

22. THE SHADOWS TALK BACK

One night, as I was trying to sleep, I noticed my mother standing over my bed. I tried not to let on that I saw her. I hardly felt reassured by her watch. It was a strange feeling on my part. She was hardly demonstrating her concern for me. Instead, her interest was much closer to an ace interrogator who scrutinized her charge in the hope that she might reveal a cherished secret. June was convinced that the terror had already invaded her inner sanctum. When I woke in the morning, she would be well versed in the proper method to return me to normalcy. Maybe a little electric shock with my waffles. All this effort would eventually return me to the fold. Her fear was not simply a figment. The demon had found a resting place in her abode. Strict vigilance was her only course. Everything that had remained unspoken for her could now be given a firm voice in her messianic crusade. Her defense of the realm was now an art form.

June constantly reminded me that I could never find any sense of real privacy in her house. At any moment she could surprise me and assert her dominion. Even sleep was not a protected sanctum. In absolute darkness, she made it her prerogative to blaze a scouring searchlight to bolster her waning authority. Her presence could burn its way into the isolation of deep sleep. She was the utter negation of the integrity of spiritual world. Her solid materiality was an affront to my efforts to escape. If I tried to float away, she was ready to drag me down. Ultimately, her strategy was metaphysical. She was ready to challenge the very order of the universe so that she could impress her will.

I had to make myself small to go unseen before her watchful eye. It was little wonder that I came to embrace the shadows. When I was successful, she scarcely knew that I was there. That was why it was so critical for her to recover her superiority while I slept.

I think that it frustrated my mother to no end that I left nothing incriminating for her to use. It made her more suspicious. And her suspicions fed her fears. She wasn't going to let me get off that easily. This was a contest of wills. She couldn't have me getting one over on her. She had to set a trap for me.

I could have made it easier for her. Heaven knows that I could have crafted a confessional to lay bare all my doubts about myself. She would relish perusing such a document in the hopes of devising the ultimate torture for me. Her little brain would get turned on by all my weaknesses that I left exposed to her wrath. At least, such a book would distract her. But it might also prove to be my undoing.

I could hardly leave myself vulnerable on my computer. I wasn't stupid. Such electronic devices were the primary tools of detection for the constabulary. All my serious work needed to be accomplished at school or at the library. June would never be able to follow those trails.

My existence might have seemed quite austere. My room was absent of any form of entertainment. Not to lament, I had my ways. She couldn't disrupt my fantasies. And I took a particular delight in my school work. I wandered joyfully in the labyrinth as I mapped out the twists and turns. My journey would serve me in good stead since I believed that no obstacle could arrest my progress. And I even convinced myself that I had the stealth of a cat able to pierce the darkness with a profound gaze.

June was left with her suspicions. Her lack of knowledge did not prevent her from inventing the worst. If I feared her, I might have felt helpless against her onslaught. But it only

steeled my courage. She had no idea what was really going on. And she was hardly the tested opponent that I needed. However, in her method I came to understand a more pervasive mania that gripped our society.

The surveillance state could hardly contain its center. It needed to feed the vanity of its participants. And June was an easy victim.

From the hallway, I could catch a glimpse of the living room without being seen. I watched my mother primping in the mirror. She had just come back from the hair-dresser. And she was tossing her hair with her nose in the air. I couldn't let on that I saw her. She would only use it against me. She couldn't admit to herself that I had something over her.

June was regaled in her power look. She was in a matching black jacket and skirt with a slit in the back. She wore open-toed heels that showed off her freshly pedicured toes.

June imagined herself gracing scintillating dinner parties. Of course, Bill was not at all the business magnate that first thought him to be. And she had to reconcile herself that she would never be the darling socialite of her dreams.

If she became too caught up in the world outside, she might lose her iron grip over the household. Her reconnaissance mission was a full-time job. On the other hand, she needed some gratification for her more elemental desires. Garden clubs and community organizations might preoccupy her, but she couldn't imagine giving that kind of time to such trifles. It was better to pretend to be a somebody than reconcile herself to a cackle of busybodies. Long elegant lunches were her consolation. She could hypothetically minister to the problems of the world with her close associates. And her confident pronouncements would ring with a triumphant strain.

The celestial ocean rippled with her grace. In this pool, she could prolong her youth. She had transcended the demands of family. Her dreams could again soar to their rightful place. For a brief moment, she believed that it would only take a minimal effort to activate anew her search for material bounty. When she drove by palatial houses, she held out the promise that she could one day walk those elegant corridors. For that reason, she avoided giving in to her envy. She was the most vociferous defender of the status quo. Even if her own talents had been confined to less demanding pursuits, she continued to believe that the fruits of wealth were available to anyone who expended a sufficient effort.

There were times when I wondered how June could even keep her life in order. I was sure that her spendthrift habits would land us in the poorhouse. June was a firm believer in the benefits of consumption. Rabid shopping kept up demand and spurred industrial production. I guess this was one of the miracles of the world economy. I just couldn't make sense of how this money ended up coming back to us. It wasn't as if Bill was fixing more transmissions. But June seemed to have some secrets of her own. If I was going to learn them, I would have to become her clone. I would have to discover the ins and outs of credit shopping. Somewhere in this nightmare of a method, there was the absurd idea of a bargain. That was when you spent less for more. But such thinking still encouraged uncontrollable extravagance.

The incredible overstock of toilet paper and paper towels in our panty may have made up for all her vices. But it was just so much easier when you were spending someone else's money. Sure, June did a great deal to keep the house in shape. But that often meant doling out chores to Josh and me. And she also used a maid service to do the more arduous tasks. So shopping for herself could remain a priority. Its rewards helped her reinforce her mission to indoctrinate us in

her beliefs.

June wasn't a real fan of Evolution Biology, but in the back of her mind, I wondered if June considered that shopping was a higher form of adaptation. Certainly the brain needed some serious morphological transformations to accommodate for all this new information. June was a pioneer in this research.

After a day of aggressive shopping, my mother showed up at the house with Ellis. I was about to pop into the living room when I heard them talking about me. I made like I was invisible.

"Sometimes, I think that Chloe's not my daughter. She has no fashion sense whatsoever. I've done what I could to help her out. Maybe she just takes after her father."

I wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean. It wasn't as if I went in for smelly overalls.

"These are her clumsy years."

Maybe I could help Ellis with the tea kettle by a clumsy spill here and there.

"I've heard that you can actually exchange your children these days if they don't meet your expectations."

"You didn't just say that."

June made no effort to recover: "She's not even here. It's not as if her ears are burning."

"Sometime I've thought that she was telepathic. Those looks that she gives me."

Ellis smiled in agreement with my mother. Where did they make friends like this.

"Chloe is a lovely girl. You know the whole deal, out of sight, out of mind. But I'm just waiting. I know that she's up to something. One day I'm going to catch her."

"She's not stealing from your purse. Or shoplifting makeup."

"Heavens no!"

I imagined Mom dragging me to the mall for a makeover.

"Doesn't your soul feel so much better?"

That would make no sense to me.

June admitted, "I just feel such a spiritual boost after I get my hair done."

"You never take Chloe with you?"

"She likes to do her own hair."

"You can't let her do that. Not at her age. It's like handing her a set of knives and asking her to juggle."

Ellis offered such a preposterous comparison. I felt as if it was my moment to emerge from the closet as a crazed zombie. Ellis would be my first victim.

Ellis added, "What are your plans to keep her in line?"

"She's not the sort to head off to cheerleading camp or something else so uplifting."

Ellis wondered, "What's the alternative?"

"They have this Human Values class after school. Our best attempt to impose morality in a secular world."

"What is that?"

"They bring in business leaders and what not to set kids straight about the real world."

"They do need some kind of guidance."

Both the women smiled.

I was ready to assent to any form of brainwashing that might be sent my way.

“If only I could send her to charm school.”

They both laughed.

Ellis contributed to the humiliation, “Does she even hang out with boys?”

“She’s nothing like me if that’s what you’re asking. Sometimes, I think that I should get her to talk to someone.”

“They can always recommend a little extra to set her on the right path.”

Ellis understood a thing about mind control. This was all the help that my mother needed.

I had just finished an essay on Stephen Crane’s poetry. This wasn’t stuff that we actually talked about in class. So it meant doing a lot of work on my own. The poems blew me away. I was so inspired. On my father’s prompting I started to talk about the essay at the dinner table. For once, he seemed to take a genuine interest in my school work.

“What is this shit?”

June glared at me.

“This sounds like a raving lunatic. Was this guy on drugs?”

“Mom, this is Stephen Crane. You know *The Red Badge of Courage*.”

“I don’t care who it is. Are you trying to make me feel that I’m stupid?”

I had no idea what she was getting at.

“I can’t make any sense of this. Bill, this doesn’t make sense to you, does it?”

“I’m listening to Chloe. I’d like to learn more about her essay.”

“Listening to Chloe. Is that what we’re supposed to do as parents? I think that I’ve listened to Chloe enough. And Chloe has become one self-centered little girl.”

My father had no idea what to say. For once, he hardly agreed with her. But he wasn’t ready to get in an argument with her. She had already demonstrated that she wasn’t going to be reasoned with.

“Chloe, I’m truly interested.”

“Blah, blah, blah, blah. Are the two of you ganging up on me? Are you trying to make me feel stupid? This is gobbley-gook. You keep reading this stuff, and you’re never going to be able to get a job. You’re just going to become a drug-fiend or something.”

Bill was still trying to ignore her outburst. And she had no excuse. It wasn’t the effects of too much wine. June was simply being bitter.

“I’m your mother. Do you respect me? Chloe, do you care about me?”

I nodded.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

I didn’t want to give up. I wanted to tell her more about my essay. But I knew that my ideas only taunted her.

“I didn’t bring you in the world to make you an unappreciative little bitch. Because that’s how I feel right now.”

“I never said anything of the kind,” I was trying to hold my tongue. But this all seemed so overwhelming. It wasn’t as if I imagined an ally in June. She was being positively vindictive.

I looked at Bill. He seemed utterly helpless. He had done his best to soften her blows. It only made her more combative.

“What are they teaching you in school? I wish that I could report your teacher to the

school board.”

Fortunately, she hardly had the will to do something like that. She was becoming tongued by her own venom.

There was really little that June could do but make me feel bad. Her tirade had been a tribute to her own power even if it demonstrated her own insecurity. Josh said nothing. But I could tell what he was thinking. He was taking a special satisfaction in my dressing down at the dinner table. It only gave him more points in his own eyes. It also underline Bill’s weakness that only made Josh seem invulnerable. He seemed to relish the public inquisition. After all, he couldn’t allow me to have a moment of success in her eyes. And she had done her business well. I sat there with tears in my eyes.

For the time being, I just needed to get a million miles away from everybody. No computer, no phone, no TV. Just the darkness of my room. I was sure that some people would have found it weird to find me just sitting there in the dark, If June surprised me, I would tell her that I was having a nap. But I wasn’t even sitting on the bed. And my eyes were open.

This kind of thing was becoming less and less rare. I could hang out with friends. Or I could use my computer. I had loads of books to read. And I spent most of my time being industrious. But there were moments when I just had to shut it all out. And I felt that there was nothing unusual about my need. Sitting in the dark was so relaxing. I zoned out and let nothing bother me. No one and nothing could touch me.

Some mystics had grappled to attain this state of isolation. For me it seemed to come naturally. I just settled into the tranquil moment and erased all the tension from my mind. Total relaxation.

I guess there was a certain luxury on my part that I could achieve such a radical separation from the world. I knew how to create a wall. And as it rolled over me, I gave into its demands. For many, it would difficult to sit still even if there was something to preoccupy them. They’d restlessly watch TV. Every second they would have to get up for a snack. Or their hands would always on their phone. This was my special discipline. It went way beyond tuning things out. It meant being content with my nothingness. I didn’t feel sorry for myself. I wasn’t getting over any trauma. I wasn’t numb. This was who I was. And I accepted my exile.

I didn’t have to become someone else. Under these circumstances, I really got to know who I was. I had no need to exchange my place with someone else. I was content. In a sense, I simply lost myself to time. I let go. I didn’t think about anything in particular. I had no pictures in my head. There was no feeling in my body. I floated in the void.

What I loved about this experience was that I had absolutely nothing to fear. I had thrown off all the impediments to my serenity. So I could live as one with myself. This was the supreme power that I had over my persecutors. This was the one place where no one could touch me. I could find purity.

Even at this point in my life, I recognized that this was the ultimate struggle. As I beat back these influences, there was still a sliver of doubt. This was why I needed more concentration to claim my victory. I was not a prisoner of my opponents. I had chosen my station willingly. But I still needed to focus my efforts if I was really to reach total peace.

I had been pushed into a box. The demons had tried to entrap me. And I had responded by I solving the puzzle. I had joyously turned my imprisonment into a form of liberation. This

convinced me that no event would ever crush my spirit. I would be able to carry on against the most crushing blows.

My survival skills provided the foundation to protect myself against the most demanding conditions. I could embrace the darkness as it traced the world that had tried to assail me. And I had overcome its effects. I could shut out everything negative from my being and sustain myself on sheer will.

This was a place where no one was watching over my shoulder. June was always waiting for me to misstep. And it made my burden more onerous. To be able to cast off her watch was such a blessing. I hardly thought about it. There was no point. I just let myself go. I became absorbed in the night. And I reveled in my oneness. In my room, I could impose my dominion. No rival could threaten my liberty. There was a limitless triumph that I welcomed. I had not accustomed myself to a dream world. Instead, I had imposed my vision on the smallest protuberance of reality.

When June first went out with the heir to a family business, she could only assume that she was set for life. Bill was hardly the charmer. His rough ways should have been a clue to her. But she was none the wiser. She had built up his fortune in her mind. The rest she left to fate. As such, she would eventually be rewarded for her commitment to their romantic destiny. All in all, she counted on Bill to redeem her from her humble beginnings. She was no debutante, but she had scoured the society pages with the hopes that she could learn the ins and outs of the local Brahmins. She firmly believed that she would eventually take her place among royalty. Although she never actually read the novels of dynasty, she, nevertheless, imagined herself ensconced at the center of epic intrigues. It was only later that she was hit with the abrupt realization that Bill was not going to give her the luxuries after which she aspired. She might have found her own way to the top. But shopping and dreaming were the extent of her social skills. She had used all her wiles to ensnare Bill. Now, she had to face the heady disappointment that came with the understanding that his ambitions would take him nowhere. And June would forever be shut out of the high society that was the apex of her longing. To compensate she endured a particularly aggravated bitterness. She could not dispel the overwhelming aftertaste of her eventual resolution.

She would never admit that she had been exiled from paradise. She continued to nurture a side of herself that was accustomed to opulence. In public, she would strut up and down as if her court was in attendance. When she could, she would play the part of the empress. Her fastidiousness was her most fervent expression of this attitude. In my early years, she tried to groom me for royal succession. But she realized that I was hardly the monarchist that she had counted on. My private rebellion only made her more attached to her dream. She would simply carry on without my support.

June remained poised in her eternal wait. Thus, her goal took on a more metaphysical bent. At the same time, her ideology appeared to justify her purges against the likes of me. If she was not cursed enough with the faded treasures of a lethargic husband, she also had to put up with a wayward offspring who challenged her authority. Josh was a welcome ally, but he didn't have the right stuff to her extend her plan. Instead, she was better served by her own grumbling about the state of the world. Due to her limited argumentative skills, these opinions remained shapeless and haphazard. But that didn't prevent her from trying to do her damage.

We never really struggled, but June would push things to the limit. Bill was always scraping to balance the books. He needed to serve her tastes. At the same time, his father had instilled in him a strict sense of accounting. She could not compromise his principles. Nevertheless, he always felt as if he was robbing Peter to pay Paul. His calm exterior was constantly beset by a franticness that had been inspired by her ruthless appetites.

In the end, June's resentment bubbled to the top. She hated everything about car repairs and transmissions. It was almost as if he had to hide the source of his income. Under these circumstances, he felt it his duty to hold his tongue. But June required his iron hand to keep everything in place. And he realized that ultimately she only served his needs. As much as she ranted and raved, she did her part to keep the house in order. The bottom line was that she made sure that the accounts held in place. She confirmed his moral order for the universe.

Their fragile truce rested upon her sizable allowance. She tried to avoid crass self-indulgence. But she needed to sustain her aristocratic airs. So she distilled it down to a science. And she was faithful in executing its laws. She knew that there was still a universe where she was the brightest star. And she saw herself without equals.

This was my life. But I was doing everything that I could to absent myself from it. Such was my reaction to June. I was on the outside looking in. I felt it had to be that way. I projected a shadow that June would observe so she would always be watching a reflection. The actual object that she hoped to penetrate would remain out of her sight. I felt that I had become an expert with mirrors. I was even fooling myself. I was flashing images and counter-images back and forth. None of them could be me.

I had become so adept at living in the shadows that I wanted to come in to the light. But if I surfaced, I would only leave myself vulnerable. Sure, living meant being touched by the world and dealing with disappointment. But this was way more than that. June knew that she had the ability to destroy me. And I had to avoid that at all cost.

I had created a hiding place, my cave. But this place was only my reaction against the world. I was still letting my troubles affect me. So I needed to get away from my escape. This was too much even for me to think about. If I didn't try to control my feelings, I would only get spun around by these treacherous currents.

All these games were making me woozy. I wanted to break the cycle. But I knew that I couldn't let June have the upper hand. So I needed to keep on with the charade. It was affecting everything that I did. My shell of an existence. I couldn't sustain myself forever on mysticism. And from one day to the next, I couldn't be sure which face I was showing to the world. It was dizzying.

I felt overwhelmed as I tried to negotiate this steep cliff by myself. I didn't dare look down. And if I fell, there would be no one to find me. I would be down at the cliff base hurt without any hope of rescue.

I was becoming more and more lost in these mirages of the soul. If rescue was a million miles away. I had to do what I could to peel myself off the ground. I had been damaged, and it wasn't going to be easy to shake it off. I really wanted someone to take my hand and lead me out of here. Just a gentle touch.

I lay there immobile and mused about what I could do. I couldn't summon any motivation. I had worked myself into a corner.

If I was older, if I had more experience, I wouldn't have been so helpless. But here I was trying to survive on my wits alone. Why had things become so harrowing all of a sudden? If I could have trusted June, I would have confessed everything that was going on. As such, she would have loved the opportunity finally to exercise her rule over me. This would have made up for all her frustration all over the years.

I held my tongue. I did not yield to the torture. I found a new resilience in myself. And I felt proud. But this time had been tough. All the pain was wearing me down. I didn't want to crack in front of her. She didn't understand how close she had come to succeeding. But from my weakness, I created a new liberation.

I realized that I could again retreat to my isolation without fear of losing myself. My struggle had been hard-fought. Perhaps, I was deriving some kind of perverse satisfaction from playing cat and mouse. Fortunately for me, the cat had no idea where the mouse was really hiding. And she never would.

If I was so confident about what had happened, why didn't I feel more at ease. I had dodged another bullet. But there was still a hollow inside. If I was confronting an emptiness of my own, I just had to assume that June herself was subject to a more intense form of insecurity. Did this knowledge in itself help me?

I already had my eyes on June. Now I recognized that I would have to turn the tables. I would have to become the hunter, and she would be the prey. I had caught her in her habitat. Her self-idolatry was the most evident sign of her own misgivings about herself. She knew how useless this pose was in affecting her actual experience. But if she gave up on the illusion, she would come crashing down. Since I did little to enhance this side of herself, she felt that it was okay to ignore me. She could monitor everything that I did. But she saw nothing of who I really was. So the hunter could have free rein.

Once I turned things around, I again felt more confident. This had always been the basis of my strength. It was as if I was taking part in an active conversation with June. I had an answer to every one of her objections. On that basis, I learned how to assert myself. What I was doing now went way beyond my initial defenses.

June's insecurity was based on her belief that I was her rival for my father's attention. This was not simply a passing feeling on her part. In some ways, it was what kept her personal drama going. She blamed me for his supposed loss of ambition. It wasn't as if it really made any difference. He never had any intention of becoming a shrewd businessperson. That didn't stop June from thinking that Bill and I were conspiring against her.

I didn't find him a real ally against her machinations. I admit that I learned a lot from him when I was very young. But my knowledge simply proceeded on its own. And he wasn't all that supportive. In those rare moments that he took an interest, I was able to draw some inspiration. But he remained firmly in her camp. And I saw this early on. He needed her rants so that he could keep things on an even keel. That way he didn't have to worry about what went on at home. He could spend his leisure time glued in front of the television. This attitude may have slowed him in his tracks. But he wasn't blessed with a grand plan for his life. His commitment to the family business was his fall back position. His alternative was a life of drifting around aimlessly.

Before he met June, he had been a little wild. And his parents really did worry about him.

For him, marrying June meant that he wanted to settle for something safe. He wasn't going to leverage the shop into something more adventuresome. He wasn't going to expand the business throughout the city. He never had plans to open a restaurant or any other kind of shop. He learned what he could from his father. And when the time came, he took over running the place.

June had done her best to fill his head with all kinds of schemes. She'd get books from the library on entrepreneurship. She read self-help books that promised untold wealth. She put all her money on that one poor pony that only wanted to run free. He couldn't be tamed. This messed with her to no end. She saw her dreams melting before her eyes. This only made her more vain. She wasn't going to give up that easily. So she did her best to hold on.

She had friends such as Ellis who sustained the myth. All of them had hoped to push their men on the fast track. All watched as their husbands skidded in lower level management jobs. The women never thought of striking out on their own. They all had tied their success to that of their husbands. They had not entered such unions idly.

I listened to my mother and Ellis ruminate about their failures. Ultimately, they blamed their lack of success on an unfavorable business climate. If only the country wasn't weighed down by an army of freeloaders. Someday the people would rise up against this abuse. June's elegant grace was her way of welcoming a beckoning future. The truly worthy would have all their troubles washed away and finally accept the bountiful reward that was meant for them.

For the time being, I was the perfect representative of the ungrateful masses. She interpreted my intelligence as a sign of my own sloth. I thought I was better than other people. And I didn't need to work. I was an elitist who thought that the world owed me a living. If my kind were allowed to prosper, the economy would come to a swift halt. So much for college. Nothing like starting the blame game young. I wasn't old enough to drive much less get a job.

June wondered how she might punish me for my errant behavior. Of course, I really hadn't anything wrong. But that only made her mistrust me more. It wasn't as if I was truly good. I just knew how to cover my tracks, and I just hadn't got caught. I didn't give her a shred of evidence to suspect me. But that didn't stop the demon from turning around in her brain. It wasn't as if the poor creature needed a warrant to go through my room. Scouring for incriminating DNA or illicit contraband wasn't going to do much to bolster her case. However, she needed to go through the motions just to reassure herself that she was on the right track. Activity rather than actual results means so much in propping up an empty authority.

She couldn't take away my privileges or ground me. She had no cause. And I had so little to spare.

"You could take away some of her favorite outfits."

Ellis prodded her.

"It's not as if she has anything to show off. She's already enough of an embarrassment."

Indeed, I was. My clothes weren't falling off me. And the kids couldn't make fun of me at school. But I really had no style. I needed to keep it that way. I didn't want to stand out at from the rest of the students. And I didn't want to draw my mother's attention towards me. I put on a blouse and jeans for class, and then I blended into the crowd.

I wasn't going to let June's fretting upset my composure. She could worry about her own shopping trips to the mall. I'd pass on such visceral stimulation. I could find more cerebral entertainment elsewhere.

My behavior simply baffled my mother. There was so little material foundation for my emotions that she had little to manipulate in her favor. I played the part of the phantom so well. And she didn't know how to work the spirit world. I didn't want to call June shallow. She simply couldn't appreciate the maze of the human psyche. She was more of a break crumb kind of girl. She never got too far off the beaten path so that she could always follow the trail back to the normal world. I was a complete mystery to her. Some days, she simply wanted to fling her hands in the air and just give up.

Part of June held out for a stricter form of interrogation. A little physical intimidation could break down the hard shell that surrounded a weak interior. She had no idea who she was dealing with. And as the days progressed, I became more adept at meeting her challenges and making things more difficult for her. It was useless for her to get upset at me. I simply didn't react. June was stumped.

She figured that she would engage one of the tricks of psychological warfare. She would give me something to which I would become attached. Then she would just take it away. I wasn't going to allow myself to be fooled. She knew a puppy wouldn't work. That would be too obvious. So she tried to shower me with random gifts. I feared her Trojan horses. And she soon realized that she was getting nowhere. I'd prefer to do my computer work in the library. And I only wanted a simple cell phone. No gadgets. Nothing for her to monitor.

I was doing everything that I could to hide who I was. This only gave June the chance to assert herself more gloriously. Her vanity knew no bounds. Ellis became her talking mirror as she would pose in front of her.

They both laughed.

"Honey, you are the fairest in the land."

"What about my rivals? Do I have someone to fear?"

Ellis spoke frankly, "Chloe is a rebel. She is going to be your undoing."

"Are you serious?"

"You know what they say about kids? They add twenty years to your age."

Ellis looked frightened. She rubbed her face. She protested, "I'm not showing it."

"You're okay for now."

That sent the shiver of the Lord through her. She had seen a ghost."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure if there is anything that we really can do. We can't turn back the hands of time."

I was Snow White, and my only hope was to escape the wicked queen. But I had been doing this all along.

"I know what's in my heart. And there is no way that Chloe is going to beat me at my own game."

I spoke under my breath, "*Knock yourself out, Mama!*"

Maybe I could come out all the best in this fairy tale. But I still had my misgivings. I was still an extra in the grand dame's drama. And she was slowly turning that knife. It would finally make its mark.

I had yet to extricate myself from the prison of my own making. I just wanted to turn off this voice in my head. I was like a TV addict trying to turn off the tube. It pursued me everywhere. And that constant whine prevented me from living.

When I looked at the kids at school, I wondered if they were beset by the same constant chatter. Of course, they were. It was with each other. No wonder they had to make up things about each other. June had been the product of this kind of nonsense. This was what I wanted to close out of my world. I wanted complete silence. Not a single word. Not a single sound. I wanted my anesthetic.

Just imagining the change was enough to inspire me. But this wouldn't last. I could shut away Ellis and June and all the kids at school. But I couldn't stop my own voice from interfering with my serenity. For all my efforts I couldn't hinder that nuisance. Maybe that was why June relied so heavily on Ellis. She could keep her most basic fear at arm's length. I didn't want to give up my control. But I felt at my wit's end. I was running out of techniques to hold off June. And I wasn't quite ready to leave home. I needed to figure out how I could survive in these four walls. And it was going to be tough.

My mysticism had reached its limits. I was ready to pass on to the next phase. It wasn't as if this was going to be a higher stage of my being. I wasn't embracing a contemplative paradise. It was more like suspended animation. I was an astronaut in a spacecraft being prepared for a long journey. I wouldn't have to remain awake for the long boring passages in space. I was being sent out into the deep reaches of the universe. I was ready to surrender to the demands of adolescence. I acted as if I was losing something in order to gain something else of infinite majesty. Who was I kidding? I was heading for a fall.