She looks through the open doorway, to the living-room floor, where Faith is coloring with crayons. 'Don't you know by now that raising a child is always a work in progress?'

Faith picks up the orange crayon and scribbles violently over the construction paper. I remember how last year, when she was learning letters, she'd scrawl a long stream of conso-

nants and ask me what she'd spelled. 'Frzwwlkg,' I'd say, and to my surprise I made her laugh.

'So go already.' My mother pushes me toward the living room.

The first thing I do is trip over the box of crayons. 'I'm sorry.' I gather fistfuls in my hands, set them back in the holiday Oreo tin we use to store them. When I'm finished, I rock back on my heels, to find Faith staring coldly at me.

'I'm sorry,' I say again, but I am not speaking of the crayons.

When Faith doesn't respond, I look down at the paper she's been drawing on. A bat and a witch, dancing beside a fire. 'Wow—this is really neat.' Inspiration strikes; I pick up the drawing and hold it close. 'Can I keep it? Hang it downstairs in my workshop?'

Faith tips her head, reaches for the picture, and rips it down the middle. Then she runs up the stairs and slams her bedroom door.

My mother comes in, wiping her hands on a dish towel. 'That went well,' I say dryly.

She shrugs. 'You can't change the world overnight.'

Reaching for one half of Faith's artwork, I run my fingers over the waxy resistance of the witch. 'I think she was drawing me.'

My mother tosses the dish towel at me; it lands unexpectedly cool against my neck. 'You think too much,' she says.

That night while I am brushing my teeth I catch sight of myself in the mirror. I am not unattractive, or so I learned at Greenhaven. Orderlies and nurses and psychiatrists look through you when you are disheveled and complaining; on the other hand, a pretty face gets noticed, and spoken to, and answered. At Greenhaven I cut my hair short, into honey-colored waves; I wore makeup to play up the green of my eyes. I spent more time on my appearance during those few months than I ever had in my life.

Sighing, I lean toward the mirror and wipe a spot of toothpaste from the corner of my mouth. When Colin and I moved into this farmhouse, we replaced this bathroom mirror.

The old one had been cracked at the corner—bad luck, I said. The new mirror, we didn't know where to hang. At five-foot-four, eye level for me was not eye level for Colin. A foot taller and lanky, he laughed when I'd first held up the mirror. 'Rye,' he said, 'I can barely see my chest.'

So instead we put the mirror where Colin could see it. I would stand on tiptoe to see the whole of my face. I never quite measured up.

In the middle of the night I feel the blankets rustle. A drift of air, a soft solidness pressed against me. Rolling over, I wrap my arms around Faith.

'This is what it would be like,' I whisper to myself, and I let my throat swell up before I can even finish my thought. Her arms come around me like a vine. Her hair, tucked beneath my chin, smells of childhood.

My mother used to tell me that when push comes to shove, you always know who to turn to. That being a family isn't a social construct, but an instinct.

The flannel of our nightgowns hooks and catches. I rub Faith's back in silence, afraid to say anything that might ruin this good fortune, and I wait for her breathing to level before I let myself fall asleep. This one thing, this I can do.

The town where we live, New Canaan, is large enough to have its own mountain, small enough to hold rumors in the nooks and crannies of the weathered clapboard storefronts. It is a town of farms and open land, of simple people rubbing shoulders with professionals from Hanover and New London who want their money to go a little bit further in real estate. We have a gas station, an old playground, and a bluegrass band. We also have one attorney, J. Evers Standish, whose shingle I've passed a million times driving up and down Route 4.

Six days after Colin has left, I answer the front door to find a sheriff's deputy on the porch, asking me if I am indeed Mrs Mariah White. My first thought is for Colin—has he been in a car accident? The sheriff reaches into his pocket and pulls

out an envelope. 'I'm sorry, ma'am,' he says, and he is gone before I can ask him what he's brought me.

The first concrete act of divorce is called a libel. It's a little piece of paper that, held in your hand, has the power to change your whole life. I will not know until months later that New Hampshire is the only state that still calls it a libel, instead of a complaint or a petition, as if part of the process, however amicable, involves a slight to one's character. Attached to the note is the piece of paper that says a divorce is being served against me.

Thirty minutes later I am sitting in the waiting room of J. Evers Standish's office, Faith curled in the corner with a battered Brio train set. I would not have brought her, but my mother has been gone all morning—off, she said, to get us both a surprise. A door behind the receptionist opens, and a tall, polished brunette walks out, hand extended. 'I'm Joan Standish.'

My jaw drops open. 'You are?' For years, in passing the building, I've pictured J. Evers Standish as an older man with muttonchops.

The attorney laughs. 'The last time I checked, I was.' She glances at Faith, absorbed in creating a tunnel for the train. 'Nan,' she asks her receptionist, 'could you keep an eye on Mrs White's daughter?' And as if I am pulled by a thread, I follow the lawyer into her office.

The funny thing is, I'm not upset. Not nearly as upset as I was the afternoon Colin left. Something about this libel seems completely over the top, like a joke with the punch line forthcoming. Something Colin and I will laugh about when the lights are out and we're holding each other a few months from now.

Joan Standish explains the libel to me. She asks me if I want to see a therapist or hear about referral programs. She asks what happened. She talks about divorce decrees and financial affidavits and custody, while I let the room whirl around me. It seems impossible that a wedding can take a year to plan but a divorce is final in six weeks—as if all the time in between, the feelings have been dwindling to the point where they can be scattered with one angry breath.

'Do you think Colin will want joint custody of your daughter?'

I stare at the attorney. 'I don't know.' I cannot imagine Colin living without Faith. But then again I cannot imagine myself living without Colin.

Joan Standish narrows her eyes and sits down on her desk, across from me. 'If you don't mind my saying so, Mrs White,' she begins, 'you seem a little . . . removed from all this. It's a very common reaction, you know, to just deny what's been legally set into motion, and therefore to just let the whole thing steamroll over you. But I can assure you that your husband has, in fact, started the judicial wheels turning to dissolve your marriage.'

I open my mouth, then snap it shut again.

'What?' she asks. 'If I'm going to represent you, you'll have to confide in me.'

I look into my lap. 'It's just that . . . well. We went through this, sort of, once before. What happens to all . . . this . . . if he decides to come back?'

The attorney leans forward, her elbows resting on her knees. 'Mrs White, you truly see no difference between then and now? Did he hurt you last time?' I nod. 'Did he promise you he'd change? Did he come back to you?' She smiles gently. 'Did he sue for divorce last time?'

'No,' I murmur.

'The difference between then and now,' Joan Standish says, 'is that this time he's done you a favor.'

Our seats for the circus are in the very first row. 'Ma,' I ask, 'how did you get tickets this close?'

My mother shrugs. 'I slept with the ringmaster,' she whispers, and then laughs at her own joke. Her surprise from yesterday involved a trip to the Concord TicketMaster, to get us all seats at the Ringling Brothers Circus, playing in Boston. She reasoned that Faith needed something that might get her excited enough to chatter again. And once she heard about the libel, she said that I should consider the trip to Boston a celebration.

My mother hails a man selling Sno-Cones and buys one

for Faith. The clowns are working the stands. I see some that I recognize—could they be the same after all these years? One with a white head and a blue smile leans over the low divider in front of us. He points to his suspenders, polka-dotted, then to Faith's spotted shirt, and claps his hands. When Faith blushes, he mutely mouths the word 'Hello.' Faith's eyes go wide, then she answers him, just as silently.

The clown reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a greasepaint crayon. He cups Faith's chin in one hand, and with the other draws a wide, splitting smile over her lips. He colors musical notes on her throat and winks.

He hops away from the divider, ready to entertain some other child, and then turns back at the last minute. Before I can manage to duck away, he reaches for my face. His hand is cool on my cheek as he paints a tear beneath my left eye, dark blue and swollen with sorrow.

Although it is not something I remember, when I was little I tried to join the circus.

My parents took me to the Boston Garden every year when Ringling Brothers came to town, and to say I loved it would be an understatement. In the weeks leading up to the show I'd wake in the middle of the night, my chest tight with flips and my eyes blind with sequins, my sheets smelling of tigers and ponies and bears. When I was actually at the circus, I'd school my eyes not to blink, aware that it would be gone as quickly as the cotton candy that melted away to nothing in the heat of my mouth.

The year I was seven I was mesmerized by the Elephant Girl. The daughter of the ringmaster, glittering and sure, she stepped on the trunk of an enormous elephant and shimmied up it, the way I sometimes walked up the playground slide. She sat with her thighs clamped around the thick, bristly neck of the elephant and stared at me the whole time she circled the center ring. *Don't you wish,* she said silently, *that you were like me?*

That year, like all the other years, my mother made me get up ten minutes before the intermission, so that we could beat the bathroom lines. She towed me to the ladies' room,

both of us crowding into the tiny stall, and she loomed like a djinn with her arms crossed over me as I squatted to pee. When I was done, she said, 'Now wait till I'm finished.'

My mother tells me that I had never crossed the street without reaching for her hand, never reached toward a hot stove; even as an infant, I'd never put small objects in my mouth. But that day, while she was in the toilet, I ducked beneath the door of the stall and disappeared.

I do not remember this. I also do not remember how I made my way past the green-coated security guards, out the door, and into the huge lot where the circus had set up its trailers. Of course, I do not remember how the ringmaster himself announced my name in hopes of finding me, how the murmurs of a lost little girl ran like fire, how my parents spent the show searching the halls. I can't recall the chalky face of the circus hand who found me, who pronounced it a wonder that I hadn't been trampled or gored. And I can't imagine what my parents thought, to discover me nestled between the lethal tusks of a sleeping elephant, my hair matted with straw and spit, his trunk curled over my shoulders like the arm of an old love.

I don't know why I'm telling you this, except to make you see that maybe, like eye color and bone structure, miracles are passed down through the bloodlines.

The Elephant Girl has grown up. Of course, I cannot be sure they are one and the same, but here is a woman in a spangly costume with the same red-gold hair and wise eyes as the girl I remember. She leads a baby elephant around the center ring and tosses it a purple ball; she bows grandly to the audience and lets the elephant wave over her shoulder. Then from the side curtains comes a child, a little girl so like the one in my past that I wonder if time stands completely still beneath a big top. But then I watch the Elephant Woman help the girl ride the baby elephant around the ring, and I see that they are mother and daughter.

A look passes between them, one that makes me glance at Faith. Her eyes are so bright I can see the Elephant Girl's sequins reflected in them. Suddenly the clown who was here

before is leaning over the divider, motioning wildly to Faith, who nods and falls over the railing into his arms. She waves back at us, her face mobile as she marches off to be part of the pre-intermission extravaganza. My mother scoots into Faith's seat. 'Did you see that? Oh, I knew we should have brought the camera.'

And then in a buffet of light and booming voice, the circus performers and animals parade around the trio of rings. I look around, trying to find Faith. 'Over there!' my mother calls. 'Yoo-hoo! Faith!' She points past the ringmaster and the caged tigers to my daughter, who is riding in front of the Elephant Lady on a tremendous tusked beast.

I wonder if other mothers feel a tug at their insides, watching their children grow up into the people they themselves wanted so badly to be. The searchlights wing over the crowd, and in spite of the cheers and the fanfare I can still hear my mother surreptitiously unwrapping a Brach's butterscotch candy in the belly of her purse.

A trained dog, spooked by something, leaps out of the arms of a clown in a hoopskirt. The dog streaks between the ringmaster's legs, over the satin train of a trapeze artist, and just in front of Faith's elephant, causing it to trumpet and rear up on its legs.

If I live to be a hundred, I will never forget how long it took to watch Faith tumble to the sawdust, how panic swelled into my eardrums and blocked out all other sound, how the clown who'd befriended her rushed over, only to bump against the juggler and knock the spinning knives out of his hands, so that the three bright blades fell and sliced across my daughter's back.

Faith lies unconscious on her belly in a hospital bed at Mass General, so small she barely takes up half the length of the mattress. An IV drips into her arm to ward off infection, the doctor says, although he is confident because the lacerations were not deep. Still, they were deep enough to require twenty stitches. My jaw is so tight from being clenched that a shudder runs down my spine, and my mother must know how close I

am to falling apart, because she has a quiet word with a nurse, touches Faith's hair, and pulls me out of the room.

We don't speak until we reach a small supply closet, which my mother appropriates for our use. Pushing me against the wall of sheets and towels, she forces me to look her in the eye. 'Mariah, Faith is all right. Faith is going to be just fine.'

Just like that, I dissolve. 'It's my fault,' I sob. 'I couldn't stop it.' I do not say what I'm sure my mother is thinking, too—that I am not crying just for the knives that scored Faith, but for retreating into depression after Colin left, maybe even for choosing Colin as a husband in the first place.

'If it's anyone's fault, it's mine—I bought the tickets.' She hugs me hard. 'This isn't some kind of punishment. It's not like an eye for an eye, Mariah. You're going to get through this. Both of you.' Then she holds me at arm's length. 'Did I ever tell you about the time I almost killed you? We went skiing, and you were all of about seven, and you slipped off the chairlift when I was adjusting my poles. You were dangling there, twenty feet above the ground, while I grabbed onto the sleeve of your little coat. All because I wasn't paying attention.'

'It's not the same. That was an accident.'

'So was this,' my mother insists.

We walk out of the supply closet and into Faith's room again. Words the psychiatrists had used at Greenhaven to describe me circle in my head: *compulsive and idealistic, rejection-sensitive, poor self-confidence, a tendency to over-compensate and to catastrophize*. 'She should have gotten someone else as a mother. Someone who was good at this sort of thing.'

My mother laughs. 'She got you for a reason, honey. You wait and see.' Announcing that she's off to get us coffee, she heads for the door. 'Just because other parents roll with the punches doesn't mean it's right. The ones who are most nervous about screwing up, Mariah, are the same ones who care enough to want things to be perfect.'

The door shuts behind her with a sigh. I sit down on Faith's bed and trace the edge of her blanket. *If I can't have Colin,* I think, *please let me have her.*

I don't realize I've spoken aloud until my mother comes

in with the coffee. 'Who are you talking to?' I flush, embarrassed to be caught bargaining with a higher power. It is not as if I believe in God. When I was a child, my family wasn't very religious; as an adult, all I have is a healthy dose of skepticism—and, apparently, the urge to beg in spite of this when I really, really need help. 'No one. Just Faith.'

My mother presses the coffee into my hand. The cup is so hot it burns my palm, and even after I set it on the nightstand my skin still smarts. At that moment, Faith blinks up at me. 'Mommy,' she croaks, and my heart turns over: Her first word in weeks is all mine.