

Stephanie Dickinson

Q & A

The Voyage Out

I sit in the back seat as Daddy races us down the Garden State Parkway in a red Thunderbird. We both like red and he's bought me a box of Charm suckers (red) the kind he ate when he was a kid. The red has purple in it and shimmers, getting redder and purpler the more you lick it. Like a lip that's been kissed too much or a hickey on a stick. This is our Saturday adventure, and we're heading to the beach at Sandy Hook. Daddy lives in Clinton Gardens, and Mommy and I, on the Upper East Side. Every other weekend Mommy lets Daddy take me out. They're friendlier now that they're not married. She used to lecture him about eating junk food, printing factoids off the Internet about clogged arteries and fat cells. So far today we've only stopped at McDonald's and Wendy's, but Daddy's managed to eat a Big Mac, a Wendy's cheeseburger, French fries, a chocolate Frosty, a chicken salad with Cesar dressing, and a Diet Pepsi. He's still working on a cup of chili.

Brad Boonshaft, a friend of Daddy's, has stolen my seat – the passenger's seat. Although I haven't seen much of him except the back of his fuzzy hair and a cell phone for an ear. "Donnie, Donnie," Brad says breathlessly to the spaz he's yammering with, "you should have seen this chick. Cellulite thighs. No, Donnie, that's Debbie, pretty face but porky in the butt."

"Daddy, do I have to listen to him?"

“Brad, keep it down, will you.”

Although the phrase *will you* should be followed by a question mark, Daddy’s voice had a period at the end of it. He’s not wearing the Chalay blond wig he wore two weekends ago. The wig looks like a farmer’s cornfield that a tornado’s touched down in. Wig or not, I’m supposed to use the pronouns *she* and *her* when referring to my father. For the almost twelve years of my life I’ve called him Daddy. But he’s still going through the transformation. While we’re in the car, I have my handsome, six-foot-three father back. I tell Mommy I’m totally open to his decision. I tell my friends that Daddy is transgender, and they say, “Cool.” I don’t say, “Cool.” I refuse to say, “Tampon Breath” or “Tard Jar,” either. Mommy calls them empty phrases. They’re the equivalent of empty calories.

I lean over the seat, sniffing. “Why do you have man cologne on today?”

“Listen, Dalloway, when I drive I have to be macho. Boy, you don’t miss anything. Nothing gets by that nose.”

Brad finishes with his conversation and is text messaging. I’m already wishing I’d brought a book. Daddy didn’t used to like my name, because my mother chose it, the Sicilian firecracker who adores Virginia Woolf and sleeps with two *Mrs. Dalloways*, one *To the Lighthouse*, and one *Orlando*. Daddy loves to lecture Mommy, who teaches junior high English, about how literature is dead. TV, movies, DVDs, Internet, advertising, and pornography have killed it. In the twenty-first century the visual is everything. I’ve heard him say Bin Laden’s not going for a dirty bomb; he’ll want the mushroom cloud. All that might be true, but I still like to shut myself into my closet and read. Mommy buys books on the street from homeless people. Most of the books were

thrown into the garbage after their owners died. The ones that belonged to really old people when they were children are the best: *Robinson Crusoe*. *Ann of Green Gables*. *White Fang*. *Lorna Doone*. I like the smell of cantaloupe rinds and fish while I read, the tick marks that remind me of rain that fell on a long-ago day.

Then I ask, "Daddy, when you're completely a woman, will you stop driving?"

He lets out a booming laugh, the one that makes his eyes crinkle, the blue laugh with happiness in it, the one I wish I had. "You're the sharpest pencil in the drawer, Dalloway," he says, glancing into the rearview and winking at me. "You're my baby."

I'm his baby again, receiving his wink. He loves to buy presents. For Christmas he gives me at least fifty presents wrapped in fuchsia and black paper with lavender ribbons that slither over the packages, each one selected with care, definitely something I want, but the best gift of all is still his wink. When Daddy becomes a woman all the way, I hope he still winks.

Brad Boonshaft turns the radio to an AM station. That talent vacuum Madonna is singing *Papa Don't Preach*. I don't like rap or salsa or jazz, either. I like talk radio. The callers always have to be told to turn their home radios down so the audience can hear them, and then the host cuts them off in mid-sentence.

"What kind of business are you in, Brad?" I ask, moving across the seat.

Daddy snickers. "Dalloway knows everything, Brad. Nothing is kept secret from this great kid."

"The ladies garment business," Brad answers, turning to look at me. His curled lip tells me what he thinks of my skinny face and long chin. The kid is fugly. He wears an

unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt and a gold nugget necklace. His mirror sunglasses perch on his head, giving off explosions of pink suns.

“Is Brad Boonshaft your real name?” I ask. “Or is it a porn star’s alias?”

“Huh?” He sniffs, like he can’t hear my voice, can’t hear any voice unless it’s transmitted from a cell tower. He snuffles again, grabbing for a Puffs from the box beside him. After he blows his nose, he pushes the crumpled tissue out his window.

I watch wind stretch the Kleenex into a long, white feather.

“What are you doing, Brad? We could be fined a thousand bucks for littering. Can’t you read the signs? NO LITTERING.” Daddy’s knuckles whiten on the wheel.

“I don’t litter.”

“You didn’t just throw out a Kleenex?”

“No, I did not,” Brad says, smoothing his puffed-up hair that I can see inside of like an exploded dandelion.

There’s a crease in Daddy’s forehead when he presses a button, putting a lock on all the windows. I can’t figure out the connection between my father and this goof. I lean over the seat, once again fishing for information.

“Brad, what kind of clothing do you sell? Designer?”

He clears his throat. “Actually, I’m the sales manager at the very high-end Seventh Avenue boutique, Tranny Fashions. We’re located in the penthouse along with the spa.”

Daddy lifts his blue eyes into the rearview. “Kim shops there, baby.”

I pick up my sucker which I’d set on the arm rest half-licked. Why Kim? Why not Tess or Andrea or Ophelia or Dalloway? Kim is the one he chose out of all the names on

the planet. Kim is his woman name. Daddy's skin has turned drier. The Climara patches make him thirsty, and he keeps a quart of water beside him. I know he's been on hormones for months. Premarin and estrofem. I watch for his puberty coming on. Maybe mine will arrive at the same time. He spends more and more time in electrolysis. There's even an operation where they can cut bone out of each leg and make you shorter. I know all the details from the World Wide Web. I don't think there are secrets anymore. Also, I found his list:

Forehead	\$3,000
Upper Lip	\$5,000
Trachea Shave	\$3,000
Rhinoplasty	\$6,000

"That jerk cut me off," Daddy curses, weaving us in and out of the jeeps and vans heading to the beach. Hormones haven't affected his driving behavior.

"Where do you live in Clinton Gardens, Kim?" Brad's lips twitch. His cupid mouth reminds me of a wren's beak.

I hope Daddy doesn't answer.

"45th Street," he says.

"Perfect," Brad sighs. "How much are rents down there?"

He goes on to mention the woes of staying with his most current roommate, a cousin, who has two young sons, both behavior problems, and he wants out. Of course, the rent is free and therefore affordable. "Kim, how many bedrooms does your apartment have?" Then Brad's dandelion head swivels. The traffic is bumper to bumper, and we're only a few yards from a trio of girls sitting in the back of a jeep, their ash, strawberry, and

platinum hair flying straight up from their heads. “Give me your statistics,” Brad croaks out the window. “I’m in the fashion industry.”

The jeep roars down the off-ramp carrying its babe cargo.

Daddy grins as if he were a normal man. He once told Mommy he still likes women, and that after the final operation they could be lesbians. Mommy started to cry. He was a beautiful man. Why would he choose to become a middle-aged woman? Then Daddy lowers his voice and when he thinks I can’t hear he tells Brad that his breasts are burning like rumbling volcanoes.

My face flushes. I picture myself curled up in my closet with two of my very oldest books: *Tarzan of the Apes* and *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man*. I hate the crowded East. There is nowhere to be lonely here. Franchises on either side of the turnpike and the haze in the air brown as the beer malt Mommy drinks when she gets home from teaching. Everything is interstate and where it isn’t, the leftover spaces are junkyards filled with old cars or sewage pools of crème de mint shit (what Mommy drinks on the weekends, a spoonful here and there in her oatmeal).

“Look, Daddy,” I say, pointing at a pond of sea oats.

“What?”

“That’s sea oats.”

“Yeah? What of it?”

“Don’t you want to cheer it on? It’s living while all this asphalt is trying to kill it.”

Daddy lets out a long breath. “Dalloway, are you going to be a vegetarian like your mother, Chairman Mao? Meat gives you concentrated protein. That’s why our ape ancestors became thinking men. Meat. Meat. Meat.”

Mommy contributes money to Save the Whales, Save the Koala Bears, Save the Redwoods, Green Peace, and Amnesty International. She's a weekend activist. Daddy likes to call her Chairman Mao. But I wonder what all that has to do with sea oats. My sucker is finished, the red and purple. I'm already missing it. I miss it for its name alone: Charm.

To the Lighthouse

The Thunderbird is gridlocked. As we inch along, I prop my elbows on either side of Daddy's headrest and examine him in the sun. His upper lip without his mustache is weak as an earthworm. His side burns removed with laser have left ghost patches, soft tissue without bristle. He's been getting facials to guard against dehydration. I've read his brochures. His face looks pale and extraterrestrial.

"Who invented the first commercially successful steamship?" Daddy shouts, like all of a sudden he feels me looking. He loves quizzing me. Q&As. A favorite game Daddy and I play when we take drives. Little known facts.

"Thomas Edison," Brad sneers.

"No way. Robert Fulton," I volunteer.

"Right, Dalloway. How many passengers could a night boat hold?"

"600."

"Who told her that?" Brad scowls.

Daddy ignores him. "The Thomas Edison Light Company installed 300 incandescent lamps on what boat?"

“The Saratoga.” Then it’s my turn to ask. “What year did the Sarasota get lamps?”

Daddy squints into the rearview. “1880.”

“1888,” I say. I’d read the picture books on *Phantom Steamboats of the Hudson*.

“See, Brad, Dalloway’s smart even if she throws knives and forks half dripping into the drawers. My Macy’s silver is pimped with water spots.” Daddy glows when he tells Brad that I’m a protégée, about to skip junior high and go straight to high school. I worry that I’ll be even skinnier and fuglier next to the freshmen. But Daddy needs to believe he fathered a genius.

“Kim, how many bedrooms you have in your apartment? I’d be willing to pay 600 dollars to rent a room,” Brad persists.

I can’t allow Daddy to take Brad Boonshaft for a roommate.

“How about a foyer, Brad?” Daddy chuckles. “I have a nice hallway with an armoire and a walk-in closet. We’ll get you a rollaway in there. Five-hundred dollars a month.”

I blurt out, “Daddy, I don’t want a rollaway in your foyer.”

We park the Thunderbird next to the Sandy Hook Visitor’s Center. The lot is lumpy with sand that has gusted into dunes that resemble camels with their humps blown away. Across the beach the gray ocean rides up onto the sand. Daddy pops the trunk.

“Okay, kids, how about a walk to the haunted lighthouse?”

I wear my new bathing suit, a pink two-piece, under my t-shirt. “Daddy, you promised I’d get to swim.”

“You will, Dalloway, but I’m not letting you near that water full of hypodermic needles. We’re going to a beach house with a private, Olympic-size pool.”

It’s the first I’ve heard of a beach house. I watch a fresh set of gray waves with their white caps roll toward the shore. I don’t care if the waves are dirty, there’s prettiness to them. The sand is blown through with salty flowers. I kneel and pick one. I make a wish.

“Come on,” Daddy laughs, “the beach house is just a mile past the lighthouse.”

“I think I’d prefer driving there,” Brad says, beginning to look alarmed.

Daddy has brought his space blanket with a metallic silver underside to collect the rays of the sun. He unloads matching canvas chairs that resemble hammocks cut in half, and cozies to keep our Cokes cold. Then there’s the mini-ice chest and Brad’s suitcase of sample clothing. “Think you can handle this, Dalloway?” He hands me a blue and pink windsock emblazoned with the word, *Kim*, and slogs ahead. I’m the one carrying our standard. Brad begrudgingly follows, lugging chairs and his stupid suitcase. What if Brad is Kim’s boyfriend?

When the salt grass closes the path behind us, Daddy takes off his windbreaker and t-shirt. Underneath he has on an orange, one-piece lady’s bathing suit. It’s no big deal. I’ve seen him dressed before. It’s not a thong or a bikini, not an illness, it isn’t anything. Daddy will love me just as much when he is a full-fledged mommy.

“But is that foyer big enough for a queen-sized bed?” Brad pants.

“It’s big enough for a twin bed, Braddo.”

No. No. No. Then it dawns on me that Kim needs money for the operations. Daddy’s got alimony and child support to pay. Old, selfish Dalloway might have said

give Kim or me up, you can't have us both. Daddy once told me that when he was a kid he wolfed down five candy bars and five hot dogs as fast as he could, and that he didn't know why, but he threw them up at the dinner table. Grandma made him eat his own vomit.

"I'm taking you guys through the lily forest," Daddy announces.

Flies everywhere. We're marching through a fly forest. Mosquitoes dive bomb us.

"See that fence, Brad? Dalloway, tell him what that is."

I press my lips together. Is that all I am to him? A pygmy fact checker?

"Spit it out, Dalloway."

"A Nike-Hercules missile site."

"And?"

"It was abandoned in 1970."

The fact didn't taste good. I stare at the rusted, electrified fence covered with birds, all shrieking and shitting.

"And?" Daddy asks.

"There's a good chance that some live missiles are buried back here."

"That sucks major sword," Brad shrills. "Cripes, we could step on one of them."

But instead of blowing up, we come to a railroad track littered with thousands of dead monarch butterflies. Like pieces of silken tux sleeves. I ask Daddy for his windbreaker and he gives it to me and I fill one of its pockets with butterflies. I would like to live in a world of butterflies, and, since birds slaughter butterflies, there would be no birds in that world. But flitting everywhere in the air, making butterfly trees and butterfly carriages, hundreds of Blue Coppers and Clouded Sulfurs, thousands of Sleepy

Oranges and Stella Orangetips, ten thousands of Golden Hairstreaks, and a million Fatal Metalmarks. There would have to be flowers: scarlet petals, swaying bells, stamens with reddish brown anthers. I put on Daddy's windbreaker and keep my right hand in the butterfly pocket. I imagine them reawakening, licking my fingers, becoming an evening glove.

Then Daddy drops the mini-ice chest. "Dalloway, I've got a pain." He clutches his chest. "You know where the will is? You're my sole beneficiary. Jesus, shooting pains." He could be having a heart attack from the hormones he's taking. It's one of the risks. Daddy could die right here, right now.

Brad peers over my shoulder. "Kim, is the pain in the middle of your chest?"

"No."

"Any numbness in your extremities?"

Daddy lifts his right, then his left leg. "No."

"Shooting pains from your stomach?"

"Yeah," he grunts from between clenched teeth. "I need a nurse."

"You need a toilet." Brad straightens up. "It's gas," he announces like an expert.

"Before Tranny Fashions I was at The Lei Lei Boutique. The owner walked into the showroom holding a beautiful, traditional Chinese satin with a crane pattern. He fell over with the hanger in his hand. I kid you not, Kim, his heart blew, and by the time he hit the floor he had turned black as a Hefty bag."

"That's not a bad death," Daddy hisses.

"Right, he didn't see himself dying."

Daddy figures the nearest bathroom is at the lighthouse. He's not sure about the exact route so he digs into the mini-ice chest for his guidebook, *30 Walks in New Jersey*. I recognize the title from when Mommy and Daddy lived together. I find the "To the Lighthouse" section marked with a hot pink paperclip and read aloud: "*In the lily marsh you'll hear the croaking of wood frogs. The sound is distinctly noticeable. It's been in the air since the beginning of your walk.*"

"Right or left, Dalloway?"

"*You haven't heard the croaking before, but now that the roar of automobiles dies away.*"

"Dalloway."

"Right," I shout. "Through the lily forest to where the trail meets the bridge."

"Meet me there," Daddy yells. His florescent bathing suit blazing, he runs into the thicket.

The lily forest is really a swamp. The trail twists through a tangle of lily pads floating like odds and ends of dumped, Chinese takeout – water chestnuts and snarling bean sprouts. The mud stinks. My big feet sink in the muck and when I pull them free, I have a wardrobe malfunction – the grey canvas with navy, microfibre stripes even ooze brown from the shoelaces. Bees buzz above the lilies like a trance. The butterfly corpses have led me to the water lily world.

Brad and I come to the slat bridge. On the other side of the bridge, the lighthouse stands just like in its picture, a tall, white tower with an aquamarine porta-john in plain view. Daddy must already be inside. Then a man emerges from the lighthouse with the longest gray beard I've ever seen. It grizzles from his cheeks and chin to his potbelly.

His even longer gray head hair looks like if he washed it, most of it would fall out. He stomps over to the porta-john, pounding on the door.

“This is private property. Get the hell out of there,” he barks.

I cross the slat bridge to protect my father. “According to *30 Walks in New Jersey*, this is public property.”

“That book's ten years old,” the bearded man claims, like he’s just finished reading it.

“Actually, the copyright is 1997.” I turn to the flysheet.

“Way to go, Dalloway. You saved the day,” Daddy hoots from inside the john.

I feel a flush of pride. I’m glad to be carrying the *Kim* windsock. The gray-bearded man slinks away. He must be homeless and making believe he’s a light keeper. But no one these days needs to turn the light or fog signals on. There are no more lighthouse keepers.

When Daddy comes out of the porta-john, I ask him if we can climb the tower, and he says, “Sure, I’ll race you.”

“No fair. You know where to begin.”

Before Brad can sit down on his suitcase, Daddy’s already inside the lighthouse. He’s taking the iron stairs two at a time, and I’m settling my sneaker on the first step.

“Are you still having a heart attack?” I call after him.

“Not anymore,” he yells down.

I like the spooky feel of the spiraling steps. I stop at the openings cut into the brick and look out to sea. The wind feels different at this height, and I can sense the light

keeper's eyes staring. Black clouds and storms and frozen sea oats from another century hang around the tower.

"I wish I could have been a light keeper," I say when we come to the top, wind swallowing the words as soon as they leave my mouth. Wouldn't that be something to try and learn everything about the weather? I'd talk only to people the sea swept in. I imagine those old lantern rooms that used hundreds of candles in revolving chandeliers or the spider lamps with eight wicks. I close my eyes and picture the white darkness. I hear fog bells ringing.

"You are *my* light keeper," Daddy says, his hair blowing skyward. "You're the light of my life."

Orlando(s)

Later, I wonder if the day is worth saving. The modernistic house is built on three tiers that fall toward the ocean. A waterfall runs over geometric stone levels. Most of the house is glass window mixed with cedar. BMWs alongside Porsches litter the driveway, vehicles showing off lustrous paint jobs. I want to go home.

"Wow," Brad whistles.

"Who lives here?"

"You'll see," Daddy says.

"I don't like it here already."

"Come on, Dalloway, give it a chance." Daddy takes my hand and leads me down a set of cedar stairs through a gate toward the pool. If I like his hand taking mine, if I like the warmth of palm against palm and wrist against wrist, why do I feel like crying? The

water in the kidney-shaped pool is Windex-blue, and chaise lounges fan around it like spots in a peacock's tail. There's zero tolerance for kids here. Everyone seems to be an adult, Daddy's age or older, husky blonds and brunettes dozing in the sun with their mouths open. A redhead in a FEMS Maid Service hat rouses herself to peer at us through the upper beige of her two-tone sunglasses. In the lounge next to her lies a man half her size, his pale skin reddening with freckles.

"Hello, hello, we're here," Daddy calls out, but the only person who seems to care is a woman in a bikini and turquoise sunglasses that cover most of her head. She's not much of a milkshake. "We've all been waiting," she gushes. "Olé. Olé."

"Come on, Dalloway. I want to introduce you."

I hang back.

Daddy squats and pulls me down so we're eye to eye. "Baby, these are my friends. This is Dr. Bonnie Peeler, a psychiatrist. She wrote the transgender definition for the DES Manual. "

"I don't care. "

"She's a pioneer in her field."

"Big deal."

"I want to show you off to her."

The Dr. Peeler woman uncurls herself and her glass from a lounge. Inside the glass is a blackberry giving the bubbles a purple gleam. It's like a bruised moonbeam when she smiles. Aiming one in my direction, she coats me in guck. Then she grins at Daddy, telling him there's plenty of champagne, and to help himself to her house if he wants to freshen up, and, Brad, go ahead and display your Tranny Fashions. When she

laughs, throwing back her head, I can see her tonsils, and that quivering pimento piece in the middle.

“This is my daughter. She’s just been promoted from sixth to ninth grade.”

Why did he have to say that? Why did he have to use the word *just*? Which means barely a minute ago when the letter came two months ago.

The three of them leave me standing by the pool and disappear into the beach house. I scuff mud from the soles of my sneakers and stare into the water. A woman dozes on the top step of the shallow end, a mask of blue pouches over her face. Her head might as well be a jellyfish. There’s a caterer carrying a tray of cheese speared with toothpicks to a table of tri-color pasta salad, lump crab, and mango. I keep holding onto the *Kim* windsock, scuffing my sneaker and trying to smile, but my face isn’t helping at all.

“Is that ginger ale?” I ask when a different caterer passes with a tray of plastic goblets filled with pale yellow.

“It’s champagne. Would you like a glass?” he smirks.

“Sure.” I drop the windsock, take one goblet, and then another. He shrugs, not his business. I’ve tasted beer and wine but never champagne. I know kids my age who are alcoholics and inhalant addicts. I gulp. The stuff tastes bad, like spoiled apples, but I like the fizz bouncing to the roof of my mouth. I guzzle both glasses. Nothing happens. I take off one of my sneakers and nudge it into the pool. At least some piece of me is going swimming.

I stand perfectly still. I can see the woman in a FEMS Maid Service hat waving to the caterer for champagne, and the dinky man in oversize swim trunks picking himself up

and swaggering to the buffet table, and the lady with the jellyfish face smacking in her sleep. They can't see me. The only person who's ever seen me is Daddy, and he doesn't always look, like today he's not noticing Dalloway. In the old days he'd take me on real estate runs up and down the Jersey shore. Whenever he saw something interesting, we'd stop and he'd take a picture. I was his perspective. He has albums of an almost peopleless universe – snapshots of stone walls, arched windows, doorways, fireplaces, and ice-block glass dividers, and I'm standing in all of them. Dalloway, 4'5", 4'8", 5'. Daddy is good with a tape measure and always calculates dimensions. When he was a kid, he worked as an electrician's helper, and, although as a bank examiner he doesn't handle anything but interest rate schedules, he can, in a pinch, wire a new light switch. Daddy knows his way around outlet boxes and halogen bulbs. He taught me the difference between a hot wire and a mounting hole. Together we installed the track lighting in my room.

I'm shifting from side to side, my bladder full. Daddy will probably be back soon to show me where the bathroom is, but I can't wait much longer. Then I notice Brad coming out of the sun porch in his swim trunks, settling into a chaise lounge. I kick my second sneaker into the pool. No one bats an eyelash. I run up the redwood steps, hurrying toward the door. The music disappears as soon as I slide the glass shut behind me. I'm in a room with a skylight that invites the sun to sit on the couch or the soft, Italian, nutmeg leather chair. The beautiful room leads into another beautiful room.

Why not take the first stairway – aren't bathrooms usually upstairs? When I get to the top, I find myself in a green-carpeted corridor. Poster-size photographs decorate the walls, pictures of men taken at the beginning of the last century, men in lipstick, men without eyebrows. A man with butterfly wings attached to his shoulder blades and gold

hair. Daddy once told Mommy that cross-dressing was a celebration of the chaos principle. She rolled her eyes. For an activist and whole-earth catalogue subscriber, he was sorry to discover that she didn't practice what she preached, that she was an exclusionist after all, that transgender people weren't worthy of the same respect as whales.

Farther down the hall I see a door part way open. That must be the bathroom. I'm inside before I realize it's a spacious room with a shampooing sink, manicure table, and two hair driers. Like Lia's Beauty Salon where Mommy takes us to get our haircuts. I can't feel my feet. They're being dragged into the floor. It takes me a second to recognize Daddy lying on a massage table, a sheet covering his bottom half. His back looks like a gigantic baked cookie. Dr. Peeler has put on a lab coat over her bikini and sits on a chair with wheels. She's looking through a magnifying mirror at his shoulder blade. "Mmmm," she says, like she's eating something good. Behind the massage table is a white box with dials and gauges.

"Hi," I say. "What are you guys doing?"

"Dalloway, come on in. Dr. Peeler's not only a shrink, but she can perform electrolysis in a pinch. We're doing a little clean up."

"Why?"

"I'm wearing a backless dress tonight, honey."

"Tonight! We're not going to be here tonight?"

"Just for a little while, sweetheart. There's going to be a band."

"What kind of a band?"

"A dinner dance band."

“Yuck.”

Daddy wears a light pink lipstick and beige foundation on his forehead and cheeks. Hopelessness wells up inside. I’ll borrow his cell phone and call Mommy. I’ll have her come pick me up, only she doesn’t have a car because it’s too expensive to park. Dr. Peeler gives me another one of her smiles. Then she talks some gobble gook about re-entering each hair follicle and burning it out.

“You mean, you take his hair out piece-by-piece?”

“One by one.”

This is what makes his skin look like Braille. It’s not Brad, but Dr. Peeler who’s taking Daddy away. How soon before he doesn’t even come by to pick me up for weekends? Dr. Peeler tells me that Kim is one of the most intelligent beings she’s ever met, that Kim’s been explaining the dangers of asteroids and stages of human development.

I wish I could say, You’ve made it this far as a man, Daddy. Can’t you make it the rest of the way? But I don’t. “Where’s the bathroom?” I ask.

Dr. Peeler croons, “Sweetie, in the middle of this hall to your right.” Then she sniffs the air. “Dalloway, were you drinking?”

“I had some champagne.”

“You’ll need to eat something. Do you like chicken fingers?”

“They’re okay.”

“How about Buffalo wings?”

“Nah.”

“Dalloway loves Buffalo wings in blue cheese dip.” Daddy winks at Dr. Peeler.

If I ever liked wings, I'll hate them forever. I try to deny what I saw. His eye involuntarily twitched; he had a lash in it. He never winked at Mommy. He saved it just for me. Winking reserved for Dalloway.

"Dalloway, why don't you relax poolside," she coaxes, "and then eat some chicken fingers. I know you kids love those."

Stuff your stupid chicken fingers. If Daddy had plans, he should have cancelled our day. He can keep his winking.

I walk toward the door.

"Isn't she a smart kid?" I hear Daddy say. "I didn't read baby books to her in the crib. She was raised on *OMNI* and *Science Digest*. We humans are still in Stage Zero. Stage One we start to do things like change weather and stop a star from imploding on us. Stage Four we're immortal. We've got do something quick or we're going to be extinct."

Dr. Peeler asks, "How so, extinct?"

"An asteroid's heading for us right now. A mile wide. The one that took the dinosaurs out was six miles long. Even if we exploded the thing, we'd kick up so much dust it would block out the sun for years. All vegetation would die."

I stop to take a last look at them. Dr. Peeler gets up to push her pen needle into Daddy's shoulder. When she does, I scurry over and kick her chair, rolling it into the manicure table. The hundreds of bottles of fingernail polish clatter to the floor. I imagine a blur of Misty Pearl, Red Surreal, Sanguino, Misto Argento, Sensuale Beige, Vampirina. So many reds like different shades of fire.

"Get a grip, Dalloway," Daddy snaps, but there is something besides anger in his voice. Maybe it's fear.

I start to laugh. I've heard it all before. Nuclear winter. Eternal dark.

Mrs. Dalloway

I find the bathroom and lock the door. It feels like an island, everything floating. The bathtub is a pedestal, the sink, too. Everywhere I turn there's a mirror – mirrors on coasters, hand mirrors, two-way mirrors, mirrors attached to accordion hinges. You can't miss the brown-haired girl with a mole in the middle of her cheek.

I open the medicine cabinet. Ointments, deodorants, tweezers, and prescription bottles. I read their labels. Antibiotics, antihistamines, pills with tragic Greek names: Ativan, Ultram, Xanax. Mommy sometimes takes Xanax when it gets to be too much. I unscrew the lid and look at the violet-colored wafers. After I shake out one, I fill the waterglass.

I sit on the toilet for a long time. The drops pinging against the side of the bowl turn into a gushing waterfall, then back to gentle spring rain. I chew the purple pill. Like a Flintstone multiple vitamin. It tastes bitter and salty and dry. I'll tell my friends that I took a Xanax. Better take one more. Then they'll be impressed. Two is a perfect number, two is twins. Pill crumbs stick to my tongue like the stuffing in Oreos. A terrycloth robe hangs from a hook on the door. I put it on over my wind breaker and swim suit. I like the way I disappear. When I kneel on the carpet, it feels like I'm sinking. It's nice here in the warm grass.

I don't know how long I've been kneeling when my teeth start to chatter. The temperature of the carpet is dropping, and the robe feels like snow. I'm almost too frozen

to stand up, and I have to claw my way out of the terrycloth. I take the pill bottle with me into the hall. I open more doors. Bedroom. Bathroom. Bedroom. A shaft of icy sun hits my face from the skylight. My shoulder bumps into the wall. I bounce back and forth. I think I'd like to have wings growing from my back like that man in the photograph, the one with gold hair.

My hand is faraway. I dig into the pocket for the Xanax bottle that keeps sliding around. Two of the purple pills didn't do anything. The sconce lamps left on look warm, and I'm shivering. Then I know where all the cold is coming from – my hands. They are causing the rest of me to freeze. I climb onto a tabletop, but that's not really true, because I leap, and abracadabra, I'm standing on it. I reach into the sconce and cup the bulb, but I'm disappointed: the light is an egg of ice. I have to warm the light, keep holding on with all my might. How do stars collapse? Four hundred million light years away, two black holes are moving toward each other. When they merge, they will warp the fabric of space. Nothing can escape, not even light; they will drag stars into them.

I remember the last outing Daddy took me on when he still lived with us, the water lilies at the botanical gardens. They floated across their pond of shallow water; each stalk had six petals. Daddy was explaining how the root detaches and sinks itself in new mud at the bottom of the pond. He pointed out the Giant Water Lily, the Night Lilies that bloomed nocturnally. Daddy held me up even though I was a big girl so I could see. In the wild these lilies attract bats, mosquitoes, and snakes. His arms were strong, and I knew I'd grown from his hands.

There's a smell in my nostrils that reminds me of the odor in Dr. Peeler's electrolysis room. Like burning skin. If Daddy's right, an asteroid is heading for us.

Before that happens I want the butterflies to come back to life. I take a monarch out of my pocket. Its wings are folded, but she still has both of them. I cup her in my palm and hold her to the bulb. Maybe the butterfly will think it's the sun.