

Elizabeth Hay / HAND GAMES

It must have had a small, almost invisible beginning, or else I was so intent on believing that nothing was the matter that I missed it. I remember my growing sense of dismay, and my almost constant inner refrain that children are resilient. And I remember one afternoon that came to seem like the beginning, not of the bad time but of my awareness of the bad time.

I was walking down the street ahead of my daughter Annie and her friend Joyce. We paused frequently. Joyce was wearing black patent leather shoes, and every hundred yards she bent down to wipe off the dust. The shoes were tiny and new, and she dusted them off with a white handkerchief. She was very small for four. Annie was the same age but much taller and puppy-like.

We weren't far from home. The streets were lined with old trees and the sidewalk was yellow with leaves. I was carrying a bag of groceries in my right hand. Just before we got to the corner, I felt Joyce's small hand slide into my free hand, leaving the other one for Annie.

The game unfolded. Annie took my encumbered hand. For a while she said nothing, then she whimpered — insisted — that I put the bag in my other hand. I told her not to be silly. Joyce said nothing. She'd said nothing when she ran ahead of Annie to slide her hand into mine, creating this deliberate, wordless, artful triangle.

The two girls were dressed in yellow and pink, and yet they reminded me of dark illustrations in an old storybook. *Dwarf with Dog* would be the caption. I saw my daughter gambolling at the feet of a tiny, dark, compact master. I saw myself in my daughter and my mother in myself — a long and sorry line of tailwagging.

That morning on the front steps Joyce had kept one hand in her bulging pocket.

Annie asked, "What's in your pocket?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"*Nothing.*"

I lay awake at three in the morning and my daughter's face floated up, the moment when the two girls were coming down the stairs of Annie's school. We'll make hot chocolate, I said to them. Annie turned to Joyce and with a bright smile asked if she wanted hot chocolate. Joyce responded in a low voice. I was ahead of them and didn't catch the words. I caught the tone. I turned and saw my daughter's face widen, a pond into which a stone had been thrown.

We walked home. For a while they played, and then Annie asked for her toy phone. She held out her hand and Joyce walked over with it. A foot away Joyce stopped, put the phone to her own ear, turned her back, and began to talk to Wendy and Peter Pan. Annie lay on the sofa holding a doll to her chest. I saw her face wiped clean, glassy, the outermost reaches of the ripple. And did nothing.

Immobilized by the snake — the touch of the snake — the knowledge that someone can turn against you when you've done nothing wrong; the cavalier nature of friendship; the arbitrary nature of dislike; the twist of rejection; the fall from grace. All of these were present in that small configuration in the dark living room: one child lying on the sofa with averted eyes, the other talking into the toy phone, her back turned.

I did nothing. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid to scold Joyce because she was the daughter of an old friend.

Small hand in mine: soft warm devious hand brushing against mine as though with affection and need. I felt my palm mapped with her ill intentions, implicated in the betrayal of my daughter, pulled into the small child's canny vindictiveness — an intricate, serious, unhappy world. I played along with her even as I saw the game, drawn into the sophisticated world of the smaller child. Impressed by it.

Impressed by the meticulous words she was able to print, by the drawings, complex with colour and minute shapes. Seduced by the seriousness of the child, and intimidated.

Dwarf. Child/adult simultaneously. The interruption of a natural progression. We see a dwarf and are transfixed by the sight of adulthood in the form of a child forever estranged from adulthood, and we look away embarrassed and afraid.

Annie comes home. She comes through the door, hangs on the knob, leans into the door and then into me. She says, "Joyce did everything to hurt my feelings," and her face finally runs with tears.

It wasn't always this way. We moved into this building in September, and for two months their friendship flourished in a form of Eden. The bad time — the first and worst bad time — began in November and went on for two months. Joyce would run to her small rocking chair and hiss, "This chair is my chair, this chair is my chair," low enough so that her mother couldn't hear but loud enough so that Annie heard, so that I heard — the woman who did nothing. She planted her tiny feet and stretched her arms across the hallway so that Annie couldn't pass. She pounced on Annie's mistakes. "That's not a jumping, it's a jumper. That's not a bicycle, it's a tricycle. That's not a skirt, it's a kilt."

At night Annie lay in bed under Joyce's bedroom and listened to the sounds upstairs. She wrapped her handkerchief around her hand and pretended it was broken. She breathed on the window, then drew a heart in the moisture and said, "I'm drawing a heart for Joyce."

Joyce likes to fold towels and pillow cases. I've watched her make the corners meet precisely and smooth the surfaces. She builds neat piles and guards them. After any trip, no matter how short, she goes into her bedroom and touches all the stuffed animals. Her mother has told me this. I suspect she doesn't have names for them. She doesn't pretend they are anything but what they are. But she likes them. When her sisters throw them off the shelf, I've seen her grab the nearest arm and pinch. She gets punished but she doesn't seem to mind this kind of punishment: the sister removed, the door closed, the silence. She puts the animals back on the shelf, always in the same order: soft blue donkey with faded ribbon, rougher older larger bear, white owl, grey rabbit, brown rabbit, cloth rabbit, white lamb, purple hippo — blue, brown, white, grey, brown, pale yellow, white, purple. She arranges colours in her drawings with the same care. When anyone compliments her on her drawings, and they often do, she doesn't acknowledge the compliment. And she never holds up a drawing to say look at this.

Annie puts her hand in mine and feels the hard ridge of plastic, the reduced space for her own hand, the weight of groceries pulling my arm down, my quick step; and there is Joyce, on the other side, with my free hand all to herself.

The softest part of my hand is the palm and the hardest part is the bottom of the fingers. They are the hardest and coldest part. Annie tells me, "My skin is soft and your skin is hard."

She brushes against my leather jacket and looks down at the sidewalk which is uneven and dusty. People pass by and say of Joyce, "How adorable, is she yours?" "No," I say, "she's a friend."

Annie tries to take Joyce's hand and sometimes Joyce lets her, and sometimes Joyce tightens her hand into a fist, and sometimes she jerks her hand away, and sometimes she pushes Annie away.

We walk up the steps to our building. We rent the first floor, Joyce's family has the second, a family with three boys lives on the third, an old woman on the fourth. Six wide steps lead up to the blue front door. At the top of the steps, Joyce and Annie scramble for the wealth of menus left by all the pizzerias in the neighbourhood. Joyce gets four, Annie gets two. "Inside you'll share them," I say.

In the kitchen Joyce slides into Annie's chair and says, "I'm the guest."

Annie looks at me. I look away and say yes, that's right, Joyce is the guest.

Increasingly, I have been feeling the weight of Joyce's jacket. It is soft, bright pink, a year old. The weather has turned cold. Today I ask Joyce if she would like to wear her coat and she gives a fierce shake of her head. I drape the coat over the back of the stroller in which the baby is sleeping, and we walk across the street to get Annie. The girls go to different schools, and twice a week I pick up Joyce as well as Annie.

In the hallway I button up Annie's coat, adjust her hat, and say to Joyce, "You can wear the coat or you can put it over your arm but you have to carry it."

Joyce is holding one of her drawings, she says she can't carry her coat as well.

"Put the drawing in the stroller then," and I reach for it.

Joyce steps back. Refuses.

“You have to carry your coat, Joyce. Each of us is responsible for her own coat. I’m not going to carry it.”

I know the coat could be shoved easily into a corner of the stroller, or draped over the back. But I am irritated because my ploy hasn’t worked and because I am using a ploy. Now that the train of events has been set in motion, it will play itself out in full.

I insist. Joyce refuses. I take the coat, which has a hood, and drop the hood over Joyce’s head. We set off. I have to buy vegetables. Half way down the block Joyce is crying, darkly furious and on the verge of a tantrum, that the coat is slipping off her, that she has to hold her picture. Outside the vegetable store, she lets the jacket fall to the sidewalk. A passerby picks it up and hands it to me, and I drop the hood over her head. By this time she is storming — loud piercing cries, choked sobs — that her mother never makes her do this — her mother always puts her coat on the stroller — my mother — sob — my mother ...

I bend down, by now trembling, and tell her that I don’t care what her mother does, nor does her mother do that; if she doesn’t carry her coat — I hear myself say — there won’t be any hot chocolate.

“I don’t want hot chocolate,” she screams.

“I don’t care what you want, I am not carrying your coat.”

I push the stroller on, and with trembling fingers choose from the outdoor display four tomatoes, three green peppers, a bunch of parsley. Joyce stands in full tantrum in the middle of the sidewalk, the jacket on the ground except for one sleeve which she holds in her hand. I push the stroller inside the store, my daughter follows, so does Joyce.

“What’s the matter?” someone asks.

“Nothing’s the matter,” I answer. “She doesn’t like her coat.”

The cashier smiles sympathetically, but I don’t care if the cashier is sympathetic. I pay. The children and the coat follow me back outside. Joyce drags it, but she doesn’t leave it behind.

Sickness and holidays intervene, and two weeks pass before I pick up Joyce again. I climb the stairs to her school, pick up her lunchbox and her coat, and we go downstairs together. At the door I give Joyce

her coat and bend down to see to my son in the stroller. I say, "Joyce, you can wear your coat zipped up or unzipped. Which is it going to be?"

Joyce stands by the door, coat in hand, looking down. I feel the ground give way as I face this dark child.

I finish with the baby. "Zipped or unzipped?"

"Unzipped," she says, and puts it on.

It is bitterly cold. The coat slides off her shoulders and blows wide in the wind.

"Are you cold?" I ask. She shakes her head. "I can zip it up for you." Shake of the head.

We pick up Annie from her school and walk several blocks. Joyce is shivering and nothing is said. Annie starts to talk about her approaching birthday. She will be five. Joyce has already had her birthday, three weeks back.

Then Joyce speaks. She says to Annie, "I'm not coming to your birthday and I'm not giving you a present."

Annie looks at me — slow motion towards tears — and I bend down and speak to Joyce. I say that she has had her birthday, and now Annie is going to have hers; you can't say mean things about it; apologize. Joyce is also close to tears. She says she is sorry. Then as I stand up she says something else, softly. The look on Annie's face makes me ask sharply, "What did you say, Joyce?"

"My mother says I don't have to come."

I try to remember what it was like to be lost in such obstinacy. Some days I can remember and some days I can't.

My friendship with Joyce's mother has changed. I lie awake at night talking to her, but in person I say nothing. At night I tell her that I can't stand it any more. I ask her what we should do. Old scenes between Joyce and Annie play out in my mind. But I know Norma has plenty of problems and doesn't need more. And I'm afraid that once I start to recount the things that Joyce has done to Annie, our friendship will never be the same. But it isn't the same now. We talk to each other, ignoring our daughters, pretending these things aren't happening, and each of us is glad when the other leaves.

Joyce makes our friendship unsustainable, and yet it continues. I

continue to pick up Joyce out of loyalty to Norma, and out of my inability to find phrases for what I feel.

Other children live on the block. Linnea lives across the street. She and Joyce have been going to the same school since they were two. Later Linnea's role in the story will become clear to me. It is always clear to Annie.

Annie continues to say, "Joyce is my *best* friend, right? Joyce is my *best* friend."

At her insistence, I take her by the hand up the flight of stairs to Joyce's apartment. I ask Norma if Joyce would like to play.

Norma turns to her daughter. "Would you like to go down?"

"No." The answer is no.

I smile, "Another time."

I hurry Annie away, not up another flight to find another playmate and teach her about the possibility of other friends, the importance of going on, but downstairs and inside. To be especially kind? No, especially irritated. Angry. At being reminded of my own childhood and forced to realize it will happen again.

I begin to invent excuses: they're not home; it's supertime; they're out of town.

I pretend to phone, dialling with one finger and holding the receiver down with the other. "They're not home," I say.

After a few days, enough time so that Annie won't seem to be begging for friendship, I give in and we go upstairs.

The staircase is carpeted and wide. Annie's right hand holds the wooden railing — cool and hard and smooth — and we walk up into the smell of cooking from the floors above, and down the hall to Joyce's door.

"Ring the bell," says Annie.

I reach up and ring it, and I hear Joyce's voice. "Linnea, Mom! It's Linnea!"

Joyce swings the door open and Norma appears at her side. Behind them is Joyce's special tea set, pink and new and never brought out for Annie to play with. I say quickly, "Would Joyce like to come down to play, or do you have other plans?"

Norma hesitates. Then she says, "Annie can stay and play, I don't mind."

Annie, already inside, stays.

It wasn't possible — why wasn't it possible — for Norma to say that she had invited Linnea to play. It wasn't possible for me to say what I knew, and that we would come back another time.

An hour later I returned for Annie. Linnea was there, and Linnea's mother.

Joyce said to Annie, "You can go now."

Norma reproached her. "Now Joyce."

This had been going on the whole time.

"There are different things you can do," I say to Annie. "When Joyce is mean you can tell her to stop being mean. You can tell her you don't like it. You can walk away and climb into a chair and read a book."

Annie has come down from upstairs. She has stopped crying. She is on the sofa leaning her head against my shoulder.

A few hours later I tuck her into bed and she says, "Talk to me more about Joyce."

"About what you can do?"

"Yes."

"You can just walk away from her and play on your own."

She doesn't say anything. She is holding my hand. Then she says, "I don't want you to pick up Joyce anymore."

I look out the window. A yellow taxi is parked across the street and I think of some tragedy, nothing specific, just the general idea of something unbearable and how I might react. The disbelief, finding myself in a situation recognizable from literature, saying to myself — this is Shakespearean. A misunderstanding of such proportions, an incident so earthshattering, as to make one's life like a book worth reading. The thought injects a certain distance, and the distance a certain relief.

But five-year-olds aren't Shakespearean. They can't even read.

On the last day of January I come home, insert my key in the first door to the apartment — the apartment has two doors at either end of a long hallway — and see the farther door swing shut. I go still. My husband is at work and no one is home.

I open the door, look the length of the apartment, and see no one. I find a neighbour on the third floor and together we look through the apartment. I go outside. I see another neighbour and tell her, and once more we comb the apartment. But there is no one. No explanation.

Later I mention it to a friend.

“You saw the future,” he says.

What I saw was a triangle of pink: the triangle formed by the doorway and the closing door, and the colour mysterious because the door was brown and the paint in the kitchen was white.

In the afternoon I heard a child’s voice in the hallway and felt dismay. Listened — no. Listened — yes. Linnea. Linnea was going upstairs to play with Joyce. I felt such pity, such mortified sadness for my daughter who hadn’t been invited. I was transfixed by the pattern repeating itself from childhood. In having a daughter I had rubbed my own childhood into view, and was still rubbing, bent over that worn engraving and rubbing it into view — a picture that emerged through touch rather than sight, and in that way of childhood: knees on the floor, busy fingers, paper and pencil.

I wrote to my mother. In passing I mentioned Joyce. You remember, the aloof and solitary child with a mean streak. I said I had almost come to hate her. That’s all.

But as I wrote, my own relationship with my mother — that awkward unhappy thing — came back to mind. My own refusal to please. How else could it be described? I used to sit on the verandah steps and deliberately withdraw. I knew that I had a choice. I could laugh when I was teased and win my parents’ approval and my mother’s gratitude, or I could sulk and fume. I chose to sulk, though that isn’t the best word to describe the combination of fury and helplessness and pleasure which I chose to inhabit because it satisfied me more than cheerfulness, especially cheerfulness as practised by my mother — an unfail-

ing attitude, a permanent posture. With my mother, pleasing and pleasure were the same.

My mother wrote back. I'm sorry, she said. I caught her tone, the shake of the head, the unspoken "it's a shame." An end-of-the-world tone, useless, completely useless to me.

Where does it come from, this end-of-the-world thinking? The belief that one bad thing cancels out everything else? It must be the panic of childhood retained. So that in the face of one criticism everything else, everything positive, the continuous ground we stand upon, falls away. A slight by Joyce of Annie, a criticism of my husband by a colleague, and the world drops away.

Why do some people retain the sense of a continuous world around them, and others not?

I ask Joyce to wait in her cubby, and I go into the teacher's office which is off to one side. I say, "I need some advice."

The teacher asks me if I have talked with Norma. I shake my head. "She's a dear friend, I'm picking up Joyce to help her out." I shake my head again.

"You may have to," says the teacher, "but there are two other things you can do. You can say to them, 'You don't have to like each other all the time, you don't have to play with each other all the time, but you do have to be nice to each other.' And you can separate them. Put one of them to play by herself in one room, and the other in another room."

The teacher's voice is very loud. I move to close the door tightly, and the teacher continues to talk just as loudly. Doesn't she care if Joyce hears? Does she want her to know she's being talked about? Does she think that will help? She says that little girls, especially, are like this.

We finish talking and I leave her office. Joyce is still sitting in her cubby, her face sombre and unreadable. We go down the stairs and across the street to Annie's school. Every few feet of our progress, I congratulate myself that things are going smoothly, that I am calm, that I haven't given Joyce any rope to hang me with.

The teacher said, "Your daughter needs your protection. You must interfere."

I say to both children, "We have a new rule. You don't have to play together, but you have to be nice to each other." And I set up two spots, the rocking chair where Joyce can go to sit by herself, the sofa for Annie.

When they quarrel I try something I read in a book. I ask each of them to tell me what's the matter. Annie tells me. Joyce won't. I guess what's the matter with Joyce and she nods. Then I tell them to go and sit on my bed. "Close the door, talk it out for five minutes, come back with a solution."

I am amazed when they come back smiling and tell me what they have decided.

I watch them sometimes through the glass door, conferring on the bed. They sit side by side, as though on a park bench, and sometimes they come back after a few minutes and sometimes they remain. But the problem, the quarrel, goes away.

In a few weeks they are closer friends than they have ever been.

They play house, castle, boat, pirate ship, camping. They pull around the furniture in the living room, drape it with old pieces of material, add the little table and chairs from Annie's bedroom; they erect walls with square pieces of old foam and fashion a rooftop from a long flat cushion. The little areas they make are small and beautiful, and often so carefully arranged with pieces of old black lace and rose-covered fabric that they look Japanese. The two of them in combination, not alone, make these places and play quietly for hours.

These little tents of friendship — creative and flimsy, improvised from big and little, different each time — have enough space for just the two of them; they sit under the shelter of an old shawl roof and pour themselves pretend tea.

I watch the two girls become friends again, unable to put my finger on how it happens and aware that everything might crumble again.

It does. Once again Joyce turns against Annie.

It happens one afternoon after two hours of happy playing. Joyce fights with one of her sisters and is sent to her room. But it is Annie she insults. From her bed she yells, "Annie Pinhead." And again. "Annie Pinhead."

Annie hears Joyce. She smiles and walks towards me. A tentative

half-smile that doesn't last.

Norma goes into Joyce's room, pulls her out into the kitchen and tells her to apologize. She won't. Her mother shakes her. She still won't.

"You'll apologize tomorrow then," and pushes her back towards her room.

On the outs. It's almost a crack down the side of your body, a shade you occupy while others sit in the sun. A dark brassiness, metallic, exposed, abandoned to the weather. And yet you choose it and not just because it's familiar. You formulate plans — not plans of action, plans of emotion.

The streetlight comes on and I imagine that Joyce raises her gaze. She looks out the window at Linnea's house and pictures a special tea party, just the two of them, with ice cream and real tea and sugar cubes.

Someone she recognizes — one of the mothers — goes into Linnea's house. Linnea has been playing with Matthew, and now he's coming out with his mother. Tall skinny Matthew has been playing with tall skinny Linnea.

Her mother comes into the room. She is urgent, emphatic, determined, worried. "You can't treat your friends this way," she says, "or you won't have any friends."

But Joyce knows this isn't so. She knows that Annie will always come running.

3

My mother comes to visit. One evening she helps Annie with her homework. I lie on the sofa and listen to her soft relentless voice. "What does this say? Sound it out. What sound does this letter make? What letter is it? What sound does it make?"

The soft patience which at any moment will turn sharp. And here it is. "How did you get *that*?"

Annie begins to chew on her hand. She puts the side of her thumb into her mouth, then the side of her hand, making small wet teeth

marks. Her grandmother says, "Don't," and pushes her hand out of her mouth. "It will get sore."

I look at the furniture while this is going on. The light from the standing lamp falls through the mesh on the big armchair and makes a pattern on the soft velvet seat. I don't interfere any more than I interfere with Joyce. I listen, and relive my mother's voice directed similarly at me. The quiz, where the adult knows the answer and you don't. Where the adult pretends she is helping when, in fact, she is testing.

I hear my mother's voice (it is my mother's voice) quizzing my daughter and my mother quizzing me — the pattern has splayed wider — and I feel pain on my child's behalf, and on my own behalf, and on my mother's behalf, since although she appears to be the source of this unreasonable and unnecessary unhappiness, how can she be? Someone came before her too.

In the morning I make coffee, and try to say something that my husband won't dismiss as extreme. I don't say that I feel as if I'm in the presence of evil. I don't say that Joyce is full of raw newborn malice. I say that Annie doesn't seem to have as much stamina as her two-year-old brother. My husband looks at me.

"Don't you remember?" he asks. "When Annie was two she had just as much stamina." And he describes the way she would get up at five in the morning and run around the kitchen with arms held high.

It comes back to me then, a vision of happy exuberance. I feel the size and weight of that plump little body, remember the expressions on her face, and the irrepressible personality. Bright, tough, funny, tender. Now, three years later, here she is. Taller, skinnier, and burdened, somehow, with temperament.

"Her life is much harder and more complicated now," he says. "She's much more aware of the world out there, and she has friendships to deal with."

A phrase goes through my mind. The stress of friendship. How early that kicks in.

When I finally react, I overreact. Perhaps it's because so many peaceful months have gone by. Perhaps that's why I can't bear the

next falling out. It's summer. School has ended. The two girls haven't seen each other for two weeks because my daughter has chosen a day camp that offers swimming, and Joyce doesn't want to swim. Annie hasn't asked to see Joyce until now. She goes upstairs to play, and after twenty minutes comes back. "Joyce told me to leave," she says. And the tears begin.

For the next two weeks Joyce is deliberately cold and punitive. Annie is pensive, but how unhappy it's hard for me to say. I am fierce. I tell Annie that Joyce is not welcome in our home. I say, "Her sort of behaviour isn't allowed."

My husband objects. "Are you sure it's wise?"

But I am strident, determined. Annie has to learn to steel herself. She has to learn what I was never taught. She has to learn not to be taken for granted.

Annie wants to know if we are never going to invite Joyce again.

"Not until she invites you," I say. "Let her take the first step. I won't allow you," I say, "to invite her."

Several times over the next week Annie broaches the subject. We will be on the street and she will say, "We're never going to invite Joyce?" And then she will say that Joyce is her oldest friend and she is Joyce's oldest friend. "We knew each other since we were babies. We've been friends since we were one year old, two years old, three years old, four years old, five years old. Joyce and Linnea are just friends since they started going to school." She is building a faith as she skips along beside me.

We pass a fruit store and she is framed by fresh tomatoes, oranges, the first strawberries. I look down at her and see her trying to soften and reassure me. My attempt to harden her makes her even softer. She is handling me the way she handles Joyce.

A few days later Joyce initiates a visit and it goes completely smoothly, as does almost every visit after that.

When I think back on the whole period, I know that most of the time — eighty percent of the time — the two girls were fast friends. A pattern of intimacy controlled and periodically broken by Joyce. I don't know whether they adjusted to each other or whether Annie adjusted — gave way — to Joyce. Whatever happened was invisible and

miraculous and temporary. They would be down by the river, fishing out leaves, nuzzling a lunch of orange slices on a blanket — grazing, I thought, as I heard their wet little mouths working — and I would be impressed by their diplomacy and affection, by the simplicity and sophistication of their forgiveness. I would feel relieved and wary. Months would go by without a break, months when the friendship was the most stable part of their lives and whatever troubles they had they resolved themselves. And then something would happen.

What happened, I realize, was always the same. Joyce would pull away and Annie would wait for her to come back.

“I wait for the other day,” she told me.

“For another day?”

“Yes. She says she’s never going to be my friend, and the next day she’s my friend again.”

One child knew all about power and the other learned all about patience.

I should have expected the final trouble, but it took me by surprise. A cool summer preceded this last episode. One morning Norma came down with a bag of clothes. All week she’d been packing and setting aside warm things as unnecessary. Joyce was on her heels. She insisted on keeping several things and uncharacteristically her mother gave in. Suddenly there was an area of yielding that hadn’t been there before, an eagerness to compensate for all the upheaval. They were moving south.

I watched Joyce enter this new emotional territory. Her grandmother catered to her more than ever, her parents softened their criticism, friends made arrangements to see her for the last time; they brought gifts, they cried. It seemed to me she enjoyed the narrowing of focus, the paring away of possessions, the simplifying of life even as it became more complicated. This was a process she was adept at, riding a storm in a narrow and purposeful boat.

That summer my daughter learned several hand games. She played them fast and with tremendous merriment. There would be the slapping of palm against palm — knee — shoulder — palm in patterns that were intricate and ingenious and rewarding. Annie’s face was brown and attentive and relaxed.

Joyce was good at not playing; at making you feel foolish for wanting to play.

This would be their final summer together.

Two days before they moved away, Norma and I talked about our daughters. It happened the morning after the going-away party, after Annie's confused sorrow and my relief that there would be no more of this. I walked upstairs and knocked on Norma's door.

Norma was packing. She listened and said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's not all bad," I said. "Annie has to learn how to protect herself. She has to learn not to wear her heart on her sleeve."

"But that's the wonder of her," said Norma, and she leaned against the doorway, slender and tired and worried.

The night before, Annie and I left the going-away party early to sit on the lower bunk in her room. It was dark outside. The window was open and the sounds of the party drifted down. It had been raining all day.

Annie listened to my voice — low and hesitant — say that Joyce was about to move and would miss her very much.

She didn't believe me. She said, "She won't even remember me because I didn't sign the book." And she cried quietly.

She meant the guest book. It was on a small table beside the large table of food, and friends had been writing their names, addresses, sentimental farewells. For most of the party Joyce wouldn't speak to Annie. She wouldn't acknowledge her presence. Linnea was there and several of Joyce's cousins. Even after Linnea left, even after the cousins went home, Joyce wouldn't speak to Annie or look at her.

"I know Joyce doesn't like me — she's sick of me — she didn't play with me all night — she won't even remember me because I didn't sign the book."

"You can sign the book tomorrow."

"She didn't even talk to me."

"You know what Joyce is like. You know how nasty she can be sometimes."

"I know she can be nasty, but I don't know *when*."

I sat on the edge of the bunk and didn't know what to do. Should we take Joyce's cue and not bother to say goodbye? Should we wait until moving day and expect her to say goodbye then? Should we let her define the friendship?

This last thought was the one that cut through my anger, and I heard myself suggest that Annie make a going-away card for Joyce.

“Would you like to?”

Annie said she would. The suggestion seemed to relieve her. She put her head on the pillow and fell asleep.

The next morning I went upstairs. My heart felt loose inside me and I said too much too apologetically. It shouldn't be so hard to be straightforward.

Around us was the chaos of the move. Norma was wearing a dress she had intended to give away, but under the stress of the move she had lost so much weight that it finally fit. It looked lovely on her and I said so.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“What if I made a time for them to play together by themselves? Later this afternoon? I'll extend an invitation.”

In the afternoon the sisters came down to invite Annie and her brother to watch a movie. They came down first, and then they came down again with Joyce because they wanted to start the movie right away; they wanted Annie and her brother to hurry up.

“Hi Joyce,” Annie said with a small and hopeful smile.

Joyce didn't reply. She stood out in the hallway and looked away.

Annie waited a moment and then repeated, “Hi, Joyce.”

Joyce, without looking at her, said hi.

Annie looked at me then with the same hopeful smile, but wider, even more hopeful, and full of relief. She was reassuring me that everything was all right.

The next day Joyce's family moved away. In the hour before their departure Joyce and Annie played. Quietly, at first, and on the sofa. They sat side by side. Then they went outside onto the street where the moving van was being filled. They hung on the fence, they ran and scampered and laughed.

Just before they left Norma gave me a card that Joyce had made for Annie but “forgotten” to give to her. Joyce didn't forget to show Annie Linnea's gift of writing paper. This she made a special trip upstairs to get; this she displayed, full of smiles; this she hugged to her chest.

Now I look up from grating a cabbage and see Norma through the window — same hair, same sweater. I start, and the woman catches sight of me and smiles. It's the sweater. A heavy dark brown and white sweater that Norma used to wear in the fall. And the loose thick hair.

I see Joyce too, but not in the same way, or in any way that I could have predicted. I see her in Annie.

A new family has moved in upstairs. One of the children is Annie's age and they are in the same class. In the morning the new girl, Marcela, runs up to Annie and Annie turns away.

Norma at the window, and Joyce in Annie — the absence of a smile, and something more than shyness.

I think of my mother, a woman with no protective shell. She is porous to everyone she meets and this is difficult for them as well as for her. They feel invaded by an innocent country, and she feels taken aback to learn that she isn't welcome. There is no end to her when she is with other people, no solitude. She wants, like a child, to be included and at the centre of everything. And yet this doesn't occur out of egotism, at least not of the usual kind, but out of friendliness; the egotism of the shy perhaps. Not that she is shy, but shyness shaped her, and the desire to be liked.

I have seen my mother treated the way Joyce treated Annie. Seen her greet someone with great friendliness, someone dark and shy and reserved and cruel, and seen that person not respond. Seen my mother repeat her cheery greeting more cheerily: "I said hello." And seen the response: "I know."

A cool and rude young man irked by her overeagerness. It wasn't just his coolness, his rudeness; it was her effort, her inability to be easy about friendship, her obvious need to have people like her. The new girl upstairs has this quality, this willingness to be hurt.

Joyce so small, so concentrated, with those hunting headlights in her eyes, and the highway so wide and dark. Her cruelty took the form of savage silences, calculated and cool and sophisticated. Women treat men this way — men they want to punish, men they want to keep.

"Such a mean streak," Norma said once.

And I softened it, reassured her. We all have mean streaks, she's

not a mean child.

I lied. I hoped. I reassured. I misunderstood. I thought she was a child who didn't suffer fools gladly, a child driven by a principled refusal to please. In her cubby at school she never looked up. Other children raced around and shouted when their mothers and babysitters arrived. Joyce didn't. She wouldn't give me, wouldn't give her mother, the satisfaction of getting what we wanted. She saw the expectation in our faces, however muted, felt it in the stance of our bodies as we waited for her to stand up.

One morning I realized my mistake. I saw her in the schoolground during recess. Her teacher was carrying her on her hip while the other children ran around, and Joyce was playing up to her shamelessly. I had never seen her so happy.

They drove away finally. They moved. And just before moving Joyce took pains to remind Annie who was boss. Don't ever think you don't need me, and don't ever think I need you.

Annie looks for mail every day. She pulls a chair into the hall and stands on it to reach the mailbox. When Joyce's postcard arrives — after days of waiting — Annie sticks it up on the refrigerator door. The postcard says how much Joyce misses her. This is what Annie wanted to hear, all she wanted to hear.

Annie writes a postcard to Joyce. "All I am thinking about is you," she writes. And she says to me, "That's not all I'm thinking about, but that's okay."

A month later she draws a picture of our apartment — the long sofa, the window, the big round overhead light. She writes *shshshsh* across the bottom of the page because, she says, the people upstairs are saying *shhhh*, and the cars outside say *shhhh* when it rains.

I suggest that she send the picture to Joyce but she doesn't want to.

"Would you like to write her a letter?"

No, she doesn't want to do that either. "I wrote to her already."

Joyce in Annie: a more determined child, no less easily hurt but eager to be someone. She sits at the table with her new friends and they compete over who has the most cousins, who has travelled

farthest, who has plans to travel soon, and her face runs with feeling. She shows everyone Joyce's postcard, even as a party we attend brings back memories of the going-away party and sparks the comment: "Joyce did that to me." We're standing beside a table of food, and children are chasing each other through the rooms. "Joyce did that to me," she says. And then, "She was thinking she'd never see Linnea again."

"But why would that make her treat you badly?"

She doesn't answer, and later I ask again. "What made Joyce behave that way?"

"We talked about that already," and her face is flushed — embarrassed — private.

How different we are. Why has it taken me so long to realize? She has never believed that Joyce was mean for the sake of being mean. She has always seen the whole thing as an affair of the heart. She was to Joyce as Joyce was to Linnea.

I dream about my daughter. I have taken her to school, into a room crowded with children, and she won't stay. She follows me into the hallway where I scold her endlessly, all the while aware of what others are thinking. They are thinking no wonder the child is so unhappy.

I see everything in stark terms — a child's capacity for evil, my incapacity to protect my child. I see a fatal flaw, something inherited that my mother and I have never been able to shake — a line of rejection passing down. But Annie (who has the clearest eyes, a man said, that he had ever seen) sees, instead, the nature of love.