Why isn't today like all my yesterdays? Riding my trike, I'm ringing the bell and having a good time—while waiting for Mommy to get up, waiting to go to the park. She says she has a tummy ache, doesn't want to get out of bed. When I pedal out of the room and she can't see me anymore, she calls: Barbara Jane, where are you?

Come find me, Mommy. When she doesn't, I pedal back to where she's lying in bed, listening to music and reading the paper. Usually, when the music's playing, we dance around the house, me riding on top of her shoes. Not today, she says, not today. When rounding the foot of the bed, the wheel of my

tricycle catches on the tip of the bedspread lying on the floor. Before I know it, I'm flat on my back, sobbing as if my heart will break.

Tossing aside *The Irish Echo,* she leans over, grabs the straps on my overalls and pulls me up onto the bed with her.

Come, come, don't cry. You're all right, she says, kissing me on the forehead, running her hand through my hair. I know what to do, let's brush your hair. Saying that she hands me her silver mirror—what a pretty girl!—the one with a bird that has the longest tail I've ever seen. Pointing to it, I ask *what's this*?

It's a peacock, she says, can you say peacock? Say, pea-cock.

Before I can say a word, the silver mirror with the peacock slips out of my hand and onto the floor. I climb down to pick it up, and when I climb back up again she's gone. Is she playing hide-and-seek? I look under the spread, she's not there. I look under the bed, she's not there. Then the radio forgets how to play the songs it once knew, and the sun forgets to take naps on Mommy's bed. Everything's topsy-turvy. Mommy's gone, and she's taken away all the music. Nothing's the way it was yesterday.

THE DOORBELL rings and rings. The apartment fills with tears and sighs, with people coming and going for days on end. My aunts sit around in the living room, crossing and uncrossing their legs, not sure what to do with their hands, while my uncles are out in the kitchen smoking cigarettes and pipes and drinking the 'suds.' No one's laughing, no one's

telling stories, no one's dancing—not the way they do when Mommy's here.

When the doorbell rings, I run to answer, but it's not my mother, it's only my grandmother. Someone moves over to make room for her to sit on the couch. The door to Mommy's bedroom is half-open, so I walk to the window to see if she's on the fire escape, but she's not. Opening the closet, I pick up her dancing shoes, the ones she calls her *Rita's* with the skinny straps that wrap around her ankles. Wherever she is, she's not dancing tonight—not without her dancing shoes.

In the kitchen, the air is thick and grey with smoke, but when I squint I see her standing in front of the refrigerator, her arms open wide. I run to her, but she disappears, and all I have left is an armful of smoke. Something's wrong—the wooden clock on the wall no longer says *tick-tock-tick-tock*. And the little boy and girl who came out to play have gone away.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I'm sitting on the floor sucking my thumb when Mommy's dancing broom falls over, hitting me on the head. I pick it up, put it next to me on the floor—hoping she will come looking for it, hoping she will come looking for me.

When I go to bed, a dark grey shadow is moving up and down, round and round, on the bedroom window—it's looking for the lock, looking for a way to get in. I scream and crawl out of bed, dragging my comforter into the closet where I sit hugging Mommy's dancing shoes. My father comes in and puts me back to bed. No one's there, he says, it's only a dream. Pulling the covers over my head, I tell myself it's only

a dream, only a dream. But it feels so real. The following night the shadow returns, and once again I scream. Lickety-split, my father throws open the window and leans out, looking first one way and then the other, leaving his snowy fingerprints on the windowsill.

Go back to sleep, go back to sleep.

Before he can lock the window, the month of November comes rushing in—dropping chunks of cold moonlight on the bed, on the floor, and on me. When Daddy pulls up my covers, I can smell the tobacco on his hands and hear the cellophane on his Chesterfields making crinkly noises. Sucking my thumb for the longest time, I can't fall asleep. When will Mommy come home? is she lost? are the little boy and girl who lived in the clock lost? will I ever see them again?

I don't understand this. She's never left me alone before, not even when she goes to the mailbox. We're friends, the two of us going everywhere together. All day long, I'm listening for her footsteps in the hallway, listening for the key in the lock. No one calls my name, no one comes to play. The place is a mess—the walls are scared to death, the tiles on the bathroom floor are wet and dirty, and even the kitchen linoleum has lost its shine. Everybody's talking at me, but I don't hear a word. When will the rain stop? when will the sun come out? what's happening? No one tells me a thing.

Mommy and Me

When Daddy's working, Mrs Ryan, the lady who lives upstairs, sits around in our living room keeping an eye on me. When the doorbell rings one morning, it's my grandmother. She tries to kiss me, but I won't let her. I'm angry with Nana, angry with Mrs Ryan, and angry with Mommy.

What's the matter with you? Where's that smile of yours? C'mon, put on a happy face, she says, pushing up the corners of her mouth.

Go away, Nana. I want Mommy.

Tsch, tsch, tsch. You're as jumpy as a little Mexican jumping bean, you know that?

Don't touch me. And I don't want Mrs Ryan to touch me. She doesn't know how to play games, and when we go to the park, she doesn't talk to Mr Echo, not the way Mommy does. And you know what, Nana? Mr Echo doesn't talk to me anymore.

At that Nana jumps to her feet, saying: That does it. You and your father are coming to live with me. I've made up my mind, go get your coat.

Well, why not? My mother's been gone a long time, and there's no one to play games with me. And not only has the radio forgotten the songs it used to sing, but the dancing broom has forgotten the steps that Mommy taught it to do.

Nana, pinning her black hat, the one that looks like a stovepipe, to her snowy white hair says: I've made up my mind. It will be best for all of us—for you too, Mrs Ryan. I'm going to take my son and granddaughter to live at my house.

Mrs Ryan doesn't say a word, only shakes her head side-to-side, as if there's no use talking to Nana. Everyone knows that once Nana's made up her mind, that's it. Nana tells Mrs Ryan she's going home to switch the rooms around and give Daddy and me her bedroom.

If you do that, Nana, where will you sleep?

I'm going to turn the dining room into a bedroom. It's right next to the parlor, so that way I'll have me a suite of rooms. Imagine that, me with a suite!

A sweet? I don't know what she's talking about.

That night, Daddy says, we're moving to Nana's. Go get your dolls.

Well, why not? I don't like it here without Mommy. All

day long the windows are crying their eyes out and the living room walls are grey with shadows.

We have to straighten up this place, Daddy says, before we leave.

So that night, we wash the walls with our tears and punch the dust out of the rugs with our fists and pull down all the shades to make the shadows go away.

Did you pack your storybooks?

THE NEXT DAY my father takes me with him to Mr Kirkbauer's butcher shop on West Farms Road. It's a busy street, but I can see the green-and-white striped awning a block away. On one side of the building is a pink pig with a curly tail, dancing on top of the letters H-A-M. I know that word—it says ham. I like ham, and I like Mr Kirkbauer's butcher shop. When you open the door, a cowbell over the door jingle-jangles. But where are the cows?

Oh, liebkin, Mr Kirkbauer says, the cows don't come home until after dark.

Everything in the butcher shop is white—white tiles on the floor, white tiles on the walls, white tiles on the ceiling. There's even a white refrigerator big enough for the butchers to walk in and out of all day long and two white scales for weighing the bologna and liverwurst. The butchers—Otto, Hugo, and Mr Kirkbauer—wear white shirts with black bow-ties and long white aprons splattered with blood. The only thing not white is the sawdust clinging to my socks.

My father jokes with Otto, telling him to keep his finger off the scale. When I ask why Otto's weighing his finger, they laugh.

Liebkin, vat vould you like today? Livervurst or bologna? Mr Kirkbauer is very nice, but he has this funny way of talking.

A couple of days after my grandfather died, Mr Kirkbauer gave my father a job as a delivery boy. At first, they didn't pay him, not with real money. Instead, they gave him all the meat, chickens, and cold cuts Nana needed to feed her six children. After my father had been a delivery boy for a year, they made him a butcher. Today, we're here to pick up his knives and say good-bye. Daddy has a new job with the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, taking care of all the oil burners and refrigerators in the Bronx. Everyone's sorry to see him leave.

Don't be a stranger, Eddie.

Come back and see us, liebkin, Mr Kirkbauer says, patting me on the top of the head, flattening my pink bow.

When the cowbell rings, I look around to see if the cows are coming down the street. I wish I could see them—just once.

There are no empty rooms at Nana's, no creepy shadows on the walls. The kitchen is bright and sunny, and the radio plays music all day long. Sometimes when the music's playing, Aunt Betty dances me around the kitchen and down the hall on the tops of her shoes—just like Mommy used to do. Aunt Betty lives with us because her husband is in the Army.

After everyone leaves for work in the morning, Nana makes herself a cup of tea and pulls up a chair. Keeping one eye on the stove and the other on her prayer book, she says her prayers.

What are you praying for, Nana?

I'm praying for more money. It's hard to keep up with the bills.

Which saint has all the money?

The Infant of Prague, he's my little man.

Nana, look, I say, pointing to a picture of the Infant on her novena booklet. Does he keep the money in the ball he has in his hand?

No, that's no ball, she says. That's the whole wide world he's holding in his hand, shows you that he's thinking of us every minute. When I'm a smidge short, he comes through with a little extra for me. A dollar's not like a rubber band, you know, you can only stretch it so far.

Why, what happens then?

What do you mean *what happens then*?

What happens if you stretch it too far?

Off you go now. Be a good girl, go get me my glasses. I left them in the parlor on top of the sewing basket.

The statue of the Infant of Prague, the one she keeps on her dresser, is taller than a milk bottle but nowhere near as tall as I am. Every day, the Infant wears a gold crown and a red cape that Nana made for him, but at Christmas, she puts on his white cape with gold rickrack. I wouldn't mind having a cape like that myself. Under his feet is a card about the size of a picture postcard: *Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door shall open.*

Which door do you knock on, Nana?

It doesn't matter, any door will do.

When you knock, who answers?

It doesn't work quite that way.

If I knocked on the back door, maybe my mother might be on the other side. Nana, how much money did you ask for today?

Not much, it changes from week to week and month to month. I let him decide. I simply say, here I am your poor child, Agnes, who needs your help. And then he helps me, as much as he can. There are a lot of people looking for help.

If Nana loses something—yesterday she lost her glasses—she goes to the ruby-red vase and takes out the Saint Anthony booklet. Then talking out loud, she says: Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, look all around. Something's been lost and cannot be found. That's when Saint Anthony whispered in her ear to go check her housedress, the one rolled up in the hamper. Sure enough, she found her glasses.

Nana, can Saint Anthony find people who are lost?

I don't know about people, but he's found my glasses, my rosary beads, and my sewing scissors. He's got good eyes, all right, much better than mine.

My eyes are good, Nana.

Yes, but our eyes here on Earth are nowhere near as good as those up in heaven looking down on us.

Making a novena is hard work. Nana has to pray every hour for nine hours straight and do the same thing over and over for nine days. Nine is the magic number. No time-outs allowed. If you miss, you have to start all over again.

She keeps all the novena booklets in the ruby-red vase, the one Daddy gave her the day we moved in. My favorite is the one that has a picture of a young girl on the cover. They call her the Little Flower, Nana said, and she's a great favorite with all the angels and saints. If I pray to her, she might send me a rose.

All the way from heaven?

All the way from heaven.

Okay, I'll do it, I say, thinking a rose would be nice. Especially now when there's snow on the ground, not a dandelion

in sight. Slipping the Little Flower's picture under my pillow, I take it out at night to talk to her. Sometimes I tell her what I did during the day, sometimes I ask what she's been doing and if she's seen my mother. So far, I haven't found a rose, and the Little Flower hasn't found my mother. Even so, I like talking to her. Talking to her is like talking to a big sister. If I had a big sister, then I wouldn't be all alone. It's not the same having a baby brother who's in the hospital.

Veronica and Ed

A few days ago, Nana got a phone call from Mother Theophilia, the superintendent at St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Mother Theophilia has been taking care of my baby brother ever since they found him at the hospital. It's a big job, because he's so tiny, not much more than three pounds. Mother Theophilia calls the house all the time to let Nana know how he's doing. That day he wasn't doing so good, and Mother Theophilia was worried.

Agnes, she said, I'd like you to come down and take a look at the baby. I'm wondering how you would feel about taking him home.

Taking him home? What do you mean, Sister, taking him home? How can I take him home? He's still in the oxygen tent, isn't he?

That he is, Agnes, that he is. But the poor little thing's not gaining any weight, not even an ounce. He's no bigger than a baby bird. I'm afraid he's not going to make it, but we don't know what to do for him. Do me a favor, Agnes, come take a look at him.

But Sister, can he breathe on his own, without the oxygen?

He can. We take him out for a feeding or to change the diaper, but the trouble is he's not gaining weight. You have to see the little arms, no bigger than matchsticks.

Are you sure he's warm enough, Sister? Do you have a blanket on him?

The doctors say he doesn't need a blanket, Agnes—the incubator's warm enough.

Don't listen to them, Sister, do what I tell you and put a light blanket over him. If nothing else, it will make him feel good. Otherwise, the poor little thing is flailing about, half-frightening himself to death. And Sister? Put a cap on his head, it will help keep in the warmth.

But, Agnes, you will come, won't you?

Of course, I will, Sister.

FLINGING HER BIBBED apron over the back of a chair, Nana tucked a few strands of silky white hair into the top of her stovepipe hat and pinned it together with a

six-inch hatpin that, at one end, has the biggest pearl in the world. After that, she took a large shoebox and buttoning her long black coat—everything's long on her because she's so short—took the subway downtown and caught the cross-town bus.

When she got to the hospital, Mother Theophilia was waiting in the lobby, her face like a white star in a black universe. That's what Nana said: Her face was like a white star in a black universe. Mother Theophilia was upset because she has not forgotten that day, months ago, when the baby arrived at the hospital and Mommy disappeared.

When Daddy brought Mommy to the hospital, the nuns told him that they had called the doctor and he was on his way. That he should go home, get himself some rest, and they'd call him as soon as they knew anything. He had a lot of errands to do and never got back to the hospital until six o'clock. By that time, Mommy was missing. The nuns ran all over the place looking for her, and they even called the priest asking for his help, but it was too late. She was gone.

When Daddy heard this, he went crazy—yelling at the doctor, yelling at the nuns, yelling at the nurses, and yelling at Mother Theophilia. No one yells at Mother Theophilia, but he did. She told Nana that what happened next she would never forget—the way he tore the sheets off the bed, knocking over a lamp and leaving it in smithereens. He was like a raging bull, he was. That's what she called him—a raging bull. And the language! She had never heard such language in all of her born days. As if it was her fault

Mommy was missing. Mother Theophilia never wanted to go through that again, not on your life. That's why she called my grandmother.

With a shoebox tucked under one arm, Nana went into the nursery and saw my baby brother kicking his blanket.

See that, Sister? He's getting stronger every day, she said. I think he's ready to go home, yes I do.

When she heard that, Mother Theophilia breathed a sigh: Praise God!

Sister, get me a roll of the cotton batting.

When she got her hands on it, she pulled it apart like cotton candy and lined the shoebox. After that, there wasn't much for her to do, other than sign a paper saying she was taking the baby home, and that the hospital was not responsible for him. All the nuns at the hospital were so happy to see him go home, and when they said their evening prayers, they said a special prayer for baby Eddie. Praise be!

When Nana brought him home to 3272 Decatur Avenue, we emptied a dresser drawer and lined it with hot bricks, and after that we covered the bricks with bath towels. She put the drawer in the kitchen near the oven, but not in the draft that comes whistling through the back door.

Well, missy, Nana said, it's time for us to put your baby brother in his bassinet. So we did. And that's how you turn an empty drawer into a baby's bassinet.

Now, don't touch the baby, she says, as I stand tippy-toed, trying to get a good look at him.

He's small, Nana. Hello, Eddie! Look, he smiled at me, Nana.

He's no bigger than a baby bird, but you give him time, and he'll be a big boy one of these days.

Nana walks around the house carrying him on her shoulder all day long. She says you have to hold tiny babies a lot, so they can hear your heart beating. She says that when he gets bigger, I'll be able to hold him, and then he'll be able to hear my heart beating too.

Now, Daddy, Eddie, and me are living on Decatur Avenue with Nana, Uncle Fred, and Aunt Betty. Everyone's here except my mother who's still missing. How will she find us? what if she goes back to our apartment on Ryer Avenue? will the super tell her we moved to Decatur Avenue?

WEIGHING IN at three pounds, two ounces, my baby brother takes the neighborhood by storm. News of his arrival spreads like wildfire up and down the block. It's a miracle, everyone says. Such a tiny tot and still alive. Mercy, mercy! Like a Tom Turkey before Thanksgiving, Nana wants to fatten him up, so she feeds him all day long using an eyedropper . . . *drip, drip, drip*.

Every one of my grandchildren is the picture of health, she says, and this little one will be, too. Mark my words. Not today or tomorrow, but one of these days.

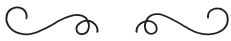
For his sake, I hope he doesn't get sick. When I'm croupy or coming down with a cold, she mixes a teaspoonful of yellow mustard seed powder with a few tablespoons of white flour and adds enough water to make a gloppy paste. Then

she smears the stuff on a piece of flannel and puts the flannel on my chest. I don't like it one bit, but by morning the germs are gone. They don't like it either.

One night, when I was coughing like crazy—half-asleep, half-awake for hours—I heard her slippers *slap-slapping* the linoleum in the hallway. When she bent over my bed in the dark, I said: Hi, Nana! She jumped a mile, and I laughed out loud.

Oh, hush! You scared the daylights out of me! Open the top of your pajamas so I can see if you're getting blisters. She says people with freckles and light skin get blisters.

Another thing she does when I don't feel so good is mix apple cider vinegar with honey and warm water. When I have a tummy ache, she says drink some. For a sore throat, let me hear you gargle. Eddie's lucky he doesn't have to do any of these things.



Most people never bother to ring the bell, they just walk on in and come on down the hall to see what's cooking. One of my aunts usually stops by in the morning to see if Nana needs anything from 204th, and one of my uncles comes by at night to see how we're all doing. Everyone calls Nana by a different name. My Uncle Jack—a New York City fireman who keeps barbells in the hall closet—calls her Aggie. My Uncle Walter—he works at Con Edison during the day and at Prentice-Hall at night—calls her Mother, but she's really his mother-in-law. The Franciscan nuns call her Agnes. The neighbors call her Mrs Bracht. My father calls her Mom. I call her Nana.

Uncle Fred, who calls her Ag, wants to plant the spring bulbs in the backyard. Last week, they finished the fall planting over at Woodlawn Cemetery, and the foreman gave him a bagful of bulbs to take home.