

21. CHLOE'S BURDEN

We were traveling to see my Aunt Jeanne who lived in Massachusetts. It was a warm day. We didn't have air-conditioning. The windows were open. My mother complained about the cross-drafts.

"Bill, this is driving me crazy. I feel as if someone is drilling in my head."

"I can close the windows."

"Then it's going to feel like a hundred and twenty in here."

She continued to taunt him to no end about this matter. He hardly said a thing. I knew that if I stayed with her, her technique would eventually rub off on me. I would nag men endlessly as my sole defense against intolerable conditions. After all her protests, my father always seemed to get his way. And all that she could do was sound off about the situation.

At the time, I didn't quite understand. I felt quite comfortable in the back seat with my brother Josh. I really couldn't figure out what the fuss was over. Josh just sat there oblivious to it all. He wasn't about to take sides.

By the time that we got to Aunt Jeanne's, that matter had been forgotten. My parents were all smiles. Graciousness had replaced the rancor. My aunt's place seemed to sparkle. Dad always claimed she kept her house so spotless that you could eat off of the kitchen floor. I imagined him in a form of penance on his knees before the kitchen scraps. The image put a smile on my face.

Jeanne didn't have any children. She had been married to my mother's brother. He was a bit of a n'er- do-well who had abandoned her. Even though she was not related by blood, my mother still treated her as part of the family. This made up for my wayward uncle's dreadful treatment of her.

Jeanne seemed like a saint. Her smile radiated all the warmth of her soul. My mother was always scattered. Jeanne never wavered. I wanted her to be my mother. When we spent time at her house, I actually felt at home. How could one place seem so far removed from the sound and the fury of our household? Bill and June were always on their best behavior when they were here. Still, I believe that Jeanne could see through the front, and this only made me like her more.

In the family room, Jeanne had piano. While everyone else was hanging out in the living room, Jeanne led me to the other room where I could entertain myself. She never thought that I was banging on her precious instrument.

"Chloe, it there to be played!"

"I really don't know that much."

She'd play a tune or two just to get me going. Then she'd leave me to explore. She had no fears about my inclinations. This was quite in contrast to my parents. Even when they weren't around, I felt that they had their eyes on me. It gave me the creeps.

While some people might have thought that I was too hard on my parents, Aunt Jeanne convinced me that things could be different. It was obvious to me why my uncle had left her. She was too much of a free spirit, and he realized that he couldn't crush her independence. She convinced me that there was always a saving grace against adversity. My mother had none of this zeal. She feigned that she was always carrying a heavy cross. She wanted sympathy where

none was warranted. I knew that Bill was a cruel man. But June only made matters worse. I felt helpless.

At Aunt Jeanne's my sleep was restful. I had none of the nightmares that I had at home.

My dad owned a transmission repair shop.. He expected that humanity ran on the same principles as the gears of a well-tooled car. He had his quick fix solutions for every quirk of behavior. And if things didn't come together so readily, then he was ready to let loose with his vitriol. It was simply better for me to avoid his wrath. He always wondered why I said so little around him. But I simply wanted to stay on his good side if that was truly possible. He still found his way to discover my foibles and used his skill to grind me into the ground. Given my mom's assertiveness, he did what he could to tame his aggressiveness. He let her fuss about issues of discipline. In a sense, his absentee authority only added a severity to her edicts. Fortunately, she barely had a clue what was really going on. So I did my best to slide under their radar.

Right in the middle of the shop, my father proudly displayed a frayed copy of one of those signs, "In God we trust, all others pay cash." The sign had probably been there since his father managed the place. I imagine if the Lord himself showed up for some repair work, that Dad wouldn't even give him credit. But I had to chalk that up to his profound insight into the weaknesses of human nature. I used to hate it when Mom brought us downtown. That potent smell permeated every inch of the place. I feared that this would be my eventual fate. I would end up the worn gear that just couldn't make it up the hill of life. It would be up to Dad to put me back together again.

When he got home from work, he'd always take a long shower. He was trying to put the toil of the day behind him. By the time, he greeted us, he was another person. It was almost a mystery where he had been all day long. I still believed that the grease was an important part of his being. Try as he may to rub it away, it melded with his being. I did not want to inherit this part of the legacy

I think that I might have been more sympathetic to my father's plight if he wasn't such a cur. His mechanics respected him, But they also loathed the way that he ran the shop. It was a chore to get him to smile. He may have taken a genuine interest in the families of his men. But he showed little mercy. He always maintained a distance between himself and the workers. He took his blessings for granted. For all their efforts, they would never achieve the kind of comfort that he took to be his birthright. He knew the job in and out. And he could do all the repair and assembly work. But he was a firm taskmaster. He believed that the repair blue book gave him the authority to wield his power. These guys were hardly shirkers. However, that didn't diminish the fact that my father thought that their work was never good enough, He never spared an opportunity to correct them. Ultimately, they had an awareness that exceeded his. They just never let on. They listened as he rambled. Then they would do what they knew best.

I'm not sure when I ceased to be the angel of his eye. Around age eight, I started to question a few of his well-worn opinions. Imagine his surprise when his celestial light was finally talking back to him. Given his political posturing, it was a little of a shocker that he didn't hand Josh and me wrenches from the moment that we began to walk and put us to work in the shop. After all, even child-labor laws must have seemed an encumbrance to him. And even though he wasn't above squeezing every ounce of effort from his Hispanic mechanics, he didn't

spare a chance to put down Mexicans.

My father stood on the edge of constant terror where an errant moment could mean a loss of a finger or a nasty gash that required stitches. Motors were unforgiving. And the twists of metal told their own story. I recognized how his character was shaped in this underworld. Here was the encounter with Lucifer if ever there was one.

For a while, I actually believed that Josh recognized what was going on. We would talk about my father's rigid attitude. And we both recognized that Mom was drifting into a dream world. Josh would feed my worst inclinations. If I questioned my parents, he would encourage me to carry my speculation further. I have no idea why the truth remained hidden for me. But Josh was hardly the free agent that he made himself out to be. He was the ultimate informer to the powers-that-be. What made it worse was the obliviousness that characterized my parent's discipline. It was a truly bizarre paradox. My older brother ended up being the most aware spokesperson for the realm. I feared the world that was to come.

Everything that Josh repeated to Bill and June only confirmed the opinions that they already held about me. This included the outlandish exaggeration that he would add to his retelling. I felt as if I was being ground up in some kind of bizarre rumor mill. But there was only one voice that proffered this slander. My parents could hardly enforce the imposing order that Josh imagined. So he did his best to complete the job for them. More than any real success, he only further isolated me from this household. His youth was his only excuse. But he beckoned to a future where he might exercise his mania unchecked.

It took a great deal of motivation before I felt that I could realistically act on my feelings. When I was eleven, that I tried to run away by not going to school and hiding out at the mall. I had no idea what set me off. Of course, my parents were frantic. After I was found, my father was ready to read the riot act. My mother tempered his fury. She was angry, but she thought that my tender age could not bear too much authority. So she did her best to try to laugh off the whole incident. My father's mean streak was able to scare the living hell out of me. But the overall laxness of the two of them only demonstrated how truly invisible I was. I learned how to survive quite well in the shadows.

What struck me most during my exile in the mall was how much I needed money to survive in this world. I had been used to traipsing through the stores with my mother close behind me. On my own, I realized that I had none of the support that I had come to expect. I was hardly the material girl. But there was nothing out here but the impulse to buy. There was no survival possible cut adrift in this wasteland.

If I was ever to get by, I would have to use my wiles. I told myself that I was quite a clever girl. But cleverness didn't get me very far in the world of commerce. No boutique was looking to employ an eleven year old. Try as I may, I wasn't going to be able to fake my way either. Besides, I could hardly imagine myself working in one of these places.

More than the fact that my running away put the fear of the Lord in me, it also convinced me with utter clarity that I could not liberate myself by buying my way to paradise. In contrast to other kids my age, this made me quite unique. It also reminded me how deep was my isolation. There was little that I could do to cure a longing that had no corresponding fix on the hangers of the mall's clothing stores. A new pair of shoes or a challenging video game was never going to transport me to the magic kingdom. I had been exiled outside the walls where I was meant to

wail and gnash my teeth.

For the time being, my parents could be comforted by my lack of viable alternatives. This was hardly a free choice. However, I was forced to survive under their roof. I kept alert. I never knew when my chance would come. At that moment, the front door would open, and I would see nothing but daylight. I longed for that liberation. I could enjoy my freedom forever.

By necessity I had been living inside my head just beyond a world of make-believe. I had my reasons. The more that I guarded my secrets, the more my story took on a life of its own. It was my most prized possession. It wasn't something that anyone could take from me. No one else was in the position to know who I was. No one else could tell my story. I couldn't even repeat it to anyone else. If I did, the secret would be over. They could just repeat it to someone else, and that would be that.

It wasn't that way because I felt sorry for myself. I wasn't making any excuses. This was just the way things were. Anytime that I tried to give someone a little glimpse of the magic that I felt, they just seemed to mangle it in all kinds of terrible ways. So I did my best to hide what I really understood. I would put on one face for the world and reserve my secret identity only for myself. I did what I could to keep my mask in place.

All along, I saw a romantic side to my adventure. Just maybe, there was one soul who could truly sense what I did. I could share my insights bit by bit with this lovely person. It would be an initiation to how I was. I still refused to let down the giant walls that protected me. But it wouldn't hurt to offer a hidden passageway inside.

My doubts were profound. I had used stealth to escape the watchful eye of my parents. So my defenses has been my response to my real situation. It wasn't as if I had something concrete to fear from Bill and June. I simply recognized when I was younger what was going on. Their meddling went way beyond any actual concern for me. And it wasn't as if they really had some important lesson to teach me. No, they only wanted me to be a carbon copy of what they were. As zealous as they were in their mission, I realized that they neither knew nor cared for the real me. Ultimately, this became my invitation to retreat from the world. This was the one place where they couldn't touch me.

The more cynical listener would probably dismiss my fears as out of hand. It wasn't as if my parents had been handed a manual, and they were deviating from the official way to raise their children. It was way more than that. Somehow they had devised their techniques of brainwashing, and they were doing their best to use them on me. The method was quite imperfect so I could quite easily overcome their efforts. But that only left me more out of touch with the world. So I did what I could to navigate my way through the obscurity. Anyone else would mess it up further. So I didn't need any help to lead me freedom.

I never saw my withdrawal as a sign of weakness, far from it. In my own way, it made me strong. It made me powerful. Sometimes I looked stubborn to other people. But there was nothing in my demeanor that could possibly reveal the source of my isolation. I exuded a confidence of my own. Try as they might, no one could break me down. Unlike some of the other kids at school, I hardly served as the ideal candidate for gossip or ridicule. People knew to leave me alone. And that was good enough for me. It wasn't as if I lacked for friends. We just all knew where to draw the line. And that was that. I didn't need anyone bringing their dolls or their critters over to my place. Amen.

I knew how complicated things could get. I didn't want to get caught in one of those sewing circles where everybody passes around the truth serum. I didn't need people knowing my business. And if there were moments when I truly felt unhappy, that was my challenge to get over. I didn't need to hear sympathetic wailing laments. All that I had to do was wish that these sweet birds of paradise would pack up their needles and thread and head for the door. My sentiments assumed that busy bodies had actually penetrated the protection afforded by my castle. Fortunately, that was never the case.

I was not pretending to be a raging proponent of self-reliance. I wasn't raising any kind of flag, nor was I congratulating myself for my own successes. It was more like whatever happened happened. I did my best to muddle along in a way that seemed the most advantageous to myself. Bill and June were more clearly advocates of rugged individualism. I was more of a phantom flitting in the winds of change and looking for a suitable resting place.

I wasn't bored. I never lacked for entertainment. From my vantage point as an observer, I saw a world spinning around its own chaos. I did what I could not to get hit by the shrapnel. This was not to say that I wasn't afraid in my own way. As much as I tried to survive in the idyll of the poets, I could still taste the remnants of fright that circumscribed my rosy environs. Every so often, I felt myself plunging into a nightmare that was hardly of my own making.

Through it all, I was reminded of a monstrous presence that seemed more grotesque than any creature from horror movies. I could almost touch this entity. I felt completely shaken. I realized how it sounds so silly. And I didn't want to pretend that my dreams had actually invaded my waking moments. But something weird was going on.

Admittedly my fear felt the greatest late at night or when I first woke up. The bizarre circumstances fed my imagination. I did my best to jump back into the real world. What was most striking about the feeling was the lingering after-effects that seemed to reach deep under the skin. It was almost as if I had been scared out of my body.

If I had to put a face to my fear, it was that of Bill, my own father. There were a few times that he scared the living daylights out of us. And his discipline was laced with a streak of severity. But he never hurt us. More often than not, his attitude was simply implied by a look or a gesture. So what I felt was a lot more complex than that. Bill just happened to bear the brunt of my suspicions.

My father taught me a simple approach to life. I learned how things work. While the other kids waited impatiently for the mechanical world to light up, I understood the driving force that put all the gears into play. From an electrical can-opener to a toaster, I discovered how the parts were chained together to produce the end function. As much as I floated in my dreams, I also made this a piece of my command. There were no mysteries of biology that had not been broken down by my analytic bent. I was the one who wouldn't shy away from the dissecting chores. Sure, I had my sympathies for the poor creatures. But I wanted to discover the source of their ability to survive. Thus, I was less vulnerable to the threats to my own integrity.

I never used my knowledge to take advantage of people. I wasn't stuck up about my what I knew. I didn't try to show up the other students. I took it all in stride, and that was that. Science didn't make me hard to the affectionate side of humanity. I was simply realistic.

It was often necessary to hold my tongue around the other kids. Their parents had shaped them in this cocoon. And the parental bonds only became stronger as they broke away from the

nest. Their rebellion was always so pro forma. Despite their unruliness, they lived by the book. They were always performing for their absent parents. My friends never could figure it out. Nothing was going to be outrageous enough.

What I saw should have been sufficient warning for me. I understood that you couldn't keep a motor going without proper care. I'd seen a head gasket blow. Or a gear box malfunction. Disaster could have been prevented. But you couldn't tell a kid to slow down. You just had to get out of the way. This was surely worse than mediating Bill and June. This was sheer craziness.

Certainly, I could have succumbed like everyone else. Temptation abounded. And I had a cause. But things were just too obvious to me. And I didn't want to be at the bottom of the pile when the world went haywire. The signs were readily apparent; I couldn't shut my eyes. And I couldn't turn off my brain.

For all his knowledge, Bill had stopped asking questions about the world. Once he had learned about those things in his immediate environment, he took everything else for granted. Those were the things that he could not change. It must have happened before he started working in the business. Curiosity made him doubt. He questioned his family and the plans that they had for him. His independent streak made him want to venture out on his own. His disappointment held him in check. Ultimately, he was overcome by his fear. There was too much uncertainty in his world. He had been erratic, and he could feel it closing in.

Once he had settled for things as they were, he had to convince himself that he had made the right decision. He didn't want to give anyone else the advantage over him. His failures made it impossible for him to go further. So he denied everyone else the chance. The rest of the world was exactly how he saw it from his eyes. He killed his own adventures. And he was ready to do the same for everyone else. This bitterness characterized his authority at the shop. He couldn't countenance others' opinions.

At home, things were even more stark. He didn't have the heart to battle June because that would imply that things were in flux. It was simpler to lay down the law and just stick to it. She could fine tune the application. Any need to adjust for trying circumstances became her bailiwick.

For all my inclination to challenge the status quo, I recognized an inherent danger. It was too easy to despise my fellow students because they didn't follow a rational method. They weren't machines. And if I acted as if they failed their owner's manual, I was doing just what my father had done all these years.

I did my best to keep up appearances. I could always see the impending catastrophes before they occurred. But I held my tongue. People had to make their own mistakes. I just needed to offer the best advice after things had gotten out of control for them. When my friends were at wit's end, I was the comforting voice who could lead them out of the darkness. Then they were ready to listen, and they appreciated my counsel.

Maybe I was too willing to go along with my friends' silly schemes. If I saw that the gang was headed for the proverbial cliff, I did my best to duck out. I wasn't going to get caught doing what everyone was. Nevertheless, I still got dragged along to some of the most cockamammy places. I had to swallow my pride.

After it was all said and done, I was glad that I could escape the madness and head home.

I would rush up to my room and try to recover. I had got too caught up in the moment. I had lost myself in the crowd. I needed to get back to who I really was.

When I was at my most vulnerable moments, I reminded myself that June was somewhere around trying to break me down. It would have been foolish to play along. I wasn't going to oblige her with a journal or a secret diary. I wasn't going to play the role of a cooperative colleague ready to assist her in her sociological research. Parents have a radar for this kind of thing. I frustrated her to no end by keeping my room in perfect shape. There wasn't even a stray thread that she could pull on. I didn't want her coming out of there with that confused look on her face.

“What's this?”

“That's a book for school. It's helping me build my vocabulary. It's fiction. Which means it's not real. Which mean, it's not going to influence me to become a drug dealer.”

I could even do my own exploring at the library. At home, I wasn't going to leave the computer open to betray me. I needed to remain a million steps ahead of her. I wanted to win this game.

The other students never understood this lesson. They had been raised to be delightful child stars. Their parents trained the video camera to capture their every move. Once you started playing your life as a reality show, it was hard to quit. It was harrowing experience, but you got off on the rush. The camera asked for every gesture to be exaggerated. It made people invent things. Once you started to invent, it became inevitable that you had to be outrageous to back up your incredible fish stories. Things just spiraled from there.

I had to store all this information in my head. I perfected my regimen. There was no telling when I would fall into the enemy's hands. My discipline was almost religious. This was my inspiration for a fundamental desire for salvation. There had to be some kind of payback for keeping it all bottled in. I couldn't go on like this for eternity.

If I wasn't waiting for my version of the apocalypse, I then I needed to enjoy myself along the way. I could imagine my mother shaking me like a piggy-bank in the hopes of extracting the treasure inside. I wasn't going to give it up for her. But it wouldn't hurt to have a few indiscretions along the way. I never meant to be perfect. That would accord me even more with her rigid plan for my life. I needed an appropriate way to rebel.

I was getting caught on my own merry-go-round. I even paid June for the ticket. Simply because she was being the hard ass didn't meant that there was any reward for challenging her authority. And I didn't have to do something stupid just to get back at her. If I was going to be successful at achieving contentment, then I needed to be patient.

I would look around the classroom and observe other students zoning out to the neon lights. I was neither the anonymous dreamer given to somnambulant gratification nor the celebrated player in a high school drama. At the same time, I realized that these invisible specimens would eventually graduate as the young adults ready to assume their roles in society. They would study something demanding like chemical engineering. Or maybe they would proudly run a plumbing supply store. I was hardly ready to throw in the towel. But I felt a more pressing need to live in the now. I needed my wits about me as I negotiated the social minefield that engulfed me. I did what I could to keep my balance. But I realized the particular value of a quick exit, and I did what I could to leave the scene with the minimum of embarrassment and the

maximum of grace. I had a sense of purpose even if I didn't get caught up in the jousting for boys. That only made me more sought after. I made my impression, then I got out before I could become overwhelmed. School wasn't all parties and silliness as it had been is portrayed in movies. Some weeks, there were loads of homework, busy work. And there were demands at home. Playing hide and seek was an art form.

If you didn't show at a couple of parties, an eager boy would be willing to catch you up on your missed homework. But miss a couple of lessons of trig, and you'd be staring at the dots before your eyes while the other students were whizzing around the circle. These were things that needed to be learned. We weren't born with a natural understanding of the ratios of Pi. So I couldn't get lost in the neon haze. There was no one ready to bail me out of my misery. My parents would be unlikely to tolerate failure. Sure, they were hardly the rooting section that I could count on. But they wouldn't exactly rescue me with a sympathetic ear.

I had friends whose life plans ran aground due to their adolescent crushes. I had seen enough trouble between Bill and June to last me a lifetime. I wasn't going to repeat their mistakes with a clumsy fourteen year old. I had my pride. I'd seen silly girls derailed by the stupidity of some guy who thought he was a stud twice his age. Damn! These brats couldn't even drive a car much less know the ins and out of how one worked. So you couldn't trust them to do well with female anatomy.

I figured that some guys thought that I was pretty stuck up because I wouldn't give it up for their lame ass flattery. If some kid started to go off about my smile or my body, I knew he was messing with me. I had enough friends who shared my interests that I didn't need come-ons from strangers. I'd be on the bus or at the mall, and these creeps would start their routines. It was like comedy hour. And they had their jokes timed. Only no one was laughing. There were loads of girls who lived in the shadows. And sweet talk would make them melt. They never got this kind of attention at school. So this was magic. Poor girls. They didn't even have a proper life.

For once, these shrinking violets believed someone was treating them as adults. They were finally being taken seriously. All their romantic musings had finally come to life. They couldn't afford to pass up such opportunities. I walked on as I watched them turn to mush.

Puritanical mores were barely suitable for me. I knew too much biology to give in such strictures. I wasn't ready to deny myself simply based on my sense of caution. It's just that the spectacle of becoming overwhelmed by a crazy situation proved too much for me. For my friends the entertainment factor was enough. They'd suspend their disbelief as if they were going into a horror movie. I didn't work like that. I needed clearer motivation to do something. I had my desires, but I did what I could to contain them.

If I was so attentive to details, how could I ever be so absent-minded? I guess that there were times when I was completely other than myself. I was barely living in my body. I'd drift through the universe like a wayward comet waiting to make contact with a radiant star. I would ignore everything in my path. These lovely journeys blessed my obliviousness. Even if I was cast adrift, I still felt as if I had a purpose. And I would throw myself into the task at hand.

There were days that I would have lost my head if it was not screwed on. I'd enter the same room over and over again. Each time I would forget my appointed task. Why had I still not scooped up my purse from my room? As I crossed the threshold, some new object would strike

my fancy. I'd catch a letter that I needed to mail. Or I'd notice a dress that I needed to give to my mother for the dry cleaner. As I slipped out, I'd glance at myself in the mirror, and I would think that I came in to brush my hair. Lord help me if my vanity was really getting the best of me. Worse, I was becoming delirious before the fundamental complexity of my surroundings.

It would be particularly cruel if I attributed my flightiness to my mother. Worse, I was becoming overloaded by my own observational powers. I could feel the planet dragging me down. Such were the curses of gravity. Ethereal beings like myself were forever crashing back down to earth when they realized the incredible texture of existence.

My most grievous offense was constantly losing my bus pass. At first, I would face my embarrassment graciously. But after a while contrition could no longer be sufficient. Sure my mother's mercy seemed infinite. But enough doubt had been planted in my head that I feared trying her patience. Instead I would reconcile myself with the fact that I would have to do without a replacement pass. So I would end up trudging home from school no matter what the weather conditions. I took my penance in stride, and I accepted the inconvenience without complaint. Would that this was a lesson for me. It was not. A month or two later when I was in a new cycle, the cherished pass would again disappear from my grasp, and I would have to accept my suffering stoically.

Of course, my greatest fear was that my little slips up would expose me to more serious damage. I had been so conscientious about maintaining a facade that I couldn't risk the slightest revelation with regards to my actual motivation. Despite my concerns, it was unlikely that anyone else could really figure what I was up to. But that didn't allay my worries.

By the time that I had escaped the house, I believed that I had left behind my troubles. Maybe the house was haunted. It always seemed to mess with me memory. I was lucky that my mom was at home most days when I got back from school. If I had to think about where were my keys, that would truly have been the clincher.

In the back of my mind, I contemplated that there was some kind of poltergeist that was wreaking havoc with my things. I was sure that I would uncover a secret drawer, and once I pulled it open, I would see all the things that I had lost. It wasn't my absent-mindedness as much as my nemesis who laid all the snares along my path.

Perhaps, I could apply the techniques that served me so well in class to my unruly memory. A little discipline would stand me in good stead against the perverse flights of my imagination. But even if I tied all my things on to my overcoat, I would still find a way to let them circulate out of my orbit. When I needed a pen or mittens, they would all be out of reach. My tried and true method would hardly serve my needs at crunch time. I would have to stuff my hands in my pockets on a cold day. Or I would have to borrow a pen from a classmate. I was fortunate that these mishaps didn't seem to occur all at once. So my secret remained safe with the one person who stricken by these minor disasters.

I had always tried to avoid identifying myself with my mother. Such an affinity seemed like a totally natural thing. She did her best to make me believe that she was the caring parent. It was only in talking with Josh that I finally realized that she was more interested in the public face. Ultimately, his own devotion was simply an indication of how effective her PR campaign had been. This might have appeared to have been a completely unsympathetic portrait of dear June. But I didn't want to give her credit for a dedication that was not there. I would hate to

imagine that I was alone at critical moments in my development. But too often I was just that lone voice crying in the wilderness. I was the last person who wanted to blame someone else for my difficulties. In my defense, she was the adult. More than that, her fostering was so rigid that I was invisible to her if I did not fit her ideal model.

I would never have wanted to characterize her as scatter-brained. But there was something entirely random about her method that was indeed quite impressive. She always shot from the hip. She seldom was willing to spare the feelings of the other person if it was simply a matter of being honest. I had no idea how she was able to hold it all together. There was more madness than I was prepared to deal with. But there was a subtlety to its application. She wasn't the sort to bang cupboard doors or throw things. It was just that on analysis nothing seemed to make sense.

If she had more couth, then I might have been won over. But she refused to hold her tongue to maintain decorum. At the same time, she believed her remarks collectively advanced a moral propriety. And this was how things appeared to her friends. She also knew when to turn on the charm. All these characteristics together made her the suitable propagandist for her policy.

There was a moment in her youth when she must have been in conflict about her personality. She still retained enough humanity that the traces of altruism confirmed a genuine understanding about others. But something had made her shrink from this side of herself as if it was a weakness. And this obstinance became the very hallmark of her tutelage.

It dawned on me not to cross her in any way. Unfortunately, she always demanded more than that. I was supposed to serve as a cheerleader for her advancing campaign. If I held my tongue, she took it as a sign of disapproval and leapt upon me for my failure.

"Do you think that you're better than me?"

I defended myself, "What do you mean?"

I could see that things were progressing in the wrong direction. I knew that I could never win an argument with her. But even a swift retreat would be a sign that I had actually engaged her. And she would settle for nothing less than a scorched earth.

I could recognize her next move. I was acting like my father, and she knew how to dispatch such an attack.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't born with your superior intellect like you. I had to learn just how to survive."

She was much more sinister than I even realized. She would recover by catching a look of herself in the mirror. Her blonde hair always showed off the latest style. She was no social climber, but she could claw tooth and nail to assert herself.

When I watched her I could pick out a gentleness in her manners. She had advanced in a world where things were sugar-coated. She had been carefree. But along the way, another being came to possess her, perhaps her mother. And in this transformation, she had lost all ability to will otherwise. I could hear the inflections of that other person in her voice as she prepared to do battle.

I was seeing my future before my eyes. I was in trepidation of the coming transformation. I was terminally adopting her personality.

My life was not at all balanced. I loved the perch that I had devised for myself. But I

knew this couldn't last forever. It was as if I had one foot in the water and one out. I would either have to make my plunge into the craziness. Or I could simply return to the certainty of the shore. Wherever I looked there was really no security. So I did what I could to stretch out my pirouette. When I finally did come down, it would hopefully be a soft landing.

Poetry had its promise. Not in words, but in deeds! That was how I tried to make a way for myself. I learned to adopt the mannerisms that were quite timely for every situation. I didn't play the fop. I never wanted to seem silly. The right technique often meant simply blending in. If I needed to go undercover, I didn't mind playing the spy for my art. Sure, it was all quite ethereal. Occasionally, I was a phantom who floated through life. I washed myself in these currents.

If there was a longing that stirred my restless heart, it was for a contemplative serenity. I had already reconciled myself to not belonging on this earth. In this more profound wish, I was angling for something immensely satisfying. I didn't believe that there was another soul who could respond to my ache. I wasn't suffering from a broken spirit. I didn't even anticipate a love lost. My pleasure was not solitary. Instead, I recognized a sense of unity with the cosmos.

Given my lofty aspirations, I was not ready to accept anything less. I didn't want to be read and write about William Blake. I wanted to be William Blake. If I found my ecstatic vision in the Christmas lights ringed around the mall, so be it. I didn't even have to write a single thing to achieve my sense of mastery. I was the living word.

At the same time, I was waiting to be dragged kicking and screaming into the real world. When would I finally be discovered and reported on to the ultimate authorities? What terrible portend would hurtle me along into an overwhelming nightmare? I imagined the lanky creature of horror beneath my bed as he reached up and tried to pull me down into the murky underworld. I would have to wrestle him to take back my fate.

I recognized with total clarity that the world that everyone else accepted as the norm was the stuff of my bad dreams. I could stay in my idyll as long as could keep my distance. But the mischief-makers couldn't be kept at bay forever.

For now, I could be satisfied being the beacon of the free world. Those other desperate souls could pin their hopes on me to carry forth the banner of true liberation. I laughed with glee when I contemplated the powers that had been bestowed on me.