The Other Betty

PAT SCHULTHEIS

Grow old and you'll become a stranger to yourself. Trust me, The day
will come when even your own reflection is unrecognizable to you.

This morning the windows of the bakery cum coffee shop below
my condo reflect a face not my own, but one resurrected from the
five-generation depth of my gene pool. Those elongated ears, that
predominant chin, they belong to my father's great-grandmother. And
those obsidian eyes, who set them in my skull? They were in her
portrait over the dining room hightboy on St. Bart's Way, where they
glares at me and my little sister, the two of us, our laps blanketeted by
Irish linen napkins and feeling privileged to be having dinner in the
dining room with our parents and not the kitchen.

I tell Ramir, whose shop it is, just my usual croissant and cup of
hazelnut, and thank you.

"Decaf, Ms. Margot?" Ramir's eyes are triumphant that he, not I,
has recalled what's good for me.

"Yes, yes, decaf." Let him have his little victory. I'm tired and
rattled: Being awake since before dawn does that. The morning traffic
hadn't started yet when I opened my eyes and saw a memory. Of a
kiss. As surely as I once saw my husband Walter knotting his tie in
the dim morning light, I saw that kiss.

I've girded myself with composure: when Walter died, for three
months I had my hairdresser come to my house. My manicurist, too.
I'm tall and can carry off the kick-pleated skirt and boots I'm wearing.
The mink vest, my gift to myself for my sixty-fifth birthday, is possibly too soigne. I don't know.

I'm afraid I'm losing perspective. As the roles I once played fade, so does my sense of appropriate costuming. Twelve years of Briarley School jumpers, then a bouquet of ball gowns. And, of course, the ultimate one, the white one, followed by three sets of maternity clothes and decades worth of good suits and sensible travelware.

Now, Walter's gone, the children grown, and the memories of those roles recede, while more elemental ones, like that kiss, surface, leaving me to question if those parts I played were roles at all and not accretions to protect that smart, wary girl who grew up with her little sister on St. Bart's Way.

In a battered old briefcase that Walter gave me when I ran the tutorial program at St. David's, I have my newspaper and an album of old family pictures. After my coffee I'll drive out to the consignment shop where my sister works and show her the album. The one picture in particular.

It's mid-morning and inside the bakery, the little metal tables and chairs are canted at angles of absence. The weathermen have driven people into a frenzy by predicting snow, and the air almost undulates with the aftermath of their anxiety. Ramir comes over, sets my croissant and coffee down. Then does something he's never done in the two years I've had my condo: he pulls out the chair opposite mine. He doesn't sit, but looks at me expectantly. "May I?"

What can I say? That it's not really convenient? That I need this time alone to decide what I'm going to tell my sister about that kiss. That I never was a person who welcomed unexpected intimacies?

I smile, "Of course, please do Ramir."
His own smile is an admixture of self-assertion and discomfort. Even though the realignment of the borders between us is his idea, he's not at ease.

My seventieth birthday present to myself was a telescope, and the time had come to understand the whirling gavotte of the stars. A dance I sometimes think of as a waltz of souls.

But I made the mistake of telling Ramir and found that with his intimate Hindu knowledge of astrology he doesn't so much talk as gossip about the constellations.

“So did you see Orion last night?” he asks.

“Not last night. I got to reading.”

“Oh, but you should have seen it. Magnificent, I tell you. Just magnificent. What could have kept you from that?”

“The Battle of Midway. I’m concentrating on the Pacific theater now.”

“Oh, Ms. Margot. You and your history. What’s history, but the study of man’s inhumanity to man. But the stars, the stars, now they are our path, aren’t they? Our path to wherever.” He stops, embarrassed for his outburst.

“Well, maybe I’ll look tonight.”

“Yes, but the snow... you’ll miss it. That belt of Orion’s, last night, that was something, I tell you.”

What Ramir doesn’t know is that most of my knowledge of the constellations comes from Google. I had no time for stars once I discovered ships.

From all over the world, they plow into old Baltimore’s harbor. And at the oddest hours, like clandestine lovers. Floating worlds that, secreted away in my condo, I am privy to, like a voyeur prying into...
universes of men, an unseemly compulsion. No one but my sister knows I watch them, only she understands my own private clairvoyance.

Ramir is a proper man; I suspect he almost certainly would not approve.

“One of my aunts back in Goa,” he says, getting, I sense, to what is his real business, “has sent me a new cha. An especially delicate Oolong with a touch of cinnamon and cumin. Probably other things in it, too. Its calming properties are supposedly fantastic. Really fantastic.”

“Ah, yes, calming properties,” I smile at him. He’s an astute, sensitive man, and he’s probably offering “calming properties” because he’s noticed the tightness in my jaw, the rigidity of my shoulders.

“The box has a message advising you to hold the cup in your palms,” he continues, “for three minutes before putting it to your lips. Three minutes, no less.”

“And does the box advise you what to do during that time? Count the seconds?”

There’s a slight contraction in his eyes; my tone’s mockery has wounded him, but Ramir lets it pass. “Well, yes, if you want. Or contemplate the tea. Just one-hundred eighty seconds. Half a circle, that’s all. Would you like to try it, Miss Margot?”

He’s so earnest, What can I say? I get out my newspaper and wait. Ramir brings the tea brewing in a little pot so perfectly yellow it could be a porcelain buttercup. “Let it soak a bit,” he says and leaves me.

I feel that if I am going to count the seconds, I should do so with my eyes closed, but an old woman holding a teacup with her eyes shut could look frail or worse to the other customers. I get up to move around to the chair vacated by Ramir and bump the one with my briefcase. The album spills out and the picture of The Other Betty, as
I’ve dubbed her, skitters out across the floor and under a table. I am a mess of awkwardness as I extract it. More than six decades buried, from the bakery floor, she smiles a smile that makes you want to know her. Or maybe be her. Big boned, she’s wearing a polka-dotted dress cinched at the waist and open at the neck. On our front porch on St. Bart’s Way, she leans back against the railing, each arm extending away from her body so that the railing, her arms, and her body form matching isosoles triangles of bright afternoon light. She looks happy. And almost aggressively confident. On the back, I read my mother’s elegant handwriting: “Betty, September, 1944.”

Taking in boarders wasn’t something done on St. Bart’s Way, but when the war came those big houses seemed self-indulgent, especially with so many workers cramming into Baltimore for jobs. I remember my father had already gone to the Navy, and my mother was alone. In my memory she’s always standing, silhouetted against the parlor’s windows, her arms wrapped around herself. She never scolded, in fact, she scarcely talked. Whatever I wanted, her only answer was, “Not now, Margot. Not now.”

And then came Betty with her easy, loud laugh. Her beer. Her cigarettes. Her music.

“You certainly are a quietest little girl I’ve ever met, Twerp,” she said the afternoon she had pinned my braids to the top of my head like a crown. “Look. See, on top they make your eyes stand out. Emphasize what you’ve got, Twerp. That’s what I say. You don’t want to go around looking all hangdog.”

She had come from Western Maryland, the coal mining Appalachian part where tiny, desperate towns hugged mountainsides
like workhouse children clinging to their mother's knees. Only one person, somehow she filled our whole house. Every morning, when she hopped on the streetcar, she left just enough energy behind to get my mother going out to her victory garden, or volunteering at the Red Cross, or even jumping rope with me. But by evening we'd both be looking forward to the door banging wide and Betty's being home.

I settle into the chair vacated by Ramir, set aside my coffee, pour the tea, and close my eyes and let its warmth draw my hands to the cup. But, I have to pull them away; it's too hot. Still, I keep my eyes closed and try to visualize the warm pillow of air between palms and cup: the space feels saffron. I sniff for the cumin, and when I open my eyes, I'm surprised to see that I have raised the cup to my lips. I sip. Comfort washes around my tongue and down my throat. I close my eyes again and try to think of what to tell my sister, but my mind is a paisley swirl of memory and the momentary pleasure of tea.

"So, did you like it, Ms. Margot? The tea?" Ramir says when I go to the register.

"It's wonderful. Give me two boxes. One for my sister."

"Ah, yes, your sister. She'll enjoy it, I'm sure." His remark heavy with understanding for how much my sister needs calming properties. I'd raved about his shop to her, and the first time she'd come to it, all blowzy, ironic persona and clacking jewelry, she'd enchanted Ramir by recounting how she'd lived on the beach in Goa "It was the sixties. If you weren't in an ashram, you were in nowhere land." The second time she wore a Kashmiri paisley shawl that enthralled him only more. But the third time, she and Don, the man she lives with in a rickety old farmhouse, had spent the afternoon at the bar in the
Valley Inn. She wanted to order a birthday cake for me, but couldn't remember if I liked angel food or not. When she called me to find out, her voice was slush spilling from the receiver, and I sailed down from my condo to collect her and Don. But for weeks afterwards, Ramir's face held the stricken expression of someone caught in an anguish of embarrassment.

He never knew the worst of it. How our father had had to go to Goa to bring my sister home, and the months of hospitalizations that followed: her infected body, her fractured mind. As for the Kashmiri shawl, she stole it. From our mother. Who lay in the next room. Mummified by morphine.

Ramir starts to tally up my tea when I ask him for three raspberry and three lemon tarts and then three éclairs: three or two of Don's grown sons stay at the farmhouse, sometimes.

As I leave the shop, a woman with two little brightly bundled girls goes in. I catch her eye and we exchange that quick smile of women sharing a moment of maternal commiseration. Suddenly I know what I want. I want to go to St. Bart's Way.

I drive with the pastries in back and the album sitting on the seat next to mine to a neighborhood where everything flows: wide porch railings into a series of six-over-six windows, and then into weathered shingles and then fieldstone chimneys.

My parents belonged to the neighborhood's second generation. By the time they bought our home, the ivy had almost camouflaged the foundation and the slate on the roof had a dusting of moss. My mother had a hunger for light, but our yard's trees were already tall, so throughout the day she'd follow the sun's course from window to window.
I remember she was at the ones in the parlor, the afternoon I came running up the sidewalk. "We just dropped an Adam bomb on the Japs," I shouted "Billy Walters just told me." The gauzy summer curtains over the open windows were rising and falling. The Other Betty wasn't home from work yet and my mother was alone. She held one arm across her stomach, her palm cradling her other elbow. She inhaled her cigarette so deeply, I think she wanted to disappear in smoke. When she turned from the window she looked at me as if I were some stranger's child. "I guess that means your father will be home, soon," she said. "Everything will be over now." The curtains suddenly fluttered higher, three white ripples. "I think we might have a storm." Then she smiled. "It will clear the air."

Once our parent's were dead, the house was sold. But a few years later, when a For Sale sign was hung on it again, I felt cheated, almost as if some understanding had been violated, as if the house was never to change hands without my permission. And now it's for sale again. Beneath the realtor's oval green sign hangs a cylinder holding fliers of vital statistics. When I get out to get one for my sister, the air has the ozonic scent of pre-snow, and it feels colder than when I left Ramit's. I should just leave, I think. I'll drop the pastries off for St. David's coffee hour, go home and tell my sister that I didn't want to get caught in the snow. She'll understand. I just want to peek in the sunroom and leave. I get in my car and pull into the drive, get out and walk past the side window of our father's old study to the sunroom. Except for a faded canvas camp chair, it's empty.

I'm backing out of the drive, when I have to slam on my brakes to avoid hitting a car pulling in. The practiced smile of the woman
who steps out can't hide her eyes' irritation. She's carrying a briefcase and a bouquet of periwinkle freesia.

"You're early," she says.

I lower my window. "What?"

Her smile never wavers. "Are you Claudia Marburg from Minneapolis?"

"No. I'm Margot Hart from Baltimore and I'm afraid you've caught me trespassing." Looking up at her makes me feel diminished. "I'm afraid I was taking a forbidden trip down Memory Lane. This is the house I grew up in, and I let nostalgia get the best of me. I'm sorry."

Her hair is brittle blonde, and against the glowing sky her flowers look vaingloriously giddy. She shifts them to her other arm.

"I'm waiting to show it to a woman flying in from Minneapolis. Her husband's just taken an appointment at Hopkins."

"Again, I'm terribly sorry," I wonder if she's thinking of calling the police. "If you could just back up, I'll be gone." I feel her assessing my grey hair, my aged chin.

Her eyes melt a little. "No harm. At open houses, people come back and visit their old places all the time."

She starts toward her car, and I have to raise my voice. "I especially wanted to see the sunroom. F Scott Fitzgerald loved sitting there. He said it relaxed him." She stops; I've reeled her in.

"F Scott Fitzgerald used to come here?"

"When Zelda was in treatment." I open the album and show her a picture of our Uncle Ward, mustached and ascotted and with one foot on the running board of a roadster. "Our father was a lawyer," I say, "and I'm not certain how he knew Fitzgerald, although I clearly
remember him in the sunroom." Then, before the realtor has a chance to look too closely, I shut the album.

"I'm Kathy Paulson," she smiles down at me. "If you want to come in and look around, I don't see any harm. My client isn't due for half an hour. The Fitzgerald connection, what with St. Paul and all, she'll probably be interested in that. People love to know a house's history."

I leave the album in my car and follow her around to the front. While she fumbles with the lockbox and I hold her flowers, she goes on about how a house's connection to someone famous adds value. She isn't certain why. The house that Spiro Agnew owned sold for nearly a third more than an identical one down the street. And you don't want to know about Barry Levinson's parents' place . . .

I don't know how long I can keep up my Fitzgerald lie, so when we're in the foyer, I substitute the truth: I tell her about Mencken coming to dinner. Although I leave out how he was already in eclipse by the time he sat under our father's great grandmother's portrait. Nor do I tell her about the terrible spanking our father gave my sister just before Mencken came. Or how our mother grabbed our father's arm, saying, "No, Fred, not the belt." Or how my sister sat sobbing beside me at the kitchen table while our parents ate with Mencken.

Kathy Paulson explains that the house is on the market because of a divorce—"Real nasty"—and she's had a hard time persuading either party to leave any furniture behind. What's left looks as worn as the camp chair in the sunroom. She heads toward the kitchen, but I stop in the parlor. I remember standing on a hassock by the window, The Other Betty on a couch, watching my mother pin up the hem of
a jumper she'd sewn for me. I remember my mother touching my leg so I'd turn and her muttering through a mouthful of pins, "I don't know what I would have done without you, Betty. I never knew what it could be like." Betty got up, cupped my mother's chin to turn her face to her own, and said, "You'd have figured it out, Lil. You'd have figured it out."

I go down the hall to the kitchen, but nothing is familiar. All the cabinets are white, and an island with a breakfast bar stretches across the middle where our table used to be.

The night I had come down for a drink of water, I immediately saw that someone had committed a violation. The table had been moved against the stove. I was so startled by this displacement that I just stayed in the dark hallway. On the counter, beside an open bottle, a Victrola held its needle deep in a record's groove, and cigarette smoke shimmered up to the weak light over the void left by the table. A white arm flashed into the doorway frame. Then a bare leg. Then I saw my mother. Laughing. In her slip. And then The Other Betty, in hers. I went back upstairs.

Kathy Paulson is fussing with her freesia. She puts them on the island, gives a wry smile: Too obvious. Then she sets them on the end of the marble counter and smiles again, satisfied. I tell her that my father and his Yale pals used to gather out in the sunroom and sing "The Wittenpoof Song."

"We had a piano out there."

Her smile widens, "I guess they didn't sing Wittenpoof with Fitzgerald around. He was Princeton, wasn't he?"

I feel overheated in my vest. "Yes. I think so."
“Yale buddies . . . Fitzgerald . . . it’s all good. You take your time, and I’ll move my car so you can back out.”

The sunroom is off the dining room, where I stay there until I hear the front door close. Then I move to the sunroom.

A fierce thunderstorm had sent me searching for my mother. I had wandered through most of the house without finding either her or Betty. I don’t know why I hadn’t checked the sunroom earlier. Maybe I wanted to prolong the terror of searching in the dark. I’ve always found something delicious about the danger of a dark house. Or maybe the memory of those slip dancers told me I didn’t really want to find her.

When I did, she was on a wicker couch. With Betty, who was wearing her polka dot dress. But Mother was in her slip. And Betty was kissing her. Holding her, bending her head back. Kissing her. That’s the memory I awoke to this morning.

When I step onto the front porch, I have to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering, whether from the cold or the torment of memory, I can’t tell. As I’m going down the front steps, Kathy Paulson is coming up. “I almost wish you’d stay so you could tell my client all your wonderful stories.”

“I can’t . . . I can’t . . . the snow. I’d love to, but the snow. Good luck with your client. Thank you . . . thank you.” I slip in my car and pull away.

The Other Betty was gone for good, and my father had been home from the Navy since Halloween. It was summer again, and the whole house was swarming with aunts and uncles because my mother was coming home, too, coming home from the hospital. With my
little sister. My new little sister. The words were like a refrain playing in my brain. I couldn’t get away from them, but I didn’t know what they meant. I couldn’t locate the place in my heart where “My little sister” was supposed to reside.

And then my mother was in the sunroom. She was holding my sister who was wrapped so mysteriously, I felt paralyzed. My father picked me up and sat me on the wicker couch. “Way back, Margot,” he said. “Sit way back.” And he laid her across my lap and I stared into profound grey eyes looking into mine.

“She can’t see anything yet,” someone said. But I knew it wasn’t true. My sister’s eyes were saying “You and me, You and me, Against all others.” And then she did something so unexpected, I laughed. She yawned. A deep, gasping yawn that showed her wiggley little tongue thrashing around in her mouth. Such audacity in front of everyone. A yawn. I’d heard more than once since my father had come home: “Cover your mouth, Margot. If you must let out a yawn, at least cover your mouth.” But my sister’s mouth was so wide I imagined I could look down her throat and see her tiny, pounding heart. And then her little body settled more deeply into my lap and she continued looking at me, and I knew that the place in my heart where she resided was all of it.

After our father’s mother, she was christened Elizabeth, but her name quickly morphed, first, briefly, into Beth, and then into the name on her cake by her second birthday: Betty. Until this morning I never saw any connection, but now I think perhaps my mother was attempting to recreate The Other Betty. Who knows how much of my sister’s rebellious streak sprung from her own nature and how much
was engendered by my mother's encouragement; my own somber nature. Mother probably considered too fixed, but my sister was a tabula rasa on which she could imprint the liberation she'd experienced during that passionate interlude. Maybe she thought she could relive that freedom through my sister.

My sister delighted in flouting all the conformity, obligations, and expectations that went with the St. Bart's Way of life. And sometimes she succeeded in delighting others too, especially our mother. When she was eight she sang "Mambo Italiano," at our parents' Christmas party. When she was ten and sent her tardy Christmas thank-you notes as Easter cards. When she was twelve and got Rastafarian braids when we vacationed in Jamaica.

But as she grew older, her transgressions grew bolder and drove our parents, especially our father, to distraction. And then to rages. Phone calls began from the Briarley School followed by hastily written donation checks. Then, in my sister's senior year, in the days before Roe v. Wade, there was the sudden trip to Puerto Rico. Then there were the failing grades from Hollins College. Then from the University of Maryland. And then my father throwing up his hands saying, "That's it. I'm done." But, of course, he went to Goa and collected her. And I was so grateful. Who else but my sister could I hand my bouquet to the day I turned to Walter before the altar in St. David's?

The little shop where she works is on an old main road that once connected Baltimore with Pennsylvania. Decades ago a quick ribbon of highway was laid through rolling farmland to sweep the traffic from one state to another; and the old main road became a sleepy afterthought littered with fast food restaurants, hair salons, and tire stores.
But a few miles of the original one-story structures have managed to maintain themselves as antique shops, or, in the case of the one where Betty works, a consignment shop.

I think Don's sister got her the job, or maybe someone from AA. All I know is that she's been happy among other people's castoffs and has become quite expert in spotting pieces of true value, especially jewelry. I wish I'd worn the enamel brooch she gave me last Christmas and think of stopping to get something to bring for lunch, but decide to settle for one of the packet of noodles I know she keeps in her desk.

Rumi's pastries and my briefcase weigh me down when I struggle with the door. But Betty comes bouncing from the back in aquamarine Crocs and a tartan jumper. Papier-mâché sailfish dangle from her ears.

I had thought the kiss could explain the kinked chain of her life, shattered marriages, shattered children, one lost in Las Cruces, one trying to "make it" teaching scrapbooking. I thought I'd tell her about the kiss and she'd see a causal link between our mother's abandon and her own lifelong quest for release, but now I don't know what to say.

"You won't believe what's come," she says. Among the faded slipcovers and dull pewter, my sister is the one bit of bright. "A telescope. I want your opinion. I'm thinking of getting it for Don."

"For Don? Why?" The scope she heads toward is brass, not a good sign. Brass usually is the indication of an ornament.

"It's all your fault, you know," my sister says. "You remember that time we were getting your birthday cake and you came and brought us up to your condo? Well, Don really enjoyed yours."

I set down the pastries and my briefcase and fasten the telescope on the telephone line outside the window where a row of pigeons sits
wing-to-wing, huddled against the coming storm. When I look through
the eyepiece, the claw of one could be a crosshatched map of the world.

“It’s pretty good,” I say.

“I get twenty percent off,” she says. “And Don’s birthday is coming
up.” She nods to the bag with Ramir’s tea and pastries. “What’s that?”

“I thought you could heat up some of those high-sodium noodles.
And then have lemon tarts. Or raspberry, too. And I bought some tea.”

“Nuts to the noodles. This old tart is skipping right to her tarts.”

“Well, at least plug in the pot for tea.”

We sit, the two of us, among a jumble of gate leg tables and wing
backed chairs. Betty grabs a bundle of linen napkins and hands me
one. On the corner, in royal blue, someone has embroidered the
initials D. W. I almost choke on the misbegotten efforts spent on all
this accumulation.

“I went to the house,” I tell her.

“What? Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . . nostalgia, I guess.” Out the window, the
first flakes have begun falling. “It’s for sale again. I almost slammed
into the realtor in the driveway.” I tell her about how I lied. “I said
F. Scott Fitzgerald used to love to come sit in our sunroom.”

“You didn’t.”

“She’s a realtor, for heaven’s sake. It’s not like she never lied.”
Perhaps I should stop here. Who’s to say there’s a causal connection
between The Other Betty and my sister? But showing off my own
cleverness has always been a weakness of mine. “I even passed off a
picture of Uncle Ward as Fitzgerald.”

My sister fizzes her napkin. “But why did you happen have a
picture of Uncle Ward with you?”
She's caught me. I have to go on and tell her about the kiss. But what good will it do? Who's to say that the errors she's made in her life are any greater than the ones I made in mine when I played the caring wife and mother but hid my withholding heart. In the office, the electric pot is screaming, and when my sister comes back from unplugging it, I've taken out the picture of The Other Betty. The photo is square with a wide scalloped border and when she takes it, my sister curls her index finger against her thumb, and then snaps it against the picture. "Betty," she says. "Betty from Lonacony."

"You know?"

"I'm her namesake. 'You were named for a dear, dear friend,' Mom told me. I was twelve, maybe thirteen. But I didn't know exactly how dear until Mom was dying. This isn't the only picture, you know. There were others."

"Where?"

"In the letters she sent to Mom."

"What letters?" Across the shop, a jack-in-the-box has a manic grin that I want to slap off.

"In that shawl I took, the one you threw such a fit about. A whole bundle was wrapped in it. All postmarked Lonacony. All from Betty. Very, very steamy, I must say. You said you brought tea?"

"But you've known about Mom and her since then and you didn't say anything?"

"What would I say, Margot? That our mother couldn't be with the person who probably was her truest love? That her whole life was a lie? I don't even know if that's true. Who knows anything?"

"But why didn't you tell me?"
"You know, you dig too much, Margot. You always have.
Sometimes I think that you think that everything that’s ever going to
happen already has. I just wanted the shawl. I didn’t know what to do
with those letters."

"So what did you?"

"I burned them. Rather, Don did."

"He burned them?"

"He said they were bad karma. So he burned them. If you want,
I’ve got some tea in my drawer."

"But why did he just go ahead and do that?"

"He didn’t ‘just do that,’ Margot. He did it because he saw they
were upsetting me. So we opened a bottle of wine, he made a fire, and
he burned them.” Her face is flushed. I’ve done that to her.

"No. No. Use this.” I hand her Ramit’s tea.

When she goes toward the office, I look through the scope again.
If it weren’t snowing, Don could see Orion’s belt tonight. Then,
perhaps he and my sister have better things to do than study the stars.

She comes back with a teapot and two cups on a silver tray. “One
of the benefits of working here, is you get to use nice stuff.” She sets
the tray on a marble consol and settles into a rocking chair with
upholstered arms. “The one I feel sorry for is Dad,” she says.

"Dad!"

“Think of it. He had to know something was wrong. Who knows
... maybe he knew about Mom and Betty. At the very least he had to
know she wasn’t the same woman he left when he went into the Navy.”

I smile at her. “Whose to say? Maybe she was better.”

"No, I don’t think so. Those letters ... what she and Betty had.
Part of her had to be always longing for that.”
She pours the tea, and I tell her how we’re supposed to close our eyes, hold the tea and wait three minutes before drinking. The silence of the snow is deep and benign. White flakes beyond enumeration falling on an old, weary city. I think of our mother, her daily orbit to the windows of our house, her unexpected passion, and of our father, his rages, perhaps at her mysterious remove. Or perhaps not. Who’s to say? So here we sit, my sister and me, two old women entwined at the root. Each counting out our half circle of time amid scents of cinnamon and cumin. Comfort enough.