



OUTTAKES

OF A UFO

INVESTIGATOR

DAVID HALPERIN

Chapter 6: The Dying of Anna Shapiro

JULY-AUGUST 1966

1.

In the beginning, Anna remembered, it had seemed like it might be all right.

They had dinner, all of them: she and Danny and Leon, and her mother and her sister Ida. The whole family was there, except of course her father, who had died more than twelve years earlier. Grandma Sophie made her chicken, with its rich aromatic sauce no one but she knew how to make.

Anna had said to her mother, more than once: *Mom, you ought to teach one of us your recipe before it's too late.* But Sophie always refused, with a laugh. Anna had already found a husband, she pointed out, even without knowing how to make the chicken. And as for Ida – well, it was too late for Ida. Chicken or no chicken, she'd stay an old maid.

Besides, Sophie would say, I'm still here to make it for you. Right?

What could Anna say to that? *Well, who knows how much longer you'll be here?* Of course you couldn't say that. She instead said, *Right!* and laughed along with her mother, and everybody around laughed. And the subject was dropped.

They'd eaten the chicken, and the chocolate cake that Grandma had made special for Danny's last evening before his trip to Israel, and then she sat in her rocker and watched Danny climb into the car with his father.

He moved awkwardly, the way he always moved these days. She didn't know why he seemed so graceless. Maybe it was that the real Danny was still a small boy, who rode inside this adolescent body of his as though it was a bicycle too big for him, and he was always frightened of falling off.

There was a brief flurry of misunderstanding between Danny and his father about where the suitcase was to go. First Danny brought it around to the trunk. Then Leon made a peremptory gesture and Danny hastened forward to a spot outside the door on the passenger side. He stood there waiting while Leon

looked baffled and angry, evidently having forgotten that Danny didn't have a key to the car. Typical of Danny, he held the heavy suitcase in his hand while he waited for his father to open the car door. It didn't occur to him just to set it down on the driveway.

Did they exchange words, angry or otherwise? She couldn't tell. She could see their expressions and gestures through the window that separated them from her. But she couldn't hear what, if anything, they might be saying.

Eventually the suitcase was in the back seat, and her two boys were in the front. Leon backed the car into the street, and she and Ida and Sophie smiled and waved to them until they were out of sight.

"Well, I just hope he'll be all right," Ida said, as soon as the car had vanished. Her smile had vanished too. Her hand, though, was still part way up in the waving gesture.

"Oh, he will," Anna said dreamily. "God looks out for fools and drunkards."

Ida took a deep breath, let it out noisily, and went to the sink to start in on the dishes.

Anna's mind wasn't really there with her. She was thinking, instead, of another chicken dinner that Grandma had made for them, sixteen and a half years earlier, only with cherry pie for dessert and not chocolate cake. That was the Shabbes dinner the Friday night before Christmas, right before they'd taken her to the hospital to bring Danny into the world.

Sixteen and a half years ago, and the same people had been around the dinner table eating Grandma's chicken: Ida, Grandma, Leon, and of course Anna herself. The only difference was that Pop was there and Danny wasn't; except as a fetus in her womb getting ready to come out. Now Pop was gone and Danny was here. Or rather, he'd been here until a few minutes ago but now he was gone too, just like Pop. Off to an alien land called Israel, which all of them knew existed and was where they somehow belonged, but which none of them could quite imagine.

The silence in the house, now that Danny and Leon were gone, might have been welcome if not for the future silences it foreshadowed.

The house was free, for the first time in ages, of the everlasting clack-clack-clacking of Danny's typewriter till all hours. It was free of Leon's repertoire of sighs and groans, his ostentatious and noisy stalkings between his den and the kitchen. Free of the complaints and accusatory questions he would suddenly spring on her, in which he'd probe like a sadistic dentist at a rotten tooth, at everything that was wrong with their home and their world and their life.

For a few hours at least, there'd be none of their quieter, more earnest conversations, in which Leon would ask some variant of his eternal question: how had it happened that their son had turned out so damn *strange*? Any other night she'd have been on call continually, expected to answer such questions patiently and knowledgeably at a moment's notice. That was her special and irreplaceable expertise, acknowledged by her husband and perhaps also by her son: authorized interpreter of Danny's strangeness.

For a few hours tonight she was free of all this, and she should have felt relief.

2.

"How long did you say you wanted us to stay, Anna?" said Ida.

Ida put the last of the dishes in the rack to dry. Anna, meanwhile, was gathering strength to heave herself to her feet and walk to the couch in the living room. There she'd lie for the rest of the evening while her mother and sister sat near her and the three of them watched television.

"Oh, just till Leon gets back from taking Danny to the airport, I thought," Anna said lightly.

"Well, jeepers, that's likely to be pretty *late*, isn't it? I mean, the plane isn't supposed to leave until one in the morning, and I imagine he'll stay there and wait, won't he, until he's sure Danny got off all right, and ... "

And and and and and. She went on and on in that put-upon tone of hers, just as if she hadn't done these calculations until this minute. As if she hadn't known a

week and a half ago, when the three of them made their plans for this evening, how late it was likely to be before Leon got back.

"I do have to get up for work tomorrow morning, Anna," she finished bleakly.

Ida cast a glance at her mother then, and Anna also watched Sophie carefully out of the corner of her eye. If Sophie were to say, for example, *Yes, it will be pretty late, won't it, before we get back home*, or something like that, then Anna was all prepared to laugh graciously and say, *Well, I don't see why you need to stay with me all night here. I'll be perfectly all right.*

But Sophie made no response to Ida's speech. So Anna laughed graciously and said nothing, as if to say through that laugh: *Yes, it's a shame, isn't it, that Danny's flight had to be scheduled for the middle of the night, but what can you do?*

3.

She dozed on the couch while the TV blared. She let her mind wander.

She was a young girl; and the couch she lay on was her mother's, in the old house on Abingdon Avenue in Trenton. She was sick, but recovering from her sickness. It was winter, and the big wet snowflakes kept on falling. It was perhaps the scarlet fever that she had in seventh grade, or perhaps the rheumatic fever that came the year afterward –

They'd assumed back then that the rheumatic fever was a sickness you could recover from.

You enjoy being sick! Leon yelled at her sometimes, during the bitter fights they used to have during the early years at Kellerfield, when Danny was a little boy. *You love being an invalid!* That, allegedly, was why she was sick and not healthy, why her heart was flawed and couldn't be mended.

She sobbed bitterly, and the tears poured down her cheeks. It was so unfair! Let him walk in her shoes, even for one single day. – Walk! it was all she could do even to stand up, even to get out of bed. – Then let him say she enjoyed it. Let him see for himself how much fun it was to be sick.

He couldn't answer her tears because he knew he was wrong. But he wouldn't admit that. He'd pout silently for a while, as was his habit; and then go prowling around the house. He'd find something Danny was doing wrong – brushing his teeth the wrong way, maybe – and yell at him for it.

She was a young girl, lying on her mother's couch; and the radiator whistled its spooky tune and when it wasn't doing that she could hear the loud ticking of the clock from the breakfast room, and Mom was always coming in from the kitchen to bring her something good, maybe hot tea or hot chocolate, or sometimes a plate of cinnamon toast –

They didn't know back then that *that* couch would lead to *this* couch, her rheumatic fever to her heart disease, such that her whole frail body was now filling up with this awful fluid which her diuretics could no longer drain from her, and her heart was drowning in it –

She was a young girl; and Sy Ginzberg put his ice-cold stethoscope to her chest and listened. He said: "I don't like that sound." Then he said, to Mom: "She had rheumatic fever six months ago?"

Then he said: "Anna, could you go out to the waiting room, please?"

She'd been relieved, at first, that the examination seemed to be over. She'd been uncomfortable with him holding the stethoscope to her chest. She wasn't wearing anything on her chest, and that embarrassed her, partly because there was so little there for her to be embarrassed about.

Soon she was scared, and worse than scared.

"How did she get the germs?" Mom kept saying over and over, as they waited for the streetcar at the stop outside Sy Ginzberg's office. She meant: the germs for the rheumatic fever. She couldn't imagine how her girl could possibly have picked them up.

Anna sweated in the heat of the August noon, and withered inside for shame. She thought back to eight months ago, to the first New Year's Eve party she'd ever been to: where there were darkened lights, and an empty bottle spinning on the floor, and more boys to kiss than she could quite remember –

4.

She was awakened by the hideous feeling of something pressing hard against her lungs, not letting her breathe. She propped herself up on her feeble arms. The pressure in her chest eased. Sitting up, she took a few quick gulps of air. *Something's wrong*, she thought, and when she struggled in her mind to grasp just what might be wrong, it was: *The clock isn't ticking any more!*

How silly of me.

This is Kellerfield, not Abingdon Avenue. We don't have an old clock in the breakfast room, ticking away day and night, so you can hear it all over the house. We don't even have a breakfast room.

She heard her mother's deep breathing from the chair next to her, and thought: *God bless her. She's still here. I'm not alone.*

She looked at her watch. It was nearly three in the morning. Ida had gone off to sleep in Danny's bed while they waited for Leon to get back. He still wasn't here. She thought: *He's not coming back, this time.*

She'd explained to Danny, when Danny was little and Leon was late coming home one evening, that when Danny was late she worried he'd gotten run over by a car or something. That wasn't what she worried about when Leon was late, she told her son, because Leon wasn't the kind of person who got run over by cars. No, with *Leon* her fear was that he'd finally decided to leave and not come back; which of course she *wasn't* concerned about with Danny, because Danny listened solemnly to this convoluted recital of his mother's anxieties. His eyes were big with sadness, and perhaps also with fright. He nodded and said nothing.

For all she knew Danny wasn't coming back this time, either.

She would wake up Mom, she decided, and tell her to go wake up Ida. The three of them would get into the car and Ida would drive them all back to Abingdon Avenue.

Let's face facts, now.

Her experiment in being a normal wife and mother hadn't worked out. Time to admit that, and salvage what we can. She'd tried. She'd done her very best. But she was just too sick to make it work.

Time to admit failure, and let's get in the car and go home.

5.

"Well?" said Anna. She smiled through her weariness and fear. "Did our boy get off all right?"

Leon, who'd just gotten in – it was three-thirty by now – seemed confused by the question. He looked more dazed than Anna or her mother, or Ida who'd just shuffled in from Danny's bedroom.

"Get off? Yeah, he got off. Sure, he got off."

Because Sophie was there he couldn't say, as Anna dreaded he might: *Yeah, he got off, and now I'm off too*, and go back to the car and drive away for good.

"Was the plane on schedule?" Anna asked.

"On schedule? Yeah, the plane was on schedule. Why shouldn't it be on schedule?"

Then why weren't you home an hour and a half ago?

Leon might have sensed the unspoken question. He went on, in his most authoritative and assuring voice: "El Al's a *fine* airline. When the El Al people *make* a schedule, they *keep* to that schedule. Don't they, now?"

None of the women answered. They were too tired, at three-thirty in the morning, to realize Leon had given them a cue to which they were supposed to respond. "Isn't that right?" said Leon, louder than before.

"Oh, that's right," said Sophie, laughing.

Anna, for a change, didn't laugh with her, didn't even smile. She bowed her head and looked like she wanted to cry.

6.

She was a young woman still, with a three-year-old son; and she floated up from that awful dark tunnel where they were suffocating her, where they were squeezing the breath out of her; and she saw Sy Ginzberg's big sad face looming over her. She's fibrillating, he kept saying, over and over, to everybody else standing around there, not to her. But the look on his face said: She's a goner.

She woke, and groped around her in her large empty bed. It was dawn: of that first and most vulnerable morning, the first morning with Danny gone. She could hear Leon snoring from the den.

He was kind that day, to her relief. Also the days that followed. He didn't yell; he didn't pick fights. He didn't demand answers to impossible questions. He didn't complain that first bleary-eyed day they were alone together, when what should arrive in the mail but the latest *PURA Bulletin*, with all its UFO news for a teenage UFO buff who wasn't around to read it any more.

"Why don't you take it to the post office with you tomorrow morning?" she said, "You could mail it overseas, to the Vereds' address." She added: "For Danny."

Of course it was for Danny. Why should an Israeli family like the Vereds want to read the *PURA Bulletin*?

He didn't fly into a rage, as she'd half suspected he might. Nor did he launch into his usual demands and pleas that she help him understand their son's lunacy. He just nodded mildly, and agreed, yes, surely Danny would want to see the latest *Bulletin*.

He smiled often, softly. Sometimes he made jokes.

On Sunday he mowed the lawn. "Wouldn't you know it?" he said, as he came in all sweaty. "Soon as the kid makes his escape, the lawn all of a sudden starts growing."

She laughed at that.

They didn't talk much. When you've been married twenty-two years, what's left to talk about?

They didn't even talk about the Vincenzos' dog. It wasn't prowling around their yard at suppertimes any more. Why not? Who knew why not? Maybe Leon's unending telephone complaints had finally had their impact. Or maybe the dog had died.

"Supper time" wasn't really supper time, anyway, with Danny gone. Anna hardly ate any more. She had no appetite, with all the fluid inside her pressing against her lungs, her stomach. She was too weak to fix anything, no matter how simple. She simply couldn't stand up, not even for a couple of minutes. Leon saw no point in preparing a whole evening meal just for himself. It was easier, and actually more pleasant, to take a snack from the fridge every couple of hours and eat it while standing by the sink, reading the *New York Times*.

Anna weighed herself every hour or two, and carefully recorded the results in a special notebook she'd been using for that purpose for the past ten years. She weighed herself all day, and then all night. There was no way she could sleep for more than an hour or two at a time, day or night, lying down or sitting in her rocker.

Her weight, she observed to herself with what felt like the last bit of hopefulness of which she was capable, was holding steady.

Leon teased her, that she seemed not to know what to do with herself, now that she didn't have Danny to look after. She looked almost *scared* to be without him, Leon said. As if it was Danny who'd been keeping her alive, and now that he was gone—

"What will you do next year?" he said. "When he goes off to college?"

"I figure we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," she said, laughing.

It wasn't true. Already she'd begun thinking about when Danny would go to college. Her thoughts consisted largely of a fantasy that he could do that without leaving home. The idea wasn't altogether absurd. There were fine schools right

here in Philadelphia. The University of Pennsylvania, for one. And there was Temple

Leon seemed to have read her mind. "Maybe he won't *have* to go away to school," he said. "Whattaya say we try to get him into the U. of P.? He can live here, take the train into Philly. I can drive him to the station every morning. He won't even have to learn to drive. Whattaya say?"

He was kidding, of course. She laughed. But there was relief in her laughter, like a little girl who's been ordered harshly to leave her home and go live on the streets; and then they tell her, their faces covered with smiles: *We were only fooling, honey. We love you. You'll always be our little girl. You'll stay here with us always, as long as you live.*

Only once, during those days in the Kellerfield house, did Leon snap at her. It felt especially bad, because it came at the end of what until then had been one of their best days.

It was Wednesday, a week from the day Danny had left for the airport. The mailman had brought Danny's first letter from Israel. They'd been asking each other, joking-like: *You think the kid's really going to write to us, now he's off having fun? Or you think he's forgotten all about us?* And now here it was: a letter.

She showed it to Leon when he got home from work that evening. He enjoyed it too, as she had.

But late that night, while she was getting up from her rocker to see if she might be able to doze a little bit in her bed, and Leon was standing by the sink all absorbed in his paper, she said to him in what she thought was an inoffensive tone of voice: "Leon, you think you might want to sit down at the typewriter and write Danny a letter? So he'll know we got his, and how glad we were to have the inside scoop on his flight?"

He looked up and glared. It was like the worst of his glares, from the worst of the bad old days, which apparently weren't over quite yet.

"Why don't *you* write to him?" he snarled. "You're his great buddy, aren't you?"

She shuffled off to bed, her head sunk in sadness and shame.

7.

She was sitting in her rocking chair by the window, toward the end of the following week, when she saw to her surprise an old blue DeSoto pull carefully up to the curb in front of their house. She was even more surprised when the driver emerged from the DeSoto, and it was none other than Danny's old friend Jeff Stollard.

So they do grow up. She wanted to smile and cry at the same time.

She'd known in her mind that most of Danny's friends, the little boys he'd had over to their house under her beaming gaze and to whom he'd given Pepsis from their refrigerator, were grown up now and were driving cars. But it hadn't hit home until this moment, when she saw with her own eyes Jeff Stollard emerge from behind the wheel of that car and come walking up the driveway toward her kitchen door.

She offered him a Pepsi. "You'll have to take it yourself, though," she said. "It's hard for me to get up." She gave him a smile of gracious regret, as though this were some trivial inconvenience, a nuisance barely even worth mentioning.

He said no thank you, and smiled, and took the kitchen chair she'd offered him with her gesture.

Still as polite as ever, she thought. Still shy and quiet. His glasses were still thick, nearly as thick as Danny's, and his complexion awful. Some things even a driver's license can't improve.

"I came by to see if you'd heard from Danny," he said. "If there were any letters from him."

A good thing she had both his letters right there with her, on the little table in front of the rocker, so she didn't have to get up for them. The second had arrived the day before. It included a description, disappointingly curt, of a tour he'd just come back from in the Galilee, an even more disappointing description of the

Vered family, and lavish praises of somebody named Shlomo who Danny said was helping him learn Hebrew.

Jeff read the letters. "It sounds like he's having a good time over there," Jeff said.

Anna agreed that was the way it sounded.

"Last time you were here," she said companionably, "I think you were riding a bicycle."

"I think I may have been," he said, nodding politely.

"And now here you are, a big man, driving your own car."

"My *mother's* car, really."

"That's what I meant."

He asked: "Did Danny ever get his license? I mean, I didn't see him after school was over, before he left for Israel."

She shook her head no, smiling her regret.

"It's not so easy to learn to drive," she said, "if you're like Danny."

Jeff nodded, very cautiously.

"I mean, you always have to be *alert* when you're driving, don't you? Isn't that what they're always telling us?"

"Yes, you do," said Jeff.

"And Danny isn't exactly what you'd call *alert*, is he?"

She laughed. Jeff smiled nervously.

"You, I imagine you've always been alert, haven't you?" she said. "You're the kind of person who keeps his eyes wide open, knows what's going on around him. Aren't you?"

Jeff cleared his throat slightly. He tended to do that when he was pleased and embarrassed at the same time. "Well, *I think I am*," he said. "But I don't know if you could get my father to agree."

They both laughed at that.

What a nice lady, Jeff thought as he drove home. What a nice, friendly, agreeable lady. It's just a shame she's so sick.

I really ought to go visit her again, he thought; and knew even as he had the thought that it would only mean he'd feel guilty. Because he knew even at the time that he'd never come visit again.

8.

They took Anna to the hospital on Saturday, two days after Jeff's visit. Friday night for the first time she hadn't been able to sleep at all, not even doze. Although she'd stopped eating almost entirely, her weight had begun to edge ominously upward. Clearly her latest diuretic had stopped working.

Leon phoned Sy Ginzberg, who told him they'd reached the limits of what he could do for her, and it was time she be taken into the hospital. Leon assumed he meant the hospital in Trenton, where she'd gone for her heart attack in 1952. He began to make plans accordingly.

"No, not *Trenton*!" Sy snapped. "They don't have the facilities there. She needs to be in the hospital in Philadelphia. *Philadelphia*!"

He didn't have to bite my head off, thought Leon, who hadn't got that much sleep last night either. I heard him the first time.

I haven't been to Philadelphia in years, Anna thought, as she watched the traffic thicken around them. These neighborhoods, all sprung up beside the highway — who knows if they'd even been built, last time I was here?

Leon drove; Sophie and Ida sat in the back seat. Anna tried to remember when was the last time she'd visited Philadelphia. Certainly not since her heart attack; maybe not even since Danny was born. Leon disliked the city, and on those old auto trips of theirs he tried to give it as wide a berth as possible.

The first thing the nurses did, after checking her into the hospital, was give her a chest X-ray. She and Leon and Ida and Sophie sat around a small, bleak white room while they waited for the doctor, an intern named Dr. Rycard, to come back with the X-rays and explain to them what they meant.

They didn't like Dr. Rycard. Leon didn't, at least. You had to call him "Doctor," because he had his M.D. for what that was worth, but as far as Leon was concerned he was just one of those rich fraternity kids whom he'd had to wait tables for back when he was in school at Carthage. Same snotty attitude, same nose stuck in the air, same I'm-the-lord-high-muckamuck-and-you're-dirt-so-kiss-my-feet-peasant kind of way of treating you. He didn't like the kid's name, either. It reminded him of something bad, dishonest, something that affected him like fingernails drawn across a chalkboard. He couldn't quite remember what that was.

Leon was still trying to recall what Rycard's name made him think of, when in came the good doctor in person, X-rays under his arm. He started telling them how there was a "butterfly pattern" visible on the X-rays.

"Butterfly pattern," said Anna in a cheerful tone, smiling, as if this made it sweet and nice, as if from having been a caterpillar she'd been turned into a pretty little butterfly and could fly away whenever she pleased.

Rycard gave her a stern look. "It's not such good news, Mrs. Shapiro," he said. "A butterfly pattern on the X-rays is a sign of pulmonary edema."

She didn't look cheerful then. She looked scared.

When Leon saw that he felt scared too. But also oddly excited, as if it had been an overcast day all his life and now there was an opening in the clouds, a blue tunnel in the sky, and he was being sucked up into it even though he didn't really want to be.

9.

The nurses wheeled her to her room. Leon and Ida and Sophie walked behind them.

"Who was that nice doctor she had in the hospital?" said Sophie. "Back when she went into the hospital, back then? It was a Dr. Lam — Lam —"

"*Lambdon*, Mom," said Ida. "That was Dr. *Lambdon*."

Her voice had become more harsh and grating these days than Leon remembered it from the past. It was like an old lady's voice: rasping, cackling. For some reason she always spoke very loudly and distinctly when she talked to Ma Berg, even though the old lady had given no sign that her hearing was going.

"Yeah, that's right," said Sophie. "Dr. *Lambdon*."

"But that wasn't *here*, Mom," said Ida. "That was in *Trenton*. At the Mercer County Hospital, in *Trenton*."

"I knew that," Sophie said irritably.

Dr. *Lambdon* was dead, anyway. He'd been dead for the past six years.

They'd given her a semi-private room, which she shared with two other patients. There were curtains you could draw across the room, to get yourself a certain measure of privacy. At the end of the room was a single bathroom, and luckily Anna had been assigned the bed closest to it.

"Well, isn't this nice!" said Sophie.

Anna discovered that the bed came with a control switch, which you could press to raise the pillow end of the bed so it was almost like you were sitting up. When you pushed the switch in the opposite direction, that end of the bed went back down again. You could set it just as high or as low as you wanted it. Leon, Sophie and Ida sat around the bed on straight-backed chairs, watching as Anna experimented with the switch.

The nurse came in and set Anna up with an I.V. She also gave Anna a lunch menu, and a pencil Anna could use to circle the choices she wanted. Anna examined the menu for a moment, circled *Hamburger* for the main course and *Fruit cocktail* for the dessert, and handed it back to the nurse.

"She looks better now, doesn't she?" Sophie cried out.

It was true. In this hospital bed, Anna felt more comfortable than she had for weeks, maybe months. The lunch menu also had helped. Seeing the different kinds of food they had listed, and knowing that she could circle any she wanted and they'd bring it to her, had comforted her more than she could have imagined.

They all agreed that Anna looked much better already.

They wouldn't have had anything to talk about after that, except that Leon had remembered to bring with him Danny's second letter from Israel, which Sophie and Ida hadn't yet seen.

"Read it to them, Leon," said Anna.

"Well, isn't that *wonderful*?" Ida said when he was finished. "He sounds like he's having the most *wonderful* time. Doesn't he, Anna?"

From the bed, Anna beamed proudly.

"Where was it he said he went for three days?" said Sophie. "To the Galilee?"

"To the Galilee, Mom," said Ida, pronouncing the words very loudly and distinctly. "But he doesn't say much *about* the trip, does he, Anna? It sounds like he went with a group, doesn't it? But he doesn't say what kind of a group it was."

"Well, *I'll* tell you what kind of a group it was," Leon roared, his face already split into a big wide smile because he knew the joke – which he hadn't yet made, of course – was going to be so funny. "It was a group of sexy *girls*, that's what it was! Danny picked them all up on the boardwalk, said, '*Hey, girls! Whattaya say we all take ourselves a little trip up to the ol' Galilee?*' And *that's* why he doesn't want us to know what kind of a group it was."

"Oh, *you!*" said Ida, and gave a few of her peals of girlish laughter. Leon felt the first stirrings of the headache he invariably developed whenever he had to be in Ida's company for any length of time. Anna and Sophie also laughed, though in a more subdued and dutiful manner.

"And what about that – what's her name? – Shoshana?" Leon went on.

"Shoshana Vered," Anna said primly. "She's the daughter of the Vered family."

"Daughter of the family," said Leon. "Maybe Danny's finally met himself a girl. Maybe she'll stay still long enough for him to get something started with her. Maybe – who knows?"

"Maybe Danny won't be coming back here when the summer's over, then," said Ida, laughing at the thought.

Anna didn't laugh. Unlike Leon's joke about the girls on the boardwalk, this didn't seem so impossible as to be funny. "Leon," she said. "The girl's only twelve years old."

"Well," said Leon, pulling a mock-serious face. "That's about Danny's social age, isn't it? Twelve years."

All of them, even Anna, had to agree that that was true.

10.

After Anna had her lunch, Leon drove Ida and Sophie back to Kellerfield so Ida could drive the two of them back to Trenton.

"Will you be writing to Danny?" Sophie asked Ida, as she backed out of the driveway.

Leon stood outdoors, in front of the house. He waved goodbye absently for a moment. Then he stared across the street toward Morgan Elementary, where Danny had once gone to school. *Poor man*, Ida had been thinking. *All alone now, in this house.*

"I wasn't planning to, Mom. Do you think I should?"

"Who else? Anna's too sick to write. And *he*" — Sophie directed a look of hatred and contempt toward Leon, who wasn't looking at them — "*he* certainly isn't going to."

"What do you think I should tell him about — about his mother?"

"Don't tell him *anything*," Sophie said.

"You don't think I should?"

Ida said this in a doubtful tone, but what Sophie said had relieved her. She couldn't imagine how she could tell Danny his mother was so sick she'd needed to be put in the hospital without going on to say he must come home at once. Which would require all sorts of complicated arrangements and rearrangements, with airplane tickets and heaven knew what else, which Danny'd be entirely incapable of doing for himself. And guess who was bound to get volunteered for the job?

Besides, the last thing the family needed at a time like this was Danny underfoot.

"We don't want to get him upset," said Sophie. After a moment, she added: "She'll be out of the hospital in a few days, anyway. So why should Danny be worried?"

And, after another moment: "Why should we ruin his whole vacation?"

11.

Leon had planned to drive into Philadelphia every couple of days to visit his wife. But things tended to pile up on him, so it wasn't until the following Thursday that he was able to make it, and then only because Laurie, the colored girl who'd cleaned house for them almost since they moved to Kellerfield, wouldn't leave off pestering him until he agreed to drive her to the hospital so she could visit with Anna and see how her old boss and chum was getting along.

The real problem, he thought as he drove into the city with Laurie beside him on the front seat, had been what to do with Ida and the old lady. You couldn't really go to the hospital without phoning them and at least making the gesture of

asking if they wanted to come along, which meant you'd be stuck in the car for nearly two hours with Sophie's digs and Ida's stupid yammering. That was under the best of conditions, too. Just let the freeway traffic get backed up, as it usually was in the late afternoons, and the ride home would be like being buried somewhere in hell.

Even worse, though, to show up in the hospital room, and find the two of them sitting there like solemn old vultures. One or the other of them was bound to say something like: *Oh, isn't it a shame Leon didn't let us know he was planning to come in today? We could have ridden with him, we poor old ladies wouldn't have had to make the long drive all by ourselves, et cetera et cetera.* He could just see himself standing there, making excuses. They would, as per usual, sit giving him their sorrowful put-upon looks. And Anna, again as per usual, would lie in bed and watch them fight it out, smiling her grand-lady imitation-Eleanor-Roosevelt smile, like old Queen Elizabeth with her whole damn court in attendance.

And what if Ida and Sophie *weren't* there? What if somehow he were to find himself alone in the hospital room with his dying wife?

That hardly bore thinking about.

He was shocked at how bad Anna looked, how much more withered and emaciated she'd become in only five days. He didn't even notice at first that Ida and Sophie were in the room with her. They jumped up and gave little cries of pleasure when they saw him come in; still more, when they saw he'd brought Laurie with him. Everybody hugged everybody else.

Wouldn't you think they might have tried giving me a phone call? he thought in the middle of all the hugging. Just to coordinate a little bit with me, maybe? I am her husband, after all.

"Well," he announced when they were all sitting down again. "Anybody want to hear the latest *dispatch*? From our Middle East correspondent?"

Everybody perked up at this. Even Anna, who'd seemed pretty much out of it, tried to sit up and look eager and smile.

It was an aerogram. Maybe Danny had finally figured out they were cheaper to send than regular letters. Leon ceremoniously unfolded the blue paper and began to read:

"July 23, 1966. Jerusalem, Israel. Dear Mom and Dad —"

"He hasn't written to *me* yet," said Ida.

She smiled when she said that, but in such a way that you knew that underneath her heart was breaking. Leave it to the Berg girls, Leon thought. They'll make you feel worse, with those smiles of theirs, than any human being alive.

"Not even a postcard," said Ida.

Leon tried again. *"Dear Mom and Dad —"*

"Has he written to *you*, Laurie?" said Ida.

"Uh-uh," Laurie said comfortably.

"May I *ple-e-ease* have your attention?" said Leon, in a comic-stern tone. "Now, then, *if* I may proceed. *Dear Mom and Dad. I am writing this in the courtyard of the youth hostel, where I have been staying for the past few days —"*

"Is that in Jerusalem?" Sophie asked.

"The lodging here is pleasant enough, though not precisely luxurious; and the privacy leaves something to be desired. Still, the people here are a jolly bunch; the cot has not yet given me a backache; and, best of all, it only costs the equivalent of fifty cents for a night's stay here, once you've taken out a year's membership in the Israel Youth Hostels Association (\$6.00), which I did right after I got into Jerusalem last Monday. So I do not think my stay here is going to send me wildly over budget."

Leon stopped reading for a moment. "Fifty cents," he said. "He doesn't say if that's *with* or *without* the bedbugs."

They all laughed.

"A whole year's membership?" said Sophie. "Oh. I guess they don't let you be a member for a shorter time."

"I was going to say," said Ida. "He only needs it for another month, really."

"That's *if* he comes back next month," said Leon. "But just between you and me, I'm not so sure he's going to come back."

No one responded to this. It wasn't clear from Leon's expression if he was joking or if he knew something the rest of them didn't.

"I mean," he explained, "who *knows* what's going on between him and that little Shoshana Vered?"

It was a joke, then. All of them laughed except Anna. They laughed out of relief, not because there was anything particularly funny about the joke.

"Keep on reading, Leon," said Anna.

"Jerusalem is the most beautiful place I've seen in Israel so far. It's in the mountains, so it's dry and the temperature is very comfortable whenever you get into the shade; though the sun can be murderous when you're out in it —"

"He needs to wear a *hat*!" Ida proclaimed. "Do you think he remembers to wear a hat, Anna?"

" — and it's all built of stone, quiet and austere, which reflects the light beautifully in the early evening. It's also the most religious place in Israel. Today is the Sabbath, and everything, I mean everything, is shut down. At sundown on Friday, the buses stop running, the restaurants all close, the museums and the archaeological sites are all closed —"

"So that's why he's writing!" Ida cried triumphantly. "There isn't anything *else* for him to do!"

" — and if it weren't for the kindness of a Swiss boy whom I've met at the hostel, and who was kind enough to share his box of crackers with me, I wouldn't have had anything to eat all day."

Ida burst into a loud, harsh laugh. "That's Danny for you!"

Anna smiled and nodded, from her bed.

"The bus system here is excellent. The buses run at all hours, and anything I can't get to by walking from the youth hostel is within easy walk of a bus stop. People do take official-type tours of Jerusalem, but you don't have to. All you need to see the city is a good guide book and a pair of legs. I've been to the Knesset. I've been to the Hebrew University. (I looked through the card catalog in the university library; hardly anything on UFOs, I'm sorry to say.) I've been to the Hadassah hospital to see the Chagall windows, which I found very dramatic.

"The most interesting parts of Jerusalem, archaeologically speaking, are in the part of the city that's in Jordan, which of course I have no way to get to (unless, of course, I can get somebody to forge a baptismal certificate for me, so the Jordanians will let me through the Mandelbaum Gate) —"

Leon looked up from reading the letter. "He's working on that, you understand," he said.

" — But there are parts of Jerusalem where you can get pretty good views of the Old City; like Mount Zion, for example, which is part in Israel and part in Jordan. (Mount Zion is the most disgustingly commercialized place in Israel, incidentally, even though it's supposed to be so "holy" they won't let you onto it unless you've got your head covered.) And there's a place called Abu Tor —"

"I hope they've got the border clearly marked," said Anna.

"Clearly marked?" said Leon. "Why? So Danny won't go chasing a butterfly or something, and look around and all of a sudden he's in Jordan?"

"That's Danny!" said Ida, laughing.

" — a place called Abu Tor, where there's lots of old stone houses, where people are still living; and the border goes right between the houses.

"It's kind of a weird place. You walk down the street; and then all of a sudden you have to stop. Things don't look any different, where you have to stop. But it's like you've reached the end of the world, because there's the border in front of you. You stand there, and you look at the Jordanian houses, and you know that as far as you're concerned they're on another planet. And yet you look and look and look, and the more you look the more they look to you just like our houses. (Israeli houses, I mean.)

"I don't know what Jordan is like, but at least in Jerusalem it sure looks a lot like Israel ...
."

There wasn't much more to the letter. Danny had apparently reached the bottom of the aerogram faster than he'd expected, and had to end abruptly with a cramped *Love, Danny*.

"Well, that's our correspondent's report," said Leon. "What's the situation over there sound like, you think?"

Laurie was the first to speak. "Danny always did write *real* good," she said. "Didn't he?"

She looked around for approval of this remark. She got none.

Ida said: "He doesn't say what the border *is*. Do you think they have a fence there, or something?"

"You still worried about him going after that butterfly, huh?" said Leon.

"Well, that's *just* what Danny would do," said Ida. She seemed delighted at the whole notion of Danny wandering absently across the border. Her obvious pleasure disgusted Leon, who'd forgotten he was the one who introduced the idea in the first place.

"Danny's *just* like his mother when she was a girl," Ida went on, laughing. The very *spittin' image* of her. Remember, Anna, how you used to —?"

"Well, you can just quit your worrying," Leon announced grandly. "Because —"

Ida would not be stopped. She practically whooped with laughter. "Remember, Anna?" she cried. "You'd be thinking about some — *poem* or other, and you'd be walking along Abingdon Avenue, and — oh, your *feet* would be on the sidewalk, all right, but your head would be somewhere up there in the clouds, wasn't it, and Mom was always worrying about whether you were going to step off the curb in front of some truck or something. Weren't you, Mom? And Danny — oh, I've always said: he's the *spittin' image*, the very *spittin' image* of his mother —"

Here we go, Leon thought. She's found her phrase of the day. With any luck we'll only have to hear it another twenty times before this freak show is over with. He could feel his headache starting up. He sneaked a look at his watch.

"I don't think so," Anna said gravely.

Leon had been about to give his explanation of why they didn't really have to worry that Danny was going to walk across the border in a dreamy daze, his mouth hanging open. He decided to let it wait. Let her talk, he thought. She hasn't had that much to say.

"I don't think my head was ever *that* much in the clouds," Anna said. "The way Danny's is sometimes. I might get dreamy, sure. But I never got *lost* in my dreams. I always saw what was going on around me. That's the difference."

She rested for a moment, then went on.

"It was a different time," she said. "During the Depression, we all had to face reality, didn't we? You, and me, and — and Pop, and — I mean, we all had to be realists. Didn't we?"

Ida and Sophie murmured their agreement. They had all been realists back then. *Everybody* had been realists. Not like now.

"I don't think I ever *heard* of flying saucers in those days," Sophie said proudly. "They didn't *have* such things. We didn't have any time for it, did we?"

"That's right!" said Ida. She added, with a little snicker: "What in the world would Danny have done back then, huh?"

Leon held up his hand, as if to call for silence. It was time he put an end to this discussion. "You know why we don't have to worry?" he said. "That Danny's going to go into some dream, and wake up and find himself in Jordan? You know why that's not going to happen?"

They were silent, waiting upon his answer.

"Because as soon as he steps across that border," said Leon, "the guns are going to start going off. And then Danny's going to wake right up. He'll hear the noise, and he'll say, *What's that?* Then he'll know it's guns, and he'll say, *Where?*

Where? Where? He'll start looking all around him, and at first he won't see a thing –"

Leon mimicked Danny's stunned, baffled, myopic expression – always looking around him for something he didn't know where it was and half the time he didn't know *what* it was. Looking everywhere, except of course where it really was He had them in stitches, with his Danny imitation.

It was so funny, you sort of forgot why they were together in that hospital room.

They all laughed as, improvising from moment to moment, Leon developed a comic scenario of the fate of the hapless Danny. First he would be captured by the Jordanian Army. Then he would be inducted – partly against his will, wholly without his understanding – as the only Jewish boy in King Hussein's Arab Legion.

Ida gasped out, between bursts of laughter: "Then maybe he *won't* be back here next month, after all!"

They were all in hysterics except Laurie, who, Leon saw to his dismay and faint shame, wasn't laughing at all. Smiling faintly, yes. She had to, to please the white folks. But no laughter. She looked pained. Embarrassed, too; maybe for them, maybe for herself, that she had to be there at that awful moment.

What was she thinking?

– this grotesque circus, this squalid farce. Look at them: all the fine white people! clowning and cavorting around her deathbed, distracting themselves from her dying and from their hating each other, by ganging up on a boy who isn't even here to defend himself; beating up on him, making fun of everything he believes in, everything he cares about –

Was *that* what she was thinking?

Naah.

She probably just didn't understand. Probably just confused, as if she didn't know *what* the heck was going on here.

It was hard sometimes, telling a joke to the *shvartzes*. The joke flew right over their heads. And then you couldn't figure out, when it was all over, how or where you'd missed contact.

12.

Anna's four visitors said goodbye to her and walked down the corridor together.

"I clean forgot to ask!" Leon exclaimed, once he was sure they were out of earshot. "How's the food in this joint agreeing with her?"

It was a joke, sort of, like many of Leon's exclamatory remarks. But this time no one laughed. Ida and Sophie looked at each other.

"She's not eating any more," Sophie said venomously. "Not since yesterday morning. They've been feeding her through tubes."

She added: "But of course *you* wouldn't have known that."

She wouldn't speak to him or look at him again, even when they were outside the hospital and walking to their cars.

13.

"Have you written to Danny?" asked Meg Colton. "To let him know what's happening with his mother?"

Leon's first impulse was to say, *Yeah, sure I've written to the kid*, which was a truthful answer, provided you took only the first part of the question into consideration. If only he'd said it loud enough and promptly enough, it might have had the advantage of drowning out the second part, so maybe she might forget she'd asked it and let the subject drop.

The weather had been dry and cool all this past week, ever since August had begun. There was a nice breeze blowing right now through the window screens. Yet he sweated. His left ear, in particular, was all damp and itchy from his pressing the receiver so hard against it. He had to strain to hear what she was

saying. She spoke softly, for fear of waking a sleeping husband. It was half past midnight. They'd been on the phone almost forty-five minutes.

She was Meg Colton now. She'd been Meg Kupferstein when they were students at Carthage University but became Meg Colton when she married Michael Colton, whose family had once upon a time been the Cohens of Brooklyn but that had changed way back, years before Michael finished his training and moved out to Long Island to become dermatologist for the local hotsy-totsies. Meg had gone with him. That had all happened long ago, before the war.

He and Meg needed badly to talk on the telephone but it had always been like pulling teeth to arrange it. How was she supposed to call him, without old Michael demanding to know when the phone bill came in what the hell were all these calls to Kellerfield, Pennsylvania? Ditto from his end. Not to mention that Anna was never, day or night, more than ten feet distant from one or the other of the telephones in their house.

But now Meg waited by the phone every night. As soon as it was late enough for Michael to have gone to bed, he'd give her a call. There was no one here to listen. And unless he was very much mistaken, Anna would never be back to look at another telephone bill.

"Yeah, sure I've written to him," Leon said. "But I haven't told him anything yet about her."

Silence at the other end; Leon read it as an accusation.

He said: "I figure, he and his mama are so damn tight, if I tell him anything's going on with her, he's not going to sleep nights worrying about is she going to die. And there goes his whole trip, his whole summer."

Silence.

"I mean," he said, "you haven't seen the way that poor kid sweated over that stupid contest of his. It was like he'd bet his whole life on winning it, so he'd have a chance to get away from here this summer, finally live a little bit."

Silence.

"You don't know what it's like," he said, "seeing him here night after night, with his typewriter, always the typewriter. He doesn't have friends. He used to, but not anymore. And *never* any girls. I used to think it was because he was so weird, but now I think, hell, it's because Anna's brainwashed him he mustn't go out with shiksas, and that's practically all there are here, shiksas —"

"In Philadelphia?" she said. "There aren't any Jewish girls in the Philadelphia area? Are you serious?"

"In *Kellerfield*!" he roared. It was she who needed to speak quietly; he didn't. "In his stupid high school, which I wanted to take him out of years ago and move him and Anna back to New Jersey, so maybe he could try to have a social life! But of course he didn't want to, because all his *friends* were here, he said. Though if he's got any friends I don't know who they are."

He took a deep breath.

"So anyway, I figure let him stay in Israel and have a good time as long as he can. Maybe he'll meet a girl over there, have some fun with her. I mean, over there they don't have anybody *except* Jewish girls."

"And don't you think he's likely to have one hell of a homecoming?" Meg said.

"Look," said Leon. "They've still got a few tricks up their sleeve. When I was there yesterday I got a chance to talk to that snot-nose — what's his name? — Rycard. He said there's another drug they're going to try. He told me the name; I don't remember it. I think that must be why they keep them so long in medical school, so they can learn to pronounce all those stupid names."

"So you think she's got a chance, then?"

"I don't know, Meg. Don't ask me questions like that, will you? All I know is, when something happens, then it'll be time enough to bring the kid back from Israel. In the meantime, what I say is: let him be! Let him have some fun for a change."

Was she going to say, *But hasn't something happened already?*

If she did, what would he answer her?

But she didn't, and he was able to change the conversation to more consoling subjects and they ended murmuring to each other comfortingly, as if through their voices they were already in each other's arms.

14.

Yet he was jolted awake sometime before dawn by a vision of his son. The boy had swollen in size, and now towered over him. His face was strange and terrifying, with an unfamiliar rage. *You didn't tell me?* he howled at Leon. *You didn't tell me?*

Leon shivered in his bed, and tried to think of some way to explain himself. The pressures he had been under.

Danny's mother had died, and now Leon was phoning him in Israel to tell him to come home for the funeral. The boy was physically present, even though he was also on the other end of the line, for in a dream all things are possible. He was enraged, and demanded to know why he hadn't been told to come home while there was still time.

You mean she was sick in the hospital two weeks before she died, and you didn't tell me?

It was a dream, Leon told himself afterward. Only a dream and nothing more. Still, he couldn't get back to sleep. He made himself some instant coffee and sat at the kitchen table looking wearily out the window.

The dawn light was "pearly." The word, he knew, had popped into his mind from that old song about how nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning. He couldn't remember where in the song it was from.

It was going to be another beautiful day.

He wrote at the kitchen table, between sips of coffee. *Sunday, August 7.* After a couple of paragraphs about the weather, and about how there wasn't much grass to be cut this month, he continued:

I've been writing the past couple of letters, on account of Mom hasn't been feeling too well lately. We are having trouble with the fluid retention and her ankles and legs are all

swollen again. The doctors have suggested a new drug which they say may help so we'll be starting to use it.

15.

The drug worked for a few days. Anna didn't die. But she wasn't able to begin eating again, and for long periods of time she wasn't very certain where she was or when it was that all this was happening.

She didn't like the nurses.

At the beginning, when she was new in the hospital, they'd been kind and solicitous. They came promptly when she rang the bell, even if it was for something silly or that was her own fault, like when she dropped the fork in the middle of lunch and didn't think she could retrieve it herself because she couldn't climb out from beneath the heavy tray. But then they changed.

The change was heralded by the appearance of Gwendolyn, on Anna's fourth day in the hospital.

Gwendolyn was a heavy-set woman in her fifties, her shortish blond hair streaked with gray. She moved slowly but with great determination, as if the gravity of this planet was a perpetual challenge which she'd dedicated her life to triumphing over. Her face was set in an almost immovable scowl. This unnerved Anna, who always assumed that if the people around her were scowling it was because she hadn't done as much as she ought to make them smile.

It was also unnerving that Gwendolyn showed such a keen interest in Anna's diamond engagement ring.

Leon had bought that ring for her the morning of their wedding. For the past twenty-two years it hadn't been off her finger. Danny, when he was little, had been fascinated by the diamond. He loved to hold her hand in the sunlight and turn her finger this way and that with his small fingers, and watch the jewel flash its rainbow of colors.

There wasn't much sunlight in this hospital room. But even under the fluorescent lights the diamond sparkled beautifully. It came to hypnotize her, as it once had Danny. She lay for hours and turned the ring back and forth on her finger, and let its sparkle remind her that she'd once been loved.

Her fingers were skin and bone. The ring hung loose. If she were to let her hand droop over the side of the bed, it'd slip away and go clattering onto the floor. All this Gwendolyn saw.

Anna saw her see it, and turned cold and angry as she watched the predatory hunger with which Gwendolyn eyed her skeletal left hand.

You'd think, if the nurses were bad the doctors would bring them into line. Yet these doctors, especially the young one who seemed to be mainly in charge of her, were as bad as the nurses. Worse, if anything.

The nurses, even if they spoke gruffly, at least spoke *to* her. But the doctors spoke only *about* her – to each other, to the nurses, to the troops of students whom they brought into the room to see this medical exhibit lying sick and emaciated on her bed. They discussed her in a rapid mutter, using long and ominous words she didn't understand.

"*What? What?*" she cried out feebly. "What did you just say?"

They gave her angry looks, as if she ought to have known they weren't talking to her. Grudgingly they repeated what they'd said, in language only slightly more intelligible. It didn't sound good.

She wished Dr. Lambdon could come and look in on her, even just once.

Dr. Lambdon had spoken *to* her. He hadn't been frightening. He'd been comforting. He'd told her after her heart attack that she was going to be all right, and sure enough she *had* been all right.

She awoke one evening, her mind lucid and determined. She knew clearly what she should have known all along: *this* was why it had gone wrong. Dr. Lambdon wasn't there.

She rang for the nurse. "Could you please send in Dr. Lambdon?" she said crisply.

"There's no Dr. Lambdon here."

"Where is he, then?"

The nurse shrugged and walked away.

Anna remembered afterward that Dr. Lambdon was dead and, remembering, she sobbed into her pillow. There was no one in the darkness who might have heard.

16.

July had become August more than a week ago. Anna knew at the beginning that it was August and not July, but afterwards she forgot that and, when she thought about it at all, supposed it still to be July.

She thought of her mother and sister, but as they were when she was young, when they were young – not as they were now, when they came every few days to stand by her bedside and ask how she was feeling and then go away again because Sophie said they were getting her too tired. The way they were now seemed unreal, irrelevant.

She thought most often of her father. Sometimes she remembered he was dead. Sometimes she forgot this, and ached for him to come visit her in her pain and weakness. At times she imagined he was actually there, standing silently by her bed for what seemed like minutes at a time. She yearned for him to stretch out his hand and stroke her hair, and speak to her.

But it was only Gwendolyn, staring at her diamond ring.

17.

Three nights before the end, she awoke to find herself in deep darkness in the middle of the night. She heard her own voice singing in the darkness, clear and

sweet and pure. But whether it was in her throat or only in her mind, she didn't know.

*We were sailing along on Moonlight Bay,
We could hear the voices singing, they seemed to say:
"You have stolen my heart, now don't go 'way."
As we sang love's old sweet song on Moonlight Bay.*

She sobbed and cried until the pillow was soaked with her tears.

18.

You wouldn't have thought it was August. Every day the skies were cool and blue. No rain fell. The grass didn't grow.

Danny would love it, Leon thought. There's hardly any lawn at all for him to cut.

He didn't write this in his next letter to Danny. Nor did he describe how, one afternoon earlier in the week, he'd driven into Philadelphia after work to visit his wife. He was alone this time, and the compartment of the hospital room where Anna lay was empty of visitors. She was asleep on her back, snoring heavily.

He didn't awaken her. Poor old lady, he thought, let her sleep. She must be tired unto death, with all she's had to go through.

He sat down in one of the empty chairs beside her bed. He couldn't stand. His pity – the same pity that was on the verge of choking his throat with tears – had taken all the strength out of his legs. It might have seemed to him in that moment that he still loved her.

But then he noticed the tightness of her left hand, clenched even in her sleep as though around something. As if there was something she was afraid, even in her sleep, might slip away from her. His pity turned to a nostalgic regret, which hovered at the border of disgust. She used to be a sweet girl, he thought. Once. Now she's become so grudging. So untrusting. So – so *clutching*. She gets those fingers clutched around you, you aren't ever going to get loose.

He didn't write any of this to his son. He didn't write that Anna was in the hospital, that she'd been there for over three weeks. To give the boy that kind of news, you needed to have just the right words to say it in. Leon was doing his best now, searching for those words.

As yet, he hadn't quite found them.

19.

The second Sunday evening in August, Sophie and Ida went to the hospital to visit Anna. They arrived after suppertime and sat with her until eight-thirty, when visiting hours were over.

They didn't talk much. She was too weak. They sat with her, mostly in silence; Ida looked frequently at her watch. She was careful not to be too obvious about it. Not because she was afraid Anna might notice – Anna was plainly too out of it to notice anything – but because she was ashamed in front of Sophie.

Anna's first week in the hospital, they'd expected she might say during one of their visits: *You know, it's time to write to Danny. It's time to tell him I'm sick, that he needs to come home.*

They'd prepared arguments to dissuade her. They would tell her she'd surely be back home in a week or two, well before Danny was scheduled to return from Israel. There'd be plenty of time to tell him, once he got back, about her hospital stay. In the meantime, why ruin his trip of a lifetime?

But she said nothing about this. They began to think, uneasily, *Maybe she just assumes we've already told him.*

So the second week she was in the hospital, they were on edge pretty much all the time they were visiting, although of course they were bright and cheerful and took care to hide their nervousness. What if she were suddenly to burst out with: *Well? Have you phoned Danny? Have you told him I'm sick? Have you told him he needs to come back home right now, so that he can say good-bye to me before I die?* They'd have had to admit that Ida, on Sophie's instructions, had written Danny two letters filled with cheery inconsequentialities, not even hinting at a problem with Anna's health.

About Danny, they didn't worry. They were trying to spare him concern; whatever happened with his mother, they could deal with it when he got back. Besides, hadn't he known she was sick when he left for Israel? And hadn't he just up and went anyway?

She asked nothing about Danny. She didn't even ask whether Leon had received any more aerograms. She certainly couldn't have been getting this information from Leon himself. For it was evident that—as anyone who knew Leon might have anticipated—he came seldom if ever to the hospital. Too busy with more important things, it seemed.

To hear Anna talk, you'd hardly have imagined she had a son at all.

By the third week they no longer worried. They knew Anna had already said goodbye to Danny in her heart. She'd made her peace with not seeing him again. She would raise no questions about what they'd told him or not told him, and so they themselves raised none.

It would only have upset her.

The sun set. The sky began to darken outside. Ida fought back the temptation to sneak more than occasional glances at her watch, while they listened to her sister struggle for breath. The fat, ugly nurse, whose blond hair was turning gray and who seemed always to be in a bad mood, stuck her head through the curtain that partitioned the room.

"Visiting hours are over."

They stood up to go, and drew near the bed to hug Anna goodnight. First Sophie, then Ida. But Anna clutched Sophie's arm as hard as she could, and said, "Mom, don't go."

"We have to," Sophie said mildly. "Our time's up."

"We'll see you tomorrow," Ida said.

Anna paid no attention to Ida. Her pleading eyes were fixed upon her mother's face.

"I'm not going to make it, Mom," she wailed softly. "Please don't go."

Ida looked closely at Anna's face, irritated that her sister wouldn't even look at her. "We have to go now," she said firmly, in the harsh, ill-tempered tone that had become more and more her voice as she aged. "We'll be back tomorrow."

She said "*Tomorrow!*" again, more loudly this time, as if Anna was losing her hearing along with everything else that had once been herself. Anna didn't take her hand from Sophie's arm.

"*Please stay,*" she said to her mother.

Sophie smiled, comfortingly.

"You sleep good tonight," she said soothingly. "We'll see you tomorrow."

The tears that spilled from Anna's cheeks to the pillow, as she turned her head to the side, were her last. Perhaps the disease had stolen all the moisture from her tear-ducts, and there were no tears left for her to cry.

She didn't cry even as she pulled the sheet over her head, enshrouding herself infant-like in her blankets, and listened to their footsteps vanish down the hallway and murmured *Please stay, please stay, please stay* into the silent pillow.