

Elegy for Miss Beagle
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It was a year of maiden-lady suicides. A school teacher here, a piano mistress there, and always a name you'd hate to have: Miss Winifred Muckler, Miss Lone Hicks, and then Miss Ella Beagle--my mother's teacher for Advanced Piano. It was 1938, a college town in Indiana, Picture the starched blouse, the wilted satin bow at the neck, and then, what nobody ever expects: eyes full of a clear crazy light--like the eyes of outlaws in old picture books--making you wonder what they've seen.

"Don't start with the romance," Says my mother. "It's the photographer's flash--all the old pictures look like that." Miss Beagle, she reminds me, was impoverished, lived alone in a small apartment on the second floor of a partitioned house; she had no family, no people that anybody knew. In those days you could safely choose a piano teacher by name alone, and from such a name as this, Grandmother Eva got what she could: that this teacher was local, plain, had never had a love affair or a year at the Sorbonne--nothing to give a young girl ideas. And Jewish just like us, though with the name of a little dog surely something had gone wrong at Ellis Island. In such matters my grandmother was legendary. "It's nothing, just an instinct," she used to say to us. "Down it comes, straight through the generations without a hitch, until we get to your mother."

My mother, their little girl. There's not much to go on; a mother will only tell you certain things. She says now that I have a daughter of my own I'll be the same. But what if they spoiled her a little, without realizing, then had to clamp down? What if, at twelve, she was sneaking trashy books into the house; at thirteen, sneaking out with silk stockings under the black tights. Grandfather Jacob was already sick by then with diabetes, and Eva would have kept the house dark and quiet straight through summer, as if the sunlight and the gaudy elms would speed him into a grave. Who knows why, but my grandmother worried most during brilliant weather. "Trust me," she'd say, "it's just part of the instinct".

But my mother: here she is at thirteen, still blind to the dull daily facts of adult misery. Never mind that her house smells of rubbing alcohol--no, she detects something sinister and interesting underneath, something sweet and foul. Her childish imagination connects it to the Yiddish newspapers piling up on the sideboard, the dining-room table--all those spiky letters crammed together on the page, not like any normal language. At thirteen, she's still fantasizing about being orphaned, or discovering an extra child locked up in the attic, or, at the very least, finding out that her daddy has a nasty sex-disease brought from Europe years ago. What she's really hoping for, she can't yet know, but what would it feel like to stand on the verge of knowledge in a house like that: tantalized by the dark, kept innocent of the history that, in her parents' own childhoods, had reached out

like a pair of dirty hands. But my mother's just a kid, a sheltered American girl, stranded in a dark house. So when nobody's looking, she sneaks a glance at The Family Medical Guide and traces the tiny print under Sexually Communicated Diseases: dizziness, delirium, gradual loss of sight. Pustules, papules, squamous lesions--these she hasn't noticed yet, maybe later.