

Sisters

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Naomi was told one of Hannah's friends would meet her at the San Salvador airport, but no one arrived who matched the description, no matter how long Naomi squinted over the heads of the small, dark-haired women weaving on foot around the junky taxis and diesel buses coughing their fumes toward the terminal. No purple ribbon, no rainbow-striped sweater. No friend of Hannah's. Of course, no Hannah.

Unlike her sister, even when Naomi was younger, she'd never liked traveling. Already today, three hours to fly from Chicago to Miami, where she'd crammed her winter coat into her suitcase. Another three hours from Miami to this airport. Now another two, at least, sweating in the tropical heat, shifting her weight from foot to itching foot chafing inside her sneakers, a headache creasing her forehead.

In broken Spanish, she began asking passersby if they knew the place, *Casa de Corazón*? A few said, "Ah, sí!" as if she were a clever child who had correctly recited a poem. Then a torrent of sharply accented vowels and emphatic nods; nothing she could catch.

Careless, to leave a woman from a foreign country, a visitor, to fend for herself. She shouldn't have been surprised.

At last, a woman close to Naomi's age took charge of her, plucking at the elbow of her damp blouse, and steered her toward a crowded bus. Naomi slipped a five – the smallest bill she had, probably ten times the charge – into the fare box, a waist-high plastic container painted with a vibrant scene. A grapefruit-sized sun dominated the upper left corner. Beneath palm trees and the word "*Jesucristo*," smiling childish figures sat holding hands. Hannah, her little hippie sister, would have liked this remnant vision from the 1960s, a utopia where everybody got along and nobody died. They weren't heading there on this bus, that was for sure.

She dropped onto a loamy, vinyl seat and felt a broken spring jab her in the rear. Before the passengers had settled, the bus lurched forward, muscled across two congested lanes, and pulled away from the airport. It turned onto a broad boulevard lined with palm trees and unfamiliar flowers flaunting audacious, red blooms.

Apparently the bus driver saw the freshly paved road as

an opportunity to race between stops, gunning the wheezing engine for several blocks and then jerking to a halt. Over and over, the passengers levitated out of their seats and slammed down again. Naomi clutched her back and looked around to see if anyone would complain, but the others didn't even pause their constant chatter. The woman who had offered her help at the airport napped with her head bouncing against the window.

Naomi mopped the sweat from her tight forehead and glared at the driver's shining bald spot. Of course the bus wasn't air conditioned. She thought of Hannah's letter: *Naomi, I'm suffocating in the heat, yet I wear long pants constantly to ward off the mosquitoes. Thirty years ago I would have said, Damn the dengue fever, I'm getting a tan. Good thing my legs are too lumpy with varicose veins now to tempt my vanity.*

Hannah could have taken the bus the night of the accident, if the bus had not been so sweltering, so bone-rattling. It would have been safer than the car.

Outside the sky was the gray of a dirty wall slopped over with whitewash. Rain hung in the air, refusing to fall. Along the boulevard, cars swerved out of reach of the bus' spasms. Looking out, Naomi saw a boy standing guard outside a bank, shouldering a machine gun nearly half his height. He looked no more than twelve or thirteen, though he couldn't have been so young, not with a gun like that.

She wished she could ask Hannah about him and about the children she had described in her letters, the kids Naomi hadn't wanted to hear about because they seemed to bring Hannah such joy. They gave her another reason not to come home. Not so different from the children she'd taught in the States, Hannah had said, but of course she hadn't mentioned the weaponry.

Someone clapped a hand on her shoulder. She twisted in her seat, ready to sling her handbag at a pickpocket, but it was only the woman from the airport signaling to get off the bus. Naomi eased herself to the stairs, pain shooting along her spine. That beaming mural at the door was a cruel joke.

In front of her spread a street of low pastel houses crouched behind imposing fences. The bus jolted away, and, in its wake, waves of litter eddied against the curb. She peeled the soggy index card with her sister's address out of the pocket of her khakis. *Casa de Corazón, Avenida Norte No. 47, San Salvador, El*

As the garden opened up to her, something inside Naomi gave out, like a stone that had been suspended from a knotted cord slipping free, falling. She had to lean on the wall to steady herself.

Salvador, Centroamérica. On the world map, the country was a coastal sliver Naomi could obliterate with her thumb.

She dragged her rolling suitcase along the road's gravel shoulder, picking her way around cellophane sandwich wrappers and a sprinkling of broken glass like sea salt. She missed the house on the first pass and had to turn back after she read the ascending numbers on the next few buildings.

She couldn't believe it was the place Hannah had described so lovingly, conjuring a graceful hacienda with a stone walkway and thick curtains fluttering in the open windows. Instead, coiling razor wire and glinting green bottle fragments snaked atop a stained wall of heavy white plaster. The close-set iron bars of the front gate prevented her from seeing into the yard. This place looked like a fort under siege.

Naomi ran her fingers over the tiny brass address numerals posted above an intercom. She took a breath and waited, listening to the jangle of unseen insects. Then she pushed the button.

The speaker buzzed. "*Quién?*" a woman's voice called. "It's Naomi." She paused. "Hannah's sister."

Naomi heard a door slam beyond the wall, then quick footsteps. She could make out a figure hurrying down the walk and turning the deadbolts on the other side of the gate. When it opened, grinding against the stone path, Naomi was looking down at a pudgy woman panting in the heat.

"Naomi!" the woman said. "I am Alicia. We worried about you."

She reached for the suitcase, but Naomi wheeled it out of arm's length. "No, thank you," she said.

Alicia's smile faded. She crossed her thick arms over her floral-print T-shirt. "Rosa was held up this morning," she said.

Naomi remembered the young guard. She wanted to ask, *with a gun?* "Held up?"

"Her little boy is sick. She called and could not get you."

Naomi unzipped her purse and extracted her cell phone. It offered a blank face – a dead battery. She'd been so flustered, she hadn't thought anyone would be polite enough to call.

Alicia wrestled the heavy gate out of the way so Naomi could pass through. As the garden opened up to her, something inside Naomi gave out, like a stone that had been suspended from a knotted cord slipping free, falling. She had to lean on the wall to steady herself.

This was Hannah's work. Palms shaded the perimeter of the yard, casting the space in a cool green light. Low plants carpeted the ground, a clean streak of white edging each broad, dark leaf.

Pink and yellow flowers, their blooms bursting huge, nodded on thin stalks from both sides of the path. Near the front door, three small birds dipped their heads to drink from a bronze basin. Naomi breathed in the scent of earth and roses. The garden was as joyous as the painting on the bus, defiantly vital.

She didn't believe she could walk through it. She felt Alicia watching her press her sweaty palm against the wall, her arm quivering. Then, gathering herself, she tipped her suitcase and hurried along the path, trying not to think. The birds scattered as the suitcase wheels grated on the stone. When she drew closer to the plants, she saw the curled, withering edges of the leaves, like closing hands.

"We have ignored the garden these past few weeks," said Alicia, who followed at Naomi's heels. "Hannah was the one with the green touch."

"Green thumb," Naomi said automatically.

"I am sorry?"

"She had a green thumb," she repeated, cringing at her own brassy voice. She sounded like an acid-tongued schoolteacher. What difference did it make? There were no right words.

Alicia let Naomi into the house. In the entranceway, a fan revolved lazily overhead and a striped rug covered the tile. In the room to their right, a pair of brown couches slumped with age next to a worn coffee table. Alicia led her up a creaking staircase where the walls were filled with wooden crosses lacquered in bright reds and greens and blues. They stopped at a small bedroom. Naomi hesitated in the doorway, not wanting to ask.

"The guest room," Alicia said quickly. "You can put your clothes in the bureau."

"I don't plan to stay long," Naomi said. She crossed the room and leaned on the windowsill, gazing out past the garden to the horizon. Smoke drifted across the raw, barren mountains. It hurt to look at them, like studying the ravaged face of a woman who once had been beautiful. In so many letters, Hannah had written about the deforestation. When Naomi drew in a breath, her throat burned, as if she had swallowed the ashes coating the windowsill.

Hannah shouldn't have been here. Two years earlier, so close to retirement, she'd gone down to El Salvador on her summer break to deliver school supplies her fourth-grade students had collected. *I know you'll say I'm crazy like you always do*, Hannah had written in her first letter. *But I'm staying. These women*

who work on labor rights, in the factories – I’m captivated by them. You would like them. Really. I feel useful here. She could count on Naomi, she knew, to close up her tiny house, hire someone to water her peonies and lilac bushes, find a home for her birds.

“What about me?” Naomi wanted to ask her younger sister, but she knew it was selfish. She had her husband, three grown children, grandchildren living nearby. Her days were crowded. The parakeets moved into her office, where they gabbled for hours and tore up their cage.

From the start, she and Hannah wrote letters; they chafed at small talk and avoided the phone. Naomi raced through every one she received, hoping to read signs of Hannah’s homesickness in a complaint about her new surroundings or a wistful reference to home, or even a wavering signature. It was true, the heat wearied Hannah. The monotonous servings of rice and beans made her miss Naomi’s dinner parties. But more often she told hilarious stories about the people she was meeting. She delighted in the children of the women who came to the house. And she reveled in victories that to Naomi seemed achingly small – workers winning the right to unmonitored bathroom breaks, or fire extinguishers being installed on the shop floor.

When Hannah urged Naomi to visit, she always offered reasons for Hannah to come home instead – a holiday, a new baby in the family – but she never did.

A week ago, a letter came by express mail, written in a blocky print that was not Hannah’s. When she closed her eyes, Naomi could read every word stamped on the air. There had been a car accident. They had identified Hannah by her hair, her luminous silver hair that fell to her waist.

Naomi turned away from the window. Alicia had busied herself with straightening the coverlet on the bed. “Of course I’ll be taking her back with me,” she said. “The, um, remains, I mean.”

Alicia heaved to her feet and faced Naomi, arms stiff at her sides. Naomi watched Alicia’s fingers twitching.

“This house was very special to Hannah,” Alicia began.

Naomi nodded. She set her mouth in a hard line. “*Casa de Corazón*. ‘Home is where the heart is,’ and all that. But her real home is far away.”

“She would like to be in the garden.” Alicia was almost pleading. “One night, she told me so.”

Naomi felt an intense weight settle onto her, as if someone were pushing her into the floor. She hadn’t prepared herself for this. “Hannah’s garden is very beautiful,” she said neutrally.

“*Por favor*.” Alicia opened her palms to Naomi. “We were very close. Like sisters.”

Naomi stepped so close she could breathe in the odor of Alicia’s sweat. She looked down on the top of her head, at the gray strands curling in the part of her dark hair. This short, fat woman was nothing like Hannah.

“She wasn’t your sister,” she said.

Alicia drew back. Her face twisted like she might cry. A little tremor passed over one corner of her mouth. She began to walk away, but when she was almost out of the room she

stopped with her hand on the doorknob.

“I am making dinner,” she said. “People are coming to meet you.”

Naomi sat on the bed. Her back ached from the bus ride. Her eyes stung with the smoke and grit in the air.

She should close the window. She should call the embassy. Two years ago she should have flown down here immediately and dragged Hannah back home.

From downstairs, she heard pots banging against the stove, louder than necessary. She recalled Hannah’s description of Alicia: *Patient as a saint, bawdy as a sailor*. Right now Alicia seemed like neither, but then Hannah always saw the world a little differently. She would have wanted Naomi to like Alicia. How far short she always fell of Hannah’s expectations.

She coaxed herself off the bed and made her way downstairs, leaning desperately on the railing. In the kitchen Alicia sat at a rough-hewn table, making tortillas. Naomi watched her dampen her fingers in a bowl of water and roll a scoop of masa into a ball, then stamp it flat with a wooden press between sheets of waxed paper. She worked with a practiced efficiency, and though she must have been aware of someone standing in the doorway, she didn’t look up until Naomi asked, “Is there something I can do?”

Alicia looked around the kitchen, frowning, as if she couldn’t find room for Naomi anywhere. Finally she pointed to the stove, her fingers covered in wet cornmeal. Naomi went to peer into the three bubbling pots: rice, black beans and a sticky mass of plantains. She picked up a wooden spoon and poked at the mash, wrinkling her nose at its buttery, burned-sugar odor.

“*Plátanos*,” said Alicia, who must have been watching Naomi prod the food.

“I know what they are,” she snapped. Hannah’s voice was loud in her head, complaining about this tedious meal, laughing, attempting to tally how many times she’d eaten it in a month. Naomi would have fed her baked brie, roast chicken, grilled asparagus, chocolate cake. She would have made sure Hannah was taken care of. Her sister could have come home any time to a feast.

Naomi looked about for something to distract her. Above the stove hung another wooden cross painted in bright primary colors. When she studied it, she could make out tiny female figures bent under enormous bundles on their backs. There were too many women to count. Below the cross, the wall was spattered with mud-brown droplets of old grease. The food began to smell rancid, and she felt queasy.

Alicia came to the stove with her pile of tortillas. Silently she poured a thick layer of oil into a pan and set it on a burner to heat. Naomi pushed up her sleeves as the air around the stove grew stifling. With a sidelong glance she saw Alicia fanning herself with her hand. They moved cautiously in the cramped space, fearful of touching.

Naomi opened and closed her mouth several times before speaking. “That night,” she said. She felt Alicia’s body tense next to hers. “Why did you let her be out on the road so late? Wasn’t it...careless?”

Alicia slid a tortilla into the hot oil. It popped and crackled so loudly she had to raise her voice to be heard.

"The manager of the factory promised to meet them. Hannah believed our work was too slow. She wanted something to happen – today," snapping her fingers. "They waited for hours. He never came."

The plantain mash crawled up the sides of the pot. Naomi jabbed at the bubbles with her spoon as they roiled to the surface. They exploded, gasping.

"So she's to blame for the accident," Naomi said.

Alicia set down her spatula and turned to look at Naomi with an odd expression, sympathy mixed with weariness and something else Naomi couldn't read.

"No," Alicia said firmly. "She is not to blame."

The intercom scratched and whirred like the legs of metallic insects rubbing together. They startled at the sound that broke the quiet, and Alicia went to the door and murmured into the speaker. The light banter of women's voices rose as the visitors entered the house. Someone laughed. But when they came into the kitchen and saw Naomi at the stove, they fell silent. One woman wore a rainbow-striped sweater, the cuffs drooping on her thin arms. A purple ribbon circled the dark braid laid across her shoulder. Naomi clutched her spoon. Rosa had copied her hairstyle from Hannah.

She held out her hand to Naomi. "I'm sorry about this morning," she said. "I tried to call you." She looked younger than Naomi had expected, maybe in her early twenties, and her English sounded more confident than Alicia's.

"I let the battery die on my phone," Naomi said. "I do it all the time." She forced herself to shake Rosa's hand.

The other young woman walked with a pronounced limp. She wore a light-blue polo shirt with the McDonald's logo embroidered over her breast. She gave Naomi a darting kiss on the cheek, and Naomi pulled back in surprise. The woman smiled at her but did not speak.

"This is Beatriz," Rosa said. "Her English is not very good. We work together at the factory."

"*Mucho gusto*," Naomi said, wondering where she had picked up the phrase. Maybe from one of Hannah's letters.

"Do you also work at McDonald's?"

Rosa repeated the question in Spanish. Beatriz laughed and murmured a reply.

"No, she bought the shirt cheap at the market," Rosa said. "She liked the color."

Naomi didn't know how to respond. She'd never met anyone before who occupied this part of the cycle Hannah had described – who spent her days assembling the massive tide of goods flowing from here to the north, and retrieving the detritus, like fast-food uniforms, backwashing down. She'd been a little embarrassed at having to explain that Hannah chose to live in this marginal country and align herself with people that Naomi had, frankly, also viewed as marginal. Now, seeing Beatriz, Hannah's friend, she imagined everyone clinging to different points on a rope that wound over the hemisphere, like buoys

bobbing on a wave, all connected, all trying to stay afloat. Her sister had seen the whole picture more clearly. But that didn't mean she had to die over it.

She turned away and opened the cupboard near the stove to search for dishes. She kept looking in the wrong place and Alicia came up next to her, impatient, jockeying for space as she pulled out a stack of mismatched plates. Without knowing whether she had started it, Naomi found herself in a tug-of-war over the dishes. Finally each took two and ladled out the rice, beans and plantains. Alicia lined a bowl with a red cloth and tucked the tortillas inside.

They waited for Naomi to choose a place at the table and then sat down, Rosa and Beatriz opposite her, Alicia at the head. Alicia said grace and Naomi, pretending to close her eyes, watched them clasp their hands.

"What do you think of Salvador?" Rosa asked as they began to eat.

"I haven't seen much," Naomi said, "and I'm not planning to." She'd never tolerate such a terrible guest in her own house, but these women ate steadily while staring at their plates. Perhaps they were too offended to speak. She dragged a fork through her dinner, feeling it would be disloyal to Hannah to eat much. Her sister's complaint about the food was one of the many things Naomi knew about her that these women would never dream.

Outside something crashed to the ground, a heavy clatter followed by an uneven series of smaller thuds. Rosa shrank into her chair. Naomi's first thought was of gunfire, but then she heard muffled growls – animals scuffling. Alicia and Beatriz both moved to get up, reluctantly, as if they performed this ritual every night.

"I'll go," said Naomi, eager to escape their scrutiny.

Alicia pointed to a closet next to the door. "Take the broom with you."

Naomi went out to the back of the house. The ambient glow of the city pinked the sky, and the humid air clung wetly to her skin. Holding the broom in front of her like a weapon, she advanced toward a row of trash cans lined up by the gate. When she got close, she saw two rangy dogs, ribs showing through rough coats, tussling over the contents of a fallen trash can. The ends of rotting vegetables and a spray of chicken bones splayed over the ground. One dog with a smear of red across its muzzle lifted its face and growled at her, showing yellowed teeth.

She raised the broom above her head and swung as hard as she could, screaming, "Get! Get out!" Never before had she wanted to hurt an animal, but now she felt she could kill. She swung again and again, even after the dogs had dodged her and were racing down the alley.

Legs shaking, Naomi set the trash can upright and refastened the lid. Her sudden rage ebbed, leaving her frightened and short of breath. The chicken bones gleamed sickly in the alley lights. She couldn't make herself touch them. The dogs would be back to squabble over them later.

When she came back into the kitchen the women beamed at her. Everyone in this country was full of praise when she did the simplest things. It was almost rude, as if they expected her to be helpless and were shocked by anything she managed on her own.

“Now I see how you and Hannah might be sisters,” Rosa said.

“That’s silly,” Naomi said as she sat down. At her place was coffee in a tiny china cup, pink flowers on a white background, like something from a doll’s tea party. She wondered if the coffee was safe to drink, gave up and took a sip.

“Not once in my life did I hear Hannah raise her voice,” she said.

Rosa and Alicia exchanged glances, and Alicia smirked, as if she were pleased to know something about Hannah that her sister didn’t.

Naomi wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the story. “Okay. Tell me.”

“It was the night Hannah got drunk,” Rosa said.

“She got drunk?”

“And she tried to imitate the factory manager. She was very bad at copying accents – she sounded like everyone at once: American, Asian, local. She climbed up on a chair and said, ‘Women, the free market does not stand still for you to go to the bathroom. You will keep the lines moving all night, and breathe the bad fumes, and eat the food with the bugs, because that is how we all become rich!’ We laughed so hard she fell off the chair.”

Naomi laughed, too, but it didn’t sound like they were describing the right person. Not Hannah, so absent-minded as a girl that she lost her white angora gloves at Christmas and had to be rescued from tears by Naomi, who offered to wear her own left glove while Hannah wore the right. Innocent Hannah, who delighted in teaching her students to transform wet newspaper into papier-mâché dragons. Hannah, who put on puppet shows for Naomi’s children because she felt safer behind the curtain. This story sounded like a legend people told about someone they remembered fondly, long after they had forgotten what she was really like.

“Why her?” she said. “She was a sweet old teacher who had no idea what she was getting into. Why couldn’t you organize yourselves?”

Alicia slapped her fork onto the table. Some saint. “You think we did nothing before she got here?”

Rosa stared into her coffee cup before answering. “The work was already happening. But Hannah – you must understand. Hannah was tireless. She wanted to meet with the women every day. And then – ” motioning to the garden beyond the door.

“It wasn’t worth it,” Naomi said.

Alicia swept her arm across the table. “Two women died at that factory. One, her heart gave out, it was so hot. The other, she was pregnant, and her supervisor would not give her leave for the doctor.”

“But you shouldn’t have let her drive late at night,” Naomi

insisted. “That had nothing to do with the rest of this.”

Rosa stopped with her cup halfway to her lips. Alicia gestured for her to speak, but she shut her eyes and shook her head. Her braid swung off her shoulder and rested against her back.

“Naomi,” Alicia said. She pressed her forehead against her fist and waited a minute to compose herself.

“We have a friend, a priest, who does this work with us. He was driving home next to a . . . steep hill. People were angry. They thought what he was asking for the workers would cost the factory too much money. They ran . . . they ran his car off the road.”

“I don’t understand what this has to do with Hannah.”

Alicia placed her hand over Naomi’s, hesitantly. “There were two people in the car.”

“Stop.”

“She was with him,” Alicia said, as if she had been thinking it over so long she could not help herself.

“No,” Naomi said. “No, that can’t be true.” She drew back her hand and gripped her cup so hard the delicate handle snapped, like a small bone breaking. She laid the broken piece on the table and ran her thumb over the exposed joint. Three bright spots of blood blossomed at the tip of her thumb. She had not imagined Hannah having time to be afraid.

The women seemed to be waiting for Naomi to break down. What she wanted to do was to stick her thumb in her mouth and suck on it, but that might be considered an insult here, the way you could not make certain hand gestures or show the sole of your shoe in some countries. She felt she was watching herself on stage, an actress playing someone else, her lines in an unfamiliar dialect.

“You’re hurt,” Rosa said.

“I don’t mind.” The drops of blood swelled like raised islands on the surface of her skin. She concentrated on the pain, let it grow, tried not to think of anything else.

Beatriz got up slowly from the table, her bad leg dragging woodenly over the floor. She went to a cupboard and came back with a bandage that Naomi let her wrap around her thumb. Beatriz’s fingers were rough, hardened over with callouses. When she finished, she rested her cheek on Naomi’s shoulder. Naomi managed, with great effort, not to pull away.

After a long while Rosa stood and came over to wrap her arms around Beatriz. “We have to hurry to catch the last bus,” she said to Naomi. “I am sorry.”

When they left and Alicia closed the door, leaving the two of them alone again, Naomi said to her, “Why did they come?” Meaning, *why did you put me on display?*

Alicia rubbed her eyes, and Naomi realized how slowly the other woman had walked to the door, as if she were ill. She said to Naomi, “They wanted to see the sister Hannah loved so much.”

Naomi lay on the narrow bed, fully dressed, sneakers dangling over the foot of the bed, face pressed into the thin blanket. The cuts on her thumb stung like ground glass under her skin. The stench of the distant fire drifted in through the

On the nightstand lay the tortoiseshell comb Naomi had sent for a birthday gift last fall. When she moved closer, she saw long silver hairs wrapped around the teeth.

open window. She dozed for what could have been several hours, and while she might have heard the bedroom door open, she didn't stir.

Later she woke to a high moon over the mountains, shrouded in smoke. She sat up, one hand supporting her stiff back.

On the dresser opposite the bed sat a small wooden box with a tight-fitting lid. Elaborate metal latches covered the sides. It could hold no more than a few pieces of a woman's jewelry, or a keepsake from some treasured moment in her life.

Naomi got up and looked it over, her hands hovering above the dresser. Her fingers trembled so violently she could barely undo the fastenings. Each latch made a quiet tapping sound as it released. She felt as if she were untying the laces of a corset, preparing to touch flesh and breath beneath. She had to see. She had to be sure.

She removed the lid. Saw. Replaced the lid quickly and went to sit down on the bed. It was worse than having nothing. "Hannah," she whispered. "I came too late."

She began to cough, quietly at first, then harder and louder, until she thought she would choke. The room was suffocating her. She eased open the door and stepped cautiously down the dark hallway, passing a closed door that might have been Alicia's bedroom. The next door was ajar. Gently she pushed it open.

The first thing she saw was the flowered quilt sewn by their grandmother covering the neatly made bed. For a moment Naomi thought she was back in the bedroom they shared when they were girls, but the rest of the room returned her to the present. The plants on the windowsill were dropping their shriveled leaves. On the nightstand lay the tortoiseshell comb Naomi had sent for a birthday gift last fall. When she moved closer, she saw long silver hairs wrapped around the teeth. Next to the bed, the worn pink slippers waited for Hannah to step into them.

As if she might wake someone with her footsteps, she tiptoed to the back of the room and pushed aside a purple curtain on a dowel rod to go into the closet. A few pairs of jeans and khakis hung from a bar on one side; shelves stacked with T-shirts lined the opposite wall. Naomi parted each stack of T-shirts and felt around until her hand brushed a piece of silk. She drew the blouse out of the pile and held it up.

She remembered clearly the pink and ivory swirls of the pattern, delicate as a watercolor painting. She remembered, too, the letter Hannah had sent after receiving the blouse. *I had to get rid of it, Naomi. It's too nice for me to wear around here, and if*

I give it to anyone else, they'll think I'm being patronizing. At the time Naomi had thought that her sister was rejecting her ties to home, that she was deliberately choosing a small and ugly life.

But Hannah hadn't thrown it away. Naomi imagined her coming up to her room in the evenings, shutting the door, taking off her plain T-shirt and slipping the cool silk over her head. The gathered elastic on the sleeves would have hugged her small wrists. She might have sat on the edge of the bed to avoid wrinkling the blouse and read a book until she grew sleepy. Then she would have folded it carefully and returned it to its hiding place.

Holding it brought back Hannah's smell of lavender shampoo, the shape of her arms, the feeling of having her near. It embodied her in a way that what Naomi had glimpsed in the other room could not.

She draped the blouse over her arm and walked out of the bedroom, leaving the door open for someone to return at any time. In the hallway the silence was watchful and expectant, the quiet of someone wide awake and holding her breath. Back in the guest room she tucked the blouse into her suitcase.

A racket of metal burst from the yard. Naomi looked out the window; the moon was no longer visible and the sky was beginning to lighten, the faint pink glow of the city competing with the sunrise's growing flame. She went downstairs and out the front door.

The noises from the back of the house stopped. Probably the dogs had eaten their fill and disappeared under the fence. In the garden dew dripped from the palm trees, splashing onto the grass. In these minutes before dawn, the flowers were muted daubs of color. She could hear birds waking, rustling among the low plants shading the ground, and she watched a black bird with red-tipped wings hunt for insects. A small lizard crept over the stone path.

Her stomach knotted the first time Hannah referred to this country as "home" in one of her letters. They'd argued. After that Hannah, careful of her sister's feelings, called both places "home," so Naomi wasn't sure which she truly preferred. If one had to choose. Now she had to admit Hannah would have loved this place she had made for herself.

Behind her the door opened. Alicia came out barefoot, wearing a thin blue robe over her nightgown. She stood at Naomi's side. There would be time later to speak. A warm breeze stirred the flowers, scattering their petals across the yard. In a little while light would begin to spread over the garden.