Marc Foster

Kissinger in Riverdale

After my eleventh birthday I began to think of myself as a shuttle diplomat between my mother and grandmother, a Henry Kissinger figure who could shape the course of events by traveling over night-darkened waters.

It was 1972, and hordes of paparazzi were jostling on the tarmac in Paris, waiting for Henry to appear in the opening doorway of a baby blue Boeing 707. When at last he did emerge it was always raining. It was always dark. An umbrella deployed from within the cabin was being held over his head by an unseen, cuff linked aide. No longer Important, Henry had become Essential. His ponderous Germanic syllables, his private lexicon—"Demobilization," "Disengagement," "Demilitarization"—clogged the airwaves. His sad, serious eyes stared at us through Coke bottle lenses on a jetway in France, behind a podium in Washington, through the window of a speeding limousine in Saigon. He had come to rescue us, when the war in Vietnam seemed like it might end some day, even though we were sure it never would.

Like most Americans, I had only the vaguest notion of why we were fighting in Vietnam. Some said it was the Domino Theory. Others said it was to prevent swarms of Chinese from marching all the way to Singapore.

I was just as confounded by the intractable struggle that seemed to exist between my mother and grandmother. On the phone they engaged in brief, nasty skirmishes, my mother tying the cord into knots while stubbing out cigarettes in the mother-of-pearl base of a quahog shell. What I noticed on my grandmother's side was how she would whimper like a dog, her blue eyes would moisten and she would pat her poof of curly white hair. After hanging up she would sit stone-faced for a spell. "How about a cookie, Milo?" she'd ask, finally, reaching for her cane on the antique cherry headboard she had inherited from my great-grandmother Edna.

Henry had his baby blue Boeing, his torpedo-finned Citroen careening around the Arc de Triomphe. My own means of transportation was a bit more modest, a gray and red Moshulu Express bus that picked me up on Third Avenue, near the tiny apartment on 98th street I shared with my

mother, and carried me to Riverdale, a downscale section of Westchester where my grandmother lived alone on the top floor of a monolithic brick tower set on a bluff overlooking the Hudson. Clearview-on-the-Hudson, they called it, three windswept brick-and-steel slabs that dominated the skyline for miles, portending a bigger, more Stalinist future for the northern suburbs of New York City.

Five or six nights a month I made the trek to Clearview, more often when my mother was seeing someone. If she needed to travel on business—she worked in public relations for a firm that financed exports of construction equipment—or she decided to go out for an evening, she would turn to me, while buttering toast in the kitchen, or setting down a glass of white wine in the living room, and she'd say, "I need you to go up to Riverdale tomorrow night, Milo." My mother spoke gently, yet orders were orders. She was telling me to hit the road, like it or not.

I needed reading glasses that autumn. The kind prescribed for me had heavy black frames, and as the days grew shorter while I was *en route* to Riverdale, I saw more of myself reflected in the half-silvered windows of the Moshulu bus. I could affect Kissinger's jowly countenance when I had a mind to. My mother had given me a briefcase for my eleventh birthday, an oxblood leather model with brass snap-fasteners. I would open the case on my lap and pull out my glasses, and a magical transformation took place, as my plump, brooding half-reflection floated atop the hurtling winter scenery, the ice-crazed East River, graffiti-tagged walls of derelict buildings—"TAKI 181," "KING 204"—flashing past in the blue-gray twilight. When I pushed back the seat it was not hard to imagine taking off in my Boeing, Scotch in hand, a stack of dossiers waiting in the belly of my briefcase, with its yawning accordion folder, the smell of leather and pencil erasers mingling in a pleasing, executive bouquet.

Twice a year my mother visited Riverdale, once on Gram's birthday in January, once during the summer months when Clearview's swimming pool opened. Those summer get-togethers were especially conflict-prone, as neither of them functioned well in the heat. My grandmother came into Manhattan for Thanksgiving, and for Christmas. Having installed herself on the couch, she would offer comments clearly intended as compliments ("that scarf looks lovely on you, dear,") while my mother, circling the room like a caged circus lion, would grimace as if Gram's utterances were lashes from a whip.

Other than that, the two communicated only through phone calls, the occasional postcard and what they could glean from my frequent debriefs. I found that I had the power to highlight certain events, such as my mother wearing the sheepskin coat Gram had given her, or my grandmother taping my mother's postcard from Vermont to the refrigerator. They both seemed to enjoy these tidbits, even though neither commented on them. I also learned that I could embellish with impunity. In my newer, better version of reality, my mother's colleagues at work complimented her sheepskin coat, while Gram shared my mother's postcard with Ernie the Doorman in the lobby of Building Three.

After I read in the *Times* that Henry was a historian, I began my own research effort, looking for clues to the origin of the family conflict. At home this was difficult because my mother had no family photos on the walls. In Riverdale, my grandmother kept a picture of herself, my mother and my Uncle Peter on her dresser. The three of them stood outdoors on a summer day, my mother wearing a paisley blouse, a black headband, my buck-toothed uncle squinting through his wire-rims. Next to that was a smaller studio portrait of Peter in military school, with cap, epaulets and crossed silver rifles on his lapels.

I'd never met Uncle Peter. I had no idea where he lived, whether he was alive or dead, whether he had children, or any of the common facts one was supposed to know about an uncle. The mystery of Uncle Peter was stored in an emotional warehouse that had apparently been locked and sealed after my father's death eight years ago. No photographs of my father or grandfather appeared in either apartment. Uncle Peter—mythical, missing Uncle Peter—was the only male presence in that home.

It came to light that Henry had been holding secret talks with Le Duc Tho. This was shocking, to me and the nation: that two men sitting in a closed room could have been entrusted with negotiating the end of the war. We were used to the Paris Peace Talks, a dozen officials from each country in plush chairs on opposite sides of an immense mahogany table. At school I thrust out my lower lip and mimicked Henry's German accent. I walked with hands clasped behind my back, eyebrows furrowed.

"Dr. Kissinger, I presume," my Social Studies teacher, Mr. Forman, would say.

“How may I *azzist* you?” I would reply.

Mr. Forman fed my interest in current events by loaning me back issues of *New Republic* and *National Review.* He encouraged me to join the debate club. The idea intrigued me enough that I began lingering outside the classroom where the club held its practices. I imagined myself taking one side or the other of an argument. “Manned space flight to Mars should be NASA’s top priority during the next ten years. Agree or disagree?” That was easy. Agree. How cool would that be? Flying to Mars? Very cool!

Sometimes my mother let me visit her office at Export Credit Corporation, and I would steal a stack of folders from the supply cabinet and put them in my briefcase, along with legal pads and ballpoint pens. Another article about Kissinger introduced me to the concept of a “dossier.” I began collecting dossiers on friends from school—Tim Brentman, Ned Gurwitz—and people I saw in the city, or in Riverdale (“December 12. Horace the Superintendent picks up litter. Places in dumpster. Lights cigarette.”) This gave structure and purpose to the hours I spent staring through windows—in the city, on the Moshulu bus and in Riverdale, where my grandmother lived off her modest savings and clipped coupons. I watched the light shift. I watched a pedestrian stop mid-stride to pick his nose. I watched flocks of pigeons flap away from a barking dog on an abandoned tennis court at Clearview, only to circle, swoop and land twenty feet from where they started.

My career in shuttle diplomacy moved into high gear after the New Year, when a strange letter arrived on the cusp of my grandmother’s 65th birthday. I rode the Moshulu bus to Riverdale one Friday afternoon, and disembarked at my usual stop, next to the Kentucky Fried Chicken at the base of Clearview. My grandmother’s apartment appeared high above, her Venetian blinds half-closed, the roof ledge above her window casings set against a blue-black sky. I climbed the hill onto Arlington Avenue, and continued past the swimming pool, with its immense concrete apron left bare after Labor Day. Once I had let myself into my grandmother’s apartment with the set of keys she had given me as a stocking stuffer, I crossed the threshold to her bedroom and set down my briefcase.

“Ooh, sugar, here you are!” My grandmother began to arrange her slippers with the butt end of her cane. The skin on her feet was cracked, her ankles swollen. “I have something special to show you. You’ll never guess who

wrote me a letter!" She shuffled to the dresser, where I saw a blue air-mail envelope propped against Uncle Peter's military school portrait. Even from a distance the handwriting looked familiar, with loopy capitals, a peculiar downward arc like my mother's shopping lists. Detecting a masculine angularity behind the pen, I felt an ominous stirring, imagining that it was a letter from my deceased father. How wonderful it would be to have him back, I felt, even though I could not recall the outline of his face, or the sound of his voice. Perhaps he had been alive all along. Gram handed me the envelope. I P. Swinburg, St. Louis, MO. Swinburg was my grandmother's name. I fingered the flap. "Go ahead, read it," she said. I hesitated, sensing that whatever lay inside threatened to disrupt the equilibrium that had existed between my mother and grandmother for as long as I could remember. "Go on, it won't bite you!"

P. Swinburg was having a wonderful life. He had a new wife named Linda, a baby on the way, a rewarding dermatology practice, a new house. Peter wanted the three of us to visit him at our earliest convenience. "Wishing you a very, *very* happy birthday. Much love! Peter." I read the letter a second time, and a third, and it was then that doubts began to enter my mind.

> *My colleagues here at St. Louis University are first-rate, mother, I'll say that right off the bat. While I build my practice, I continue to teach, keeping me abreast of the latest medical research, and providing further avenues for advancement.*

It was all about *his* career accomplishments, *his* new house, *his* baby on the way. This worried me. My mother had no patience for self-important people. "Oh, how ridiculous!" she would say, when she came across something especially pompous in the newspaper. Her latest bugbear was Nixon's catch-phrase, "Peace With Honor."

"Isn't it wonderful? Eight years!"

"It's great," I said, trying to imagine a peaceful reunion between Peter and my mother, though it was getting harder by the minute.

Gram wanted to know whether Uncle Peter had been in touch with my mother. I told her she hadn't said a word about it to me.

"Goodness gracious! When you get home, tell her, sugar. She'll be so excited."

Two burnt-out cars passing below in the break-down lane of the

Major Deegan reminded me of war images I saw in the newspaper, and on television: vehicles, hamlets, people, formerly intact, mangled by violence. I opened my briefcase, put on my black-framed glasses and tried to find my half-reflection, but it was impossible just now, the light outside was too bright. I began to worry, not from the standpoint of Kissinger, but from my own perspective. How was I going to tell her about the letter?

My mother was the source of food, comfort, knowledge, hope. My greatest fear was that, like the sun, she would burn out and disappear, and I would be like so many kids I saw on television rotting in Harlem, starving in Africa or running for cover in Vietnam. I understood that New York was full of murderers, arsonists and con men, that the city was bankrupt. Our family finances were precarious. My mother needed to keep her job. I knew my job was to behave. When I acted up I saw the strain it caused. She let puffs of air escape like a deflating balloon. Her face clouded, her jaw clenched. "Oh, Milo," she would say, before letting me settle. When the weather was fair we went cycling, or took the subway to Union Square or visited the Cloisters. Alongside the chaos wonderful things were happening in the city: concerts, peace marches, street fairs. My mother and I wandered for hours, never sure exactly where we were going, but confident that it would turn out all right in the end. When we returned home we flopped on the couch and recounted the things we had seen, the people we had met ("Wasn't that poodle a scream, Milo, with the hair-do and the rhinestone collar?") We ate left-overs and swapped sections of the newspaper like a married couple.

My grandmother, like the moon, had lost her atmosphere, but she retained a reassuring presence, reflecting the light my mother produced, never wavering in her devotion. We played gin rummy. We watched *Laugh-In.* We baked cakes. She led a passive existence, but never hurried, never impatient.

I wanted the two women who made up my private universe to love each other as much as I loved them individually. This seemed to be the natural order of things.

I expected my mother to be surprised by the news I brought back from Riverdale, but she wasn't. She retrieved a blue air-mail envelope from the lower drawer of her roll-top desk and dropped it in my lap.

"He sent one to you too?" I asked, nonplussed.

"Of course he did."

"What do you mean, 'of course?'"

"He wants my approval. I'm his big sister."

"I don't get it."

"Of course you don't get it. You're an only child."

She began to stare at a spot to the left of my head, where a record album that had once belonged to my father, *Play Bach Jazz,* leaned against the hi-fi. When I turned back she was applying lotion to her hands. I loved those hands. Her knuckles stuck out like the scrollwork of a viola; her nails were cut in a way that was practical but feminine. Later in life I developed a habit of examining a woman's hands in the moments after a first meeting.

My mother lifted her head then, and began to talk. Listening to her on the padded chair in the living room, with the Citgo sign flashing red, red, red over the Triboro Bridge, I remember that when she looked at me directly, she seemed to be appraising me in a more serious context, as she began to talk about her past. This change unsettled me. We had stepped beyond the bounds of what had passed between us until then, and I worried that we could not go back.

A simple fact informed her story: Peter had gotten hit by a car. It was 1948, in Illinois, and Peter had gotten hit by a car. My mother was nine at the time, my uncle five.

I imagined a bulbous bumper, policemen taking notes.

Her father—my grandfather—was away on business. She and Peter were playing Monopoly. A kid across the street—Julius or Jerome or something—liked to call Peter 'short stuff.' Peter had a bucket he dumped on himself to keep cool. He filled the bucket and ran into the street so he could get Julius, and that's when he got hit.

"My God," I said.

"It was awful," my mother said, taking a drag.

Someone tried to move Peter. Someone else said no, don't, he might be paralyzed. My grandmother shouted for someone to watch him while she called an ambulance. My mother ran into the street and knelt over my uncle, and she prayed. He was breathing, but he looked half-alive, half-dead, with gray skin, like he had been put in a freezer. My grandmother ran out and told Peter to hang on, then she turned to my mother. "She said, 'Are you mommy's big girl?' I said 'What do you mean?' She said, 'Are you mommy's big girl?' and I said, 'Of course I'm mommy's big girl.' She said I needed to

stay home while she went to the hospital. I didn't know why she wanted me to stay home. I thought maybe it was so I could answer the phone if Dad called. After the ambulance came, I stayed home all day and into the night. Do you know what that was like?"

"No," I said, though I did know something about being alone.

He made it, of course. Eventually she was allowed to visit his hospital room, with the flowers, get-well cards, nurses waiting on him hand and foot. That was typical. Peter was the little boy, Peter got hit by the car, Peter got polio and had to be hospitalized for six months, Peter had to go back to college for an extra year so he could go to medical school. "Cost Dad a fortune. After your father died Peter disappeared completely—no post cards, no phone calls, nothing. Poof. Vanished. I've been taking care of your grandmother for eight years, Milo, with no help from my brother. Now he's back. Peter the wonderful boy who's doing wonderful things in St. Louis. It's bullshit!"

That word, *bullshit,* felt authentic to me. It was the kind of word President Nixon might use in private with Henry. I could also see how it transformed the debate. Peter was now the enemy. When my mother asked me how Gram had seemed in Riverdale, I recalled her polishing the frame of Peter's military school portrait. I told my mother, well, it seemed like Gram was happy.

"Of course she's happy," she said, reaching over to pluck the envelope from my hand. As she withdrew the letter and separated the pages, I could see her eyes darting to and fro. "He was always the favorite. Here's the thing: since your father died, I've been *doing*. Finding a job. Paying the rent. Getting Milo a scholarship. Cleaning the dishes. This Peter business has made me *think.* I'm glad we're talking about this, because I don't want you to take it the wrong way. It's just that I've decided to start focusing more on my own needs. This may change things with Gram, the choices we make."

I didn't like the sound of this at all, the vagueness, the implied menace. I began to imagine all sorts of fantastic scenarios: my grandmother locked up in a nursing home, begging for spare change on Upper Broadway, pulling a shopping cart with her belongings past Kentucky Fried Chicken. The discomfort I felt induced a rocking motion, a kneading of hands. My eyes began to mist.

"I'm not saying anything in particular. Don't get upset."

“I’m not getting upset.” I was, though. It felt like a seam was opening up in the earth, like the one that had formed in Alaska after a big earthquake, when houses and bicycles were pulled into an airless chasm below ground. I stared at my sneakers and imagined myself falling into such a fissure. It would hurt for a moment, but then everything would be dark and there would be no cause for worry.

“Just look at you. Come over here, I’ll give you a hug.”

“It’s really hard for me when you don’t talk to Gram,” I half-whispered.

“I don’t know what to say to her anymore, that’s the thing, Milo.”

“Her birthday is next Tuesday. Call her.”

“It’s on my to-do list.”

My mother kept a locked file cabinet in the closet off the living room. A few times I had snuck in and tried to open it. While my mother was out grocery shopping one evening that next week, I crawled in with a flashlight and began jostling the heavy box with increasing violence. While doing so, quite by accident, I discovered a set of keys taped to one side. I felt my pulse quicken, listening for the sound of tumblers in the front door, but heard only water gurgling through the neighbor’s pipes, and a distantly barking dog. After fiddling with the keys, I was able to turn the lock. I opened the top cabinet and trained the cone of light inside.

Photo albums. I leafed through one of them and found pictures of my father. Here he was, bare-chested, on a grassy knoll next to my mother. Here he was lifting weights, shadow-boxing, sitting beside a piano. His nose and eyes I recognized as my own. I opened the bottom file drawer. Old travel documents. Apartment leases. Further back, a file labeled, simply, “Frank.” Inside I found, printed on a small rectangle of mustard-colored card stock, my father’s death certificate. Frank August. Place of death: Montshire, New Jersey. Time of death: 2:14 a.m. Cause of death: auto accident. Details of the impact appeared in my mind: shattered limbs, his face hitting the steering wheel, blood everywhere. My vision began to blur. My hands shook. The closet felt suddenly very claustrophobic as I replaced the album and file folder.

I knew where I needed to go at that moment. I went inside my bedroom, turned out the lights, and crawled under the covers with the sound of

a waterfall building in my head. In the darkness I began to create animations of my father. I gave him a forceful gate, a lopsided smile. I wanted his voice to be masculine, but with a twangy, nasal overtone. I felt his hand on my shoulder.

For my grandmother's birthday, my mother borrowed a friend's car and drove Gram and myself to Ming Garden. My grandmother loved fried noodles in duck sauce, over-sweetened ginger ale from the bar with the shimmering waterfall clock and miniature umbrellas that she hoarded and carried back in her purse. "What are you going to have, dear? So many choices, I can't decide!" She always decided on chicken with cashews. My mother ate with chopsticks, while Gram ate with a fork, slowly and methodically, until she had taken her fill. She always asked for a doggie bag.

When I saw my mother appraising my grandmother with the same detective's stare she had used with me back in the city after she noticed her boots had been rearranged in the closet, I knew something was afoot.

"Happy birthday," my mother said, setting a package on the table.

"Thank you so much, sweetheart. Ooh, how pretty!"

I knew what was in the package because I had gone through this before: pants suits, two pairs. My mother bought pants suits from Bloomingdale's because that was what Gram wanted. Every aspect of this process repelled my mother. Normally she lingered in the aisles, but when it came to pants suit buying, she held the articles at arm's length. They were, I think, everything she was trying not to be: old, lonely, Midwestern, middle class. This was ironic, because my grandmother loved receiving them.

"It's just wrapping paper."

"Aren't these flowers beautiful?" My grandmother struggled with the tape. "Oh, sugar. Look at these hands."

My mother unfastened the tape, opened the carton. Flashes of avocado and mustard peeked around the tissue paper.

"How lovely!"

"If they don't fit, I'll take them back tomorrow, no problem."

"Thank you so much, dear," my grandmother said. She began to sing: "'All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth, my two front teeth.' Remember how we used to sing that song?"

My mother tilted her head to one side. I recalled her story of

Christmas morning in Illinois. My great-grandparents had wrapped each volume of an encyclopedia, and asked that my mother and uncle recite a litany of twenty-six "thank-you's."

My grandmother had something special she wanted to show my mother. She began digging in her purse. I heard an airplane bank overhead; it was bound, I reasoned, for California, where I imagined my grandfather walking his cocker spaniel Gypsy along a sidewalk flanked by bermudagrass and sprinklers, while his second wife Dawn painted her toe nails on the patio. My mother never spoke much when we visited my grandfather and Dawn. I always had the sense that she was holding her tongue. When she did let something slip it usually took the form of a light jab at Dawn. "She must use quite a lot of hair spray," she would say, flipping through Dawn's copy of *Better Homes and Gardens.* "I guess she wants to keep everything in its place."

Look, my grandmother said, producing the blue air-mail envelope. Did my mother want to read it? My mother reminded Gram that Peter had written her too. They had talked about this. Didn't she remember?

"Did he tell you he's expecting a baby?" my grandmother asked.

"He did," my mother said.

"For goodness sake! How long has it been, dear, five years, six?"

"Eight years and two months in August."

"I was thinking we should call him today," my grandmother said. "What do you think? Should we?"

My mother opened her purse, applied lipstick, snapped it back into its silver tube. "You go ahead. I don't have much to say to him."

"But sweetheart, he's your brother. Don't you want to say hello?"

My mother fiddled with her hair, avoiding eye contact. After more hair-twirling, she shook her head and looked at my grandmother. "*He's* the one who cut out on *us*, remember?"

"They were very attached, you know, your husband and Peter. Frank was like an older brother to him."

"I was there too, mom. We were all there."

"I—"

"Peter can win the Nobel prize, O.K.? He can father 250 children. He can be the next Abraham, and it won't make a difference to me. Do you know what he said to me at Frank's funeral? You know what he said? 'I hope you'll be able to live with yourself.' That's what he said. After all I'd been through that week, those were Peter's final words of comfort. Can you believe that?"

I recoiled from this comment. In addition to having a high opinion of himself, it appeared Peter was awfully quick to lay blame. Why was it now my mother's fault?

Gram began to cry. My mother pulled a packet of Kleenex from her purse. Eight years *was* a long time, my mother said. She would have loved for Peter to be more involved in her life, but that wasn't how it had played out. "He made the choice. Now you're asking me to make nice. I'll tell you my answer. No."

Gram regarded Peter's letter, eyes glistening. My mother, arms crossed, watched Gram's half-eaten dish of cashew chicken being cleared. I looked at my hands, wanting to say something that would restart the conversation. Metallic clanking, and a blast of garlic-laded steam, billowed out from the kitchen. Seconds passed like stages in the fossil record. I supposed then that we had reached the essence of the conflict. My mother should not have been talking about my father's funeral at Gram's birthday lunch. I also understood that my efforts at diplomacy were no match for the pain that resided within both of them.

Finally I suggested that we go back to Gram's for dessert. My grandmother had prepared a bundt cake. Perhaps things would settle down a little after a slice of cake. This seemed acceptable to both women. We spent the usual twenty minutes getting Gram dressed in her wool overcoat with the black fur collar, escorting her down the sidewalk with the baby steps, the rest stops. In the car my grandmother thanked my mother for taking her out to such a wonderful lunch. She stared with renewed interest at pedestrians outside. My mother said sure, no problem.

Inside Gram's apartment my mother explained that she had to get back to the city. She needed to make progress on the annual report. "Don't you want to stay for dessert?" my grandmother asked.

"I really shouldn't," my mother said, tightening her overcoat.

"What about calling Peter? Are you sure you don't want to join me?"

My mother took Peter's letter from my grandmother's hand and carried it into the bedroom. I heard dialing, a pause. My grandmother gripped her cane. Now my mother was talking with someone, offering congratulations. Wonderful news about the baby. Gram shuffled expectantly into the hallway. "It's Peter," my mother said. "Why don't you come in here and talk to him. He's waiting."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to him a little longer?"

"I'm sure," my mother said, half-closing the door. "Happy now?"

"Thank you, sweetheart. Thank you so much."

Gram's bedroom door latch clicked shut with a resonant, foreboding "clunk." My mother lifted her purse from the couch, and I followed her toward the front door.

Some people have accused Henry of being a war criminal, for denying that we were bombing Cambodia, for sacrificing a million lives in order to achieve a meaningless goal. I am not here to polish one side of that coin or the other. What I can say is that, in the winter of 1973, my identification with him became complete: my grandmother grew synonymous with the intractable Le Duc Tho, and my mother took on the role of a defiant, paranoid Nixon.

Referring to the North Vietnamese, Kissinger writes in *Diplomacy* and *White House Years,* they were hard, unyielding. So, in her own way, was my grandmother, reclining in her nightgown, smiling at Paul Lynde's snarky put-downs on *Hollywood Squares.* She seemed incapable of grasping everyday pressures my mother faced, or how their shared past might impact her feelings about Uncle Peter. When Gram began to complain about my mother being hard to reach, I told her things were busy at work. This was partially true: my mother was staying later at the office. My trips to Riverdale were lengthening, while at home in Manhattan my mother slept less, smoked more. As February bled into March, my mother relied more on my grandmother for childcare, even as direct contact between them diminished. The increased frequency of my back-and-forth journeys heightened my fears that something sinister was taking shape. At night before bed I imagined teams of commandos rappelling off the roof of Building Three onto my grandmother's balcony.

At some point I realized I had become the sole line of communication between my mother and grandmother. This was not a role I relished. Each wanted to know how the other was doing, yet neither wanted to hear the truth. What was the truth? My mother was alone in New York with a dependent son and a stalled social life. My grandmother had a bad hip and unhealthy addictions to pills, *Hollywood Squares,* baked desserts.

In the city I returned many times to the locked file cabinet. By now I

had begun to dream about my father in movie-length sequences. I imagined him driving his car at two in the morning, insects flitting in and out of his headlights, seconds before hitting—what? A tree? A telephone pole? What had he been thinking just before he died? Was he drunk? In a letter from my paternal grandmother to my mother, I detected an undercurrent of blame, hints of his accident being not so accidental after all. "I can't help but feel that Frank would not have put himself in such a situation if he had been in happier circumstances at home." Now I wondered: *what* circumstances? Were they fighting? Was I the cause of their marital conflict?

In the back of the lower file cabinet I discovered my mother's high school yearbook, along with a scrap book full of keepsakes from cotillions she had organized. The invitations had voluptuous script lettering on pastel card stock, lace inserts, sequined bows. I took notes, and stored the notes in my stack of dossiers, but after a while it got repetitive. My mother's list of extra-curricular activities was a mile long: Honor Society, Class Council, Chorus, Synchronized Swimming, Debate. It went on and on. "Look at Me!" she seemed be shouting. "Look at What a Great Kid I am! Pay Attention to Me!"

A fresh body count appeared on Channel Seven: 1,732 North Vietnamese, 236 Americans and South Vietnamese. Who was gaining from this intractable conflict? And how long would it take for Henry to stop the carnage? Meanwhile, more letters arrived from St. Louis. Peter was urging us to visit.

My mother had clammed up completely. A couple weeks ago she'd had a reunion with a former boyfriend, a tax attorney named Larry who played drums in a jazz ensemble. Now Larry was having second thoughts. At night I could hear my mother on the telephone, crying, blowing her nose. Sometimes on a weekend evening she would call and tell me to go see my grandmother. I complained, but I went. If I was at Martin Schorn's place, I got on the Moshulu bus at 54th Street. If I was at John Novick's, I caught it at 19th. If I was at Fred Riordan's on Columbus I took the cross-town and picked up the Moshulu at 87th. This was the price of being a shuttle diplomat. You took orders. You paid your fare.

"Joining us today, are you, Milo?" Mr. Forman asked, as the debate club was about to start practice in Room 14.

“I’ll just watch from back here,” I said, from my flip-top desk near the coat rack.

“No spectators in this club. You’re in or you’re out. Mr. Brewster has quite a grasp of current events, don’t you, Mr. Brewster?”

The entire club turned to stare. I turned crimson. John Novick waved, and I waved back, meekly.

Mr. Forman said he had a topic right up my alley. “Recent signing of the Paris Peace Accords means the Vietnam War is truly over. True or false? Which side would you like to take, Milo?”

I considered everything I had been through with my family, and my growing obsession with American foreign policy. On one hand, I felt, bringing home American troops was an important step in ending the war. On the other hand, thinking that their removal would end the bloodshed seemed pretty unrealistic.

“What’ll it be, Milo? True or false? You can make up your mind on your way up here, if you like.”

I slid from behind my desk, put on my black-framed glasses, and stepped toward the podium. False, I decided. This war was not over, not by a long shot.

In March my mother started seeing Dennis Mahoney, an insurance executive from Chicago who had met her at a business function. It didn’t take long before Dennis was flying in every other weekend. He left his cowboy boots in the front hall, and hung his menthol-smelling trench coat on a rack next to the table where my mother opened mail. A balding, gangly man with fringes of gray at his temples, Dennis taught me the right way to shake hands: look the other guy straight in the eye, and give it your best shot. “Go ahead, try it,” he said, grabbing my hand. Dennis bought me a can of tennis balls and told me to keep squeezing them until my grip improved.

My mother let slip that she could imagine us moving to Chicago some day to be with Dennis, that he was bringing her back to her Midwestern roots. Not like all the neurotic intellectuals here in New York, she said. She found Dennis *very* refreshing.

I considered that if my mother and I left New York, my grandmother would be abandoned at Clearview. Who would visit her then? Where would she turn to for companionship? Often at night I stood in the dark at Gram’s

bedroom window, the Clearview pool, with its stew of rotting leaves in the deep end, faintly visible. I would turn then and stare at my snoring grandmother, her chest rising and falling, her fingers twitching, her chalky face set in the manner of a death mask.

It was always a highlight of my year to watch the Clearview pool come to life in May. A team of men removed a brown mass from the deep end, an enormous spigot ran for days, and suddenly summer arrived, with the promise of swimming, diving and trips to the pinball room. From the 22nd floor it beckoned, a blue 'L'-shaped miracle set amongst a forest of parasols and chaises.

Already Gram's apartment had acquired an air of tranquility on the morning of my mother's annual summer visit. The dining room table was set. Red and pink patterns on the plates created a glow at the center of the table. My grandmother baked cinnamon rolls then wrapped them in aluminum foil and stowed them in her bag so my mother would have something to eat. I advised her against this. When she ignored me I took what I felt were necessary measures; I removed the cinnamon rolls, and for good measure I lifted Peter's latest letter—he was writing one to my mother and grandmother every couple months to update them on Linda's pregnancy—out of the bag and placed it on Gram's side table.

At half-past nine my grandmother and I gathered our pool gear. We shuffled across the catwalk, past the trash chute, down the elevator. Baby-stepping down the sidewalk, my grandmother caught her breath during rest breaks. A rim of sweat covered her upper lip. When we reached the chaise lounges I helped her get comfortable. I began swimming then, diving after coins, amidst the flab, polyester, transistor radios, bathing caps, Pez dispensers, flip-flops. Shrieking girls jumped off their fathers' shoulders into the shallow end. I recognized Shirley, a chubby girl one or two years older than me who liked to hang out at the diving board and chew gum. A little after noon, kneeling on the concrete edge where I looked at a penny shifting under glass, I heard my grandmother calling: "Sugar! Look!"

Sitting upright in her chaise, my grandmother pointed toward the front entrance. My mother had passed through the ticket gate. Breaching the turnstile, she stepped onto the cement apron that girdled the swimming pool. I ran to hug her.

"Hello there, handsome," she said, stooping to look me in the eye. "Swimming pool working out O.K.?"

"It's great," I said.

We made our way to my grandmother's red umbrella amidst a haze of evaporating coconut oil.

"Hello, sweetheart," my grandmother said, kissing my mother. "I'm so glad you could come up today." Gram leaned her backside over the webbing. Grasping her cane in one hand and the chaise in the other, she lowered herself, bending at the knees until, at a critical juncture, she let herself fall onto the plastic. "Oopsydaisy!" My mother held Gram's forearm. "That's fine, dear. Thanks so much for your help." My grandmother rotated, one leg at a time, through 90 degrees in her chaise. Sweat had to be blotted, lipstick reapplied. My mother and I positioned ourselves as best we could underneath the tilted parasol. The day was becoming very hot. My grandmother rummaged through her canvas satchel. Gram wanted to know whether my mother had eaten breakfast. "Now isn't that the funniest thing? I can't find the cinnamon rolls anywhere. Milo, do you remember where I put them?"

"They may have gotten left at home," I said.

"I can't find Peter's letter either. Your poor old grandmother is having memory trouble today, Milo."

Gram removed a photo from one of the clear plastic inserts in her wallet. Peter's new baby had arrived on schedule, a boy, Jason. Wasn't that an adorable name?

"Gram," I said.

"I brought the picture so you could take a look. Here it is," Gram said, brandishing the portrait.

"Gram, don't," I said.

"No, thanks," my mother said.

"Go on, sugar, here, look how cute he is."

"He sent one to me, remember? I really don't want to. Thanks."

My grandmother's hand stretched over the airless gap that separated her from my mother. Young Jason, on his baby blanket, sat suspended in mid-air.

"Excuse me, I need a cigarette," my mother said, grabbing for her bag. It got caught on the leg of her chaise. She struggled, freed the bag finally, and reached inside for her silver flip-top lighter. After strapping on her sandals she strode away from us.

Gram said she thought my mother seemed nervous. I told her she had been a little preoccupied lately. Beyond that, I said, I thought talking about Uncle Peter today was not such a great idea.

"I reserved a cushion for her, too. Why don't you go for a swim, dear. You can take a nice swim and we'll meet you back here at the cabana."

I wasn't interested in taking a nice swim. What interested me was heading off a spat between Gram and my mother. I veered off in the direction of the diving boards, then doubled back after several paces and began trailing Gram. My mother was leaning on the fence, smoking, next to Joe the Cushion Man. When Gram approached Joe and opened her purse, my mother waved her hand, saying she didn't need a cushion.

"But I reserved one for you, sugar," my grandmother said.

"The chaise lounges are fine without them."

"Sometimes they run out. Don't you run out sometimes, Joe?"

Joe the Cushion Man shrugged. A stack of 20 or 25 rose behind him. My grandmother began pulling a five out of her purse. "On a hot summer day like this? Of course they run out." I pointed out to Gram that my mother didn't need a cushion. My mother said it was O.K., she could handle this. She reached into her own pocket. "Mom, for Christ sake."

"I'll get it, dear."

"No, I'll get it."

"Gram."

"You'll be much more comfortable with a cushion."

"Mom, stop, O.K.? I'll pay for it."

I watched my mother reach for my grandmother's wrist, grasp it and pull it away from Joe the Cushion Man, and I heard a soft whimper issue from Gram's lips. "Jimminy Christmas!" my grandmother said.

"I told you I don't want a cushion. Can't you listen to me? The chaise lounges are perfectly fine without them. It's a beautiful day. I can lie all day without a cushion." Her cigarette dropped on the cement and disappeared under the grinding toe of her sandal.

"I was only trying to help."

"Stop trying to help me. Help yourself a little!"

"I don't know what you mean, dear."

My mother walked off toward the pool building, while Gram stood with the rolled-up five clenched in her fist. I sprinted across the concrete,

through the door to the downstairs bathroom, and ran barefoot down the stairs, into the lounge area, with the colored lights and the Venus fountain. I found my mother on a bench in the dark.

"You O.K.? What's going on?"

"I always wanted her to be my parent. But she's not, she's a child herself." She massaged her forehead and stared at the floor before turning to face me. "I'm through with all this, Milo. You and I, we'll be together, whatever happens with Dennis, or anyone else, but not this. You can tell her I'm going back to the city."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Tell her something. I don't care. Be diplomatic."

She released me, and I followed her upstairs. At the entry gate she gave me a hug. Things were going to be different, she said. There would be changes. None of these changes would be positive ones for my grandmother, I imagined. I watched my mother exit and duck out of sight. Walking along the pool edge, the laughing children with their laughing parents now seemed distant to me. I felt drawn away, removed from their joy. Most of all I wanted to talk to Henry. He would counsel me. He would forgive me for my failings.

When I reached the cabana Gram asked whether my mother was all right. I told her she wasn't feeling well, that she'd decided to go back to Manhattan.

"She'll miss dinner. What a shame."

"She's sorry she had to leave so soon."

"What a lovely afternoon, too."

"Yes," I said. "It is a beautiful day."

For a long time I wondered about my grandmother's Le Duc Tho-like intransigence. After Gram's death—my mother and I had been to Chicago and back, and she was single again—my mother asked for an autopsy. It turned out my grandmother had developed Alzheimer's. The news seemed to provide comfort to my mother. "Maybe she was just a senile old bat after all, Milo," she told me, when I called from my office on the day she received the report. I wasn't so sure. The two of them, it seemed to me, had been set on a collision course ever since that day in Illinois when Peter lay unconscious in the road. If that was the start of the Hot War, then the Cold War had concluded one afternoon in 1973 at Clearview swimming pool.

On that day we had, in some sense, achieved what Kissinger could not, Peace With Honor.