

ELISA TODD

I

Winter was approaching much too quickly for my fragile bones, but what was I going to do, fly south? Not my instinct. Besides, how could anyone leave New York for the winter? Where was one to go, to the islands? The islands! They did seem appealing: St. Croix, St. Lucia, Martinique...farther south just to be sure: Grenada, St. Vincent, the Tabago Keys, Aruba, the Galapagos Islands? One might as well go to hell...one might as well stay here.

"Winter in New York it will be," I remember saying to myself. If only I had known what a terrible winter it would be, how cold and bitter, and how I would cut to the marrow of my life, kissing death as a friend, caressing my shadow's black lips with surgeon's fingers and artful thoughts. Would that it never had happened! Would that I had never been born! Somewhere, someone made a mistake, and for that, I made a hundred, a thousand; entire generations have been lost for a single error, a passion, a whim, an impulse...if only I had flown south for the winter!

I remember closing the windows to keep out the chill; an hour later I still felt the chill. I was as cold as the snow on a high windy peak and, as I reflect, as prone to an avalanche; my sanity was a thin sheet of ice on which the whole world was carelessly skating; my mind was like Rockefeller Rink on the day of an unexpected thaw: mushy, impressionable, and very dangerous; I should have

been wearing a sign, bearing, as Hester Prynne did in The Scarlet Letter, the mark of my burden: DANGER THIN ICE!

There I sat, staring out my apartment window overlooking Park Avenue, watching the world as if the window were a movie screen, watching as if the cars flowing by had been directed by a garrulous director, watching as if life were nothing but a picture show for which the admission price was birth.

I watched a man wearing a grey overcoat get caught by the swiftly changing lights on the island separating the north and southbound lanes of Park Avenue. He stood motionless watching the oncoming traffic. He seemed dangerously close to the edge of the island divide; speeding taxis passed within inches of his flapping coat leaving him standing in a whirling breeze. One slip, one awkward lean, one driver cruising too close to the curb and he would be smashed, thrown into the air, and he would end up a bloody heap on the asphalt pavement. The red light changed to green. The man crossed safely to the other side of Park Avenue. He disappeared down a side street.

I sat in front of my screenlike window, unemployed, overeducated, alone, and to top it all off, I could not get the chill out of my bones. I put a pot of water on the stove, warmed my hands, and watched the water boil. Bubbles formed. Steam rose. Furious boiling was attained. I boiled with the agitated water because that is how I felt: furious as boiling water, seething. I let the water cook for a full minute just to make sure that it was sterile, that all the germs were dead. I never made coffee or tea; I always drank hot water plain, so it was very important that there were no little organisms left alive in it; I did not want any small fish swimming around in my drinking water; I did not want to taste anything; I did not want to see anything; I did not want to smell anything; I only wanted hot water and vapor to warm my chilly bones.

I poured myself a large mug of sterile water, my most trustworthy companion, and returned to my seat in front of the window; it was midday, fuzzy grey Autumn; cars sailed ceaselessly along Park Avenue; pigeons alighted on their familiar window sill perches. I thought about the businessman in the grey overcoat who had been trapped by the changing lights, who had stood on the edge of the island so dangerously close to the traffic lane. Why had he been outside in the middle of the day? Was he meeting someone for lunch? Maybe he was going to see his doctor for an ingrown toenail or stomach pains. Perhaps he was more seriously ill with a rare and incurable disease that he could not tell anyone about, not even his wife. Maybe he had cancer or heart murmurs. Perhaps he was not sick at all; he had not had the appearance of a sick man; he had walked with a rather strong gait. Sick men walk slowly and insecurely, leaning on banisters and gasping for breath. This man had walked quickly and surely, even athletically. He was in perfect health. He was fit, strong, and brave; he had not even feared the oncoming cars. He was as steady as Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca"...that is how healthy he was. It must have been his child who was sick, his only daughter. This man was tough and was going to help his poor young daughter get well. He was going home to protect her from the ghouls and goblins, from sniffles and fever. He had probably left work just to check on her, just because a nurse had called from school telling him that his precious had been sent home feeling weak: "She had sneezed twice and coughed once, and although we did not find a fever, she might develop one at any moment." How wonderful he must have been, cancelling half a dozen meetings and an important presentation just to see his precious safe at home. He had postponed everything in his afternoon book just to make her smile. "Daddy!" she would yell as she ran into his arms. "Daddy, I got sent home from school." He would lift her up lovingly: "How do you feel my daffodil?" She would smile all gooey warm inside. "I feel better now." Yes,

daddy was home and all was well....I remember coming home sick from school one day, and my daddy came home from the office to take care of me. I remember it well; he had made me feel good, safe, and warm. He had tucked me into bed...how wonderful it had been.

The hot water warmed my hands, my insides, and my bones. I sipped it as if it were the most expensive liqueur. I let the steam tickle my nose...where was my daddy now that I really needed him? In heaven with my mother I supposed. My parents, the ambassadors of success, were in heaven, while I, the princess of failure, was in their apartment on Park Avenue; it should have been the other way around...why had they abandoned me? Why had they gone away at precisely the time when I needed them most? Why had they left the situation so out of control? When were they coming back? I glanced around the apartment; it was a mess; books, magazines, clothing, and dishes were scattered all about. It would do no good to clean up; they were never coming back.

I finished my mug of hot water, glanced out the window, and immediately felt cold again...what was I going to do? I did not want to sit in the apartment all day; I did that most of the time. In fact, I had not gone out in a week. I needed to get some fresh air, some stimulation; I needed to get out...but to where? Where would I go...to the islands? No, I had decided against that and could not go back on my word. I could go to a museum, but I was tired of museums; I had been to them all and found them barren compared to the animated museum around me. I could just go for a walk, an adventure walk, a walk without a predetermined destination. If I did not like the weather outside, I could walk right around the block and return home. If I did like the weather, I could go for two or three blocks or more. Perfect! I could decide as I walked, stopping at each corner in order to choose whether to turn back or to walk onwards. I could even make the decision every half block or every quarter block, or I could

make it continuously. Fantastic! All options open, all possibilities present...an adventure walk it would be, and if I really felt good, I could go to a movie. I loved the movies. I lived for the movies. If all went well, I would go to a double feature...how excitingly the opportunities were revealing themselves; how wonderfully the potential futures could unfold! I could look for the spiciest double feature in town: Garbo and Davis, Brando and Dean. Yes, I was happy again; a second mug of hot water had warmed me completely. I put on my coat, loaded my pockets with keys and cash, and with great expectations, let the door slam behind me. The little eye-peeper almost popped right out. The glass inside rattled; it was already cracked.

The elevator took forever to arrive. The elevator man, Dominique, who was as drunk as usual, opened the metal, lattice door with a crash. I shivered from the dark red hue in his eyes which seemed to be bleeding; every vessel was on the verge of explosion. It was a miracle that the man could see; he was on fire. The elevator plummeted downward and stopped half a foot below the lobby landing. It went up, down, and up, and missed its mark again. It settled down very slowly. "Pardon madame!" Dominique mumbled incoherently as if he were speaking in a dream to a fragment of his imagination. "Pardon moi!"

I stood horrified by his greasy black hair combed in spaghettilike clumps, by his decaying crooked teeth - a silver cap here, one missing there - and by his abysmal red eyes; his eyes were unbearable. "Merci beaucoup!" I said as I jumped out of the elevator which was still an inch below floor level. I passed anxiously through the lobby. Albert, the doorman, was not attentive, so I leaned hard against the heavy lobby door and slid sideways into the open street. I looked up to the sky above Park Avenue and watched a jet soar through the clouds. I welcomed the fresh air and open space; it was wonderful. After all, I had not been out of my dingy apartment for over a week.

I thought about Dominique. I could not have imagined a ghastlier sight; his hideous eyes blazed in my own. Did he dislike riding up and down in the elevator all day? Had not he resigned to it? He had been doing it for years, ever since I could remember, and much before that. What was going on in his fiendish mind?...Up and down. Up and down. "Pardon moi!"^{Me} I'm sorry, but I just had t-t-too much to drink, too much to d-drink for the p-past forty years...Pardon moi!"^{Me} What could I do but to pardon this living Sisyphus, this fool of the fates doomed to ride his elevator up and down until the cable wore thin, snapped, and he plummeted with a sigh of relief into eternity? How could I not have sympathy for Dominique? How could I not reach out to this monster as ugly as Frankenstein, as crippled as Quasimodo and twice as hunched? He was as gross and disturbing as my father had been when they pulled him from the wreck with blood pouring out of his mouth, nose, eyes, and ears; I was aghast.

I took a deep breath of fresh air. A car roared by. A breeze whipped up my coat sleeves. Grey clouds flew overhead. The long rows of majestic buildings stood strong and proud against the elements, and yet, to me, they were the elements, the engineered cliffs of Manhattan, the rock faces and caverns of the concrete jungle; only one Egyptian temple ever looked so ominous...Karnak! I thought with a crushing fear about Luxor on the Nile...and Cairo! I gave myself a hug to tame the chill and proceeded to walk downtown.

I did not stop at the first corner, nor at the second, nor at the third; I had no intention of stopping at all; I wanted to take a very long walk and to avoid if possible returning to my apartment until after nightfall; it would be easy if I could find a good double feature, or if I found a good single, I could always sit through it twice...no trouble at all; I could stay out for hours; besides, I would have to eat and that would take up plenty of time.

How pitiable I was without a care in the world, without direction, and without desire. Oh, I had money, food, and a nice flat...but what good were these materials to me? What did I derive from them? Nothing. I was lonely, pathetic, and bored. I had nothing to do to occupy my mind and no one to fill my time; I would have been better off without any provisions, starving in the streets, searching for a job, sleeping on park benches, and begging for nickels and dimes; at least then, I would have had a goal, a purpose; I had none. At least then, I would have an excuse to suffer; I had none, yet I suffered nonetheless; I suffered for the sake of suffering as some people worry about worrying; I suffered for lack of anything better to do. My sorry disposition was all my own fault; I could have found a job, submitted to the daily routine, but something held me back; and besides, I had no real skills anyway...work? No, the working world was not for me; it involved too much drive and energy; it would only eat me up and spit me out, and I was already chewed up enough....School? I could have gone back to school, but I had had quite enough of that, if not too much; and moreover, I found that I could learn more by overhearing a good conversation than by taking an advanced full year course; the world was my educator, the city my classroom; there was no reason for me to go back to school....Romance? Admittedly, I was looking for romance, but then again, who was not? I mean, I was never very popular with the guys. I was never outgoing or pretty to look at. I have always been skinny, flat-chested, short, pale, and just plain unattractive. I had about as much chance of finding romance as a porcupine in a balloon factory; my social life was a bust....Travel much? I could have traveled, but I had done that before. I had been twice around the world by the time I was twenty-one and knew that I could travel just as well while actually staying at home. "Traveling," for me, like "staying at home," was a state of mind; one chapter of Moby Dick and I was good as gone, far gone on a

whaling journey; and besides, I had decided against it; I had decided to spend the winter in New York....New York? I loved New York, and I hated it. I was born, bred, and undeniably was addicted to New York like other people were addicted to cigarettes, alcohol, or more potent narcotics. Living in New York gave me a sense, a false one no doubt, of doing something; it created the illusion of participating. At least, I could justify my life, I was in New York with all those busy people, lights, and excitement. Everybody in New York, from the least to the most, from the worst to the best, was doing something, was going somewhere, at least was getting high on being in New York. I was one of those people. I was a victim, physically and psychologically, of whatever it was that lured and addicted people, pigeons, cockroaches, and squirrels to the crazy city. I was a true New Yorker.

There I was, walking down Park Avenue with my eyes on the grey cement, when to my utmost surprise, I heard someone utter, as if from the crawl space backstage, "Lisa....Lisa!" That was not my name, but it was close enough; a vaguely familiar quality in the voice made me pause. I looked up at the oncoming figure. Once visible, I easily recognized Linda Muller, an old friend who at times was my best friend, and who, at other times, was merely an acquaintance; it was our parents who had originally and always, until the accident, been friends. "Linda!" I said with surprise. I was very happy to see her.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," she said as if I had been resurrected, as if I had come back from the dead to haunt the sidewalks of Park Avenue; but then again, I had not seen her since the death of my parents. I saw it in her eyes; she was thinking about them and about the accident; she was apologizing; she was feeling guilty that she had neglected to check up on me for almost a year.

"No," I said. I glanced down at the sidewalk and then back at her. She looked happy and busy. She smiled.

"We should get together," she said without hesitation. She wanted to rescue me. "I'm having a party Saturday night; would you like to come? We'll have a chance to talk there." She was sincerely my friend.

"Sure," I said; I would have nothing better to do. Since the accident, I did not like going to parties, especially when I did not know most of the guests, but Linda's party would be different; we had a lot to catch up on; and besides, she would probably introduce me to some very interesting people; if I had one decent conversation, it would be worth the whole evening. "I'll be there...thank you!"

"Bring a friend if you want."

"Fine," I laughed, although I knew that I would have no date.

She grabbed my hand and held it firmly. "I'm really glad that we bumped; we sort of lost touch. I'll see you Saturday then...take care!" She kissed me and was off.

"Bye!" I said to her back. I watched her walk a block and turn into her building. I did not mind that she had called me Lisa; she had often done that before. She had made me happy. In fact, I felt wonderful; I was busy and active again. I thought about the times we had shared together in our childhood by the sailing pond, playing around the "Alice In Wonderland" sculpture on sunny days in Central Park. I remembered through pictures pasted in the family photograph albums, pictures that had become the building blocks out of which my memory was constructed. The architecture of my memory, I was convinced, was very similar to a stack of family photograph albums; the pictures arranged chronologically, or according to related people, or according to places visited, or according to specific events, or haphazardly, or according to some unknowable and mysterious

thread of the subconscious...but every image stacked, filed, and callable for reference, for remembering.

I continued down the street trying to remember what day it was. "Tuesday," I thought at first. Then, "Wednesday." I was not sure. "Tuesday," I finally decided because the day before could only have been Monday. I had to think clearly: "Saturday (seven) minus Tuesday (three) leaves four days until the party." I was very excited.

I arrived at a wide crosstown street and, following the invitation of a green light, headed west toward Madison Avenue only to be caught on the Park Avenue island separating north and southbound traffic; the light had trapped me. I positioned myself close to the edge of the island, as if on the edge of a windblown cliff, and waited for the traffic to start. I wanted to be as bold as the businessman that I had seen from my window. I stood firmly as the cars started forward, but I stepped back as the first speeding automobile approached on the inside lane. Imbecile! One slip and it would be all over; one wrong step and death would smash me with a motor-driven hammer...bang! I became impatient. I wanted to get off the island as quickly as possible; the treacherous sound of speeding cars in front and behind of me gave me a chill. I looked up at the long rows of tall buildings and wondered how they had been built so straight; not one brick seemed out of place. I remembered that Manhattan Island was mostly solid bedrock below. I laughed at the song that came to mind, lines from a television cartoon: "You'll have a good time, a da-ba-do-time, you'll have a gay old time." The light turned green. I hurried across the street.

Park Avenue to Madison was a long block with a section of gem-filled sidewalk that sparkled like a starry Vermont night...and what glitter of hope; it sparkled even in New York on a grey Tuesday in November.

As I approached the corner I approached another decision. The light urged me to cross Madison Avenue, so I did and continued on to Fifth. I would be happy to walk down Fifth Avenue because then I could walk along Central Park and would not have to worry about crossing so many streets. With my mind the way it was, I would be safer crossing fewer streets; after all, one absentminded step and...checkmate! The game would be over.

I walked slowly toward the park side of Fifth. When I arrived at the crosswalk, the light was blinking red, so I ran across and hopped, like Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz," onto the adventurous sidewalk. Fifth Avenue was dreamy, magical, and very very rich. If New York were Emerald City, then certainly Fifth Avenue was the enchanted Yellow Brick Road; one never knew who one might meet strolling along Fifth Avenue.

I looked around. The sky was flat grey, the trees in the park were mostly bare, and the fountains at the Metropolitan Museum of Art had been turned off, yet I was strangely pleased; I was happy from having bumped into Linda and from having been invited to her party; my mind was racing in elation; my blood was warm; for the moment my pains were buried, although delicately close to the surface, under an emulsion of lightsensitive emotion. I had a feeling to be savored, absolutely indulged in, precisely why I had gone on a walk in the first place. I wallowed in my bliss. I quickened my pace. I started to skip down the street under a tunnel of leafless branches and trees...how quaint the memorial honoring R. M. Hunt, friend of the arts; how magnificent the mansion housing the Frick Collection opposite it; how mischievous to hop upon the parade bleachers considerably set out for the holiday season! I almost lost my balance as I gazed into the park; a tingle traveled up and down my spine. The park, which had recently been green and full of noise and colorful crowds, was empty and brown. It seemed as dangerous as any rumor ever made it out to be. It evoked such a

cold stare that it seemed like a garden of death, the playground of the devil herself, the hellhole of New York. I walked along the park wall until I could see the drained sailing pond with its bed of rotting leaves. I thought about the "Alice In Wonderland" sculpture nearby. Instantly, as if it were summer again, the park turned from hell to heaven, from Hades to Eden, from a garden of darkness to a garden of light; it was the only garden around, the only open space in the ever confining city. I decided to enter the garden, to visit the sandbox of my childhood, to touch the "Alice In Wonderland" sculpture once again. I jumped down off the rickety parade bleachers and ran towards the nearest park entrance.

II

Inside the park I walked steadily, cautiously, and for the most part, fearlessly. I knew how to identify trouble and how to avoid it; I knew where to run. I had frolicked in the park for over twenty-one years and had only been mugged once, as a child, when a gang of hoodlums had stolen my Flexible Flyer sled in the middle of the day in front of countless apathetic onlookers. Nevertheless, I had learned and fully believed that, per square foot, Central Park was the safest place in the city, and, certainly, it was one of the most beautiful.

I walked by the sailing pond where two old men sat together on a broken bench, chatting, pondering, watching me pass quickly to the bronze "Alice In Wonderland" statue on which I had climbed, as a child, a thousand, perhaps ten thousand times before. I touched its cold metal, caressing the smooth mushroom on which Alice sat, half-lotus, with a puppy-dog in her lap. I peered at the White Rabbit, stopwatch in hand, and at the Mad Hatter with his snide grin. The Cheshire Cat was perched, as always, cozily behind in a stubby tree trunk. I read from the inscription on the sculpture's dedication plaque: "In Memory of My Wife, Margarita Delacorte, Who Loved All Children." Here was true love, a love which consistently gleamed upon all those that came in touch with it, captured and well preserved in a solid bronze sculpture; here was solid bronze love visibly and tangibly at work. What a monument! What a work of art! What wonderful memories of endless, sunny afternoons of delight! "O frabjous day! Calloo! Callay!" I recited, recalling a line from Lewis Carrol's poem, "Jabberwocky." I was just as lost as Alice having fallen through a hole into a strange and bizarre world. Poor Alice, poor me! Lucky Alice, lucky me! I was lucky, at least, to pause, to step back, and to examine from a distance, as

through the wrong end of a looking glass, the world and its folly. I was poor, as Alice, to be subject to such unwarranted twists of fate, to find myself in such hopeless and uncontrollable situations, and to be so lost and so alone, that it would take a miracle to make me believe that life was other than a series of absolutely unrelated hallucinations. Where was I? What was I going to do? I read one of the poetic inscriptions surrounding the statue: "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat! How I wonder what you're at! Up above the world you fly, like a tea-tray in the sky." I reexamined the entire sculpture, observing, as if for the first time, every detail, curve, and crease. I wanted to fuse with it, to become one of its characters; then the children would come and say: "There's Alice, and there's the White Rabbit, and there's the Cheshire Cat, and there's Alice's friend...Elisa Todd!" If only I could be Alice's accomplice in giving such joy, in sharing such love; if only there were a hole under the sculpture through which I could fall into a world of excitement, adventure, and magic; if only my life were as wonderful as Alice's....

My enchantment with the statue was so complete that for an instant I imagined that part of it was moving, that Alice had started to rise, and that the White Rabbit had shifted his head. I stared at the beautiful bronze sculpture; it was still...it was my head that was spinning! I looked all around as if I expected to see someone sneaking up on me. The two old men who had been on the park bench were gone; a strange man was lurking in the distant shadows; it was time to leave. I looked back at Alice. "Bye-bye!" I said to her. I put my cold hands into my pocket and slowly strolled out of the dying park. Where was I supposed to go? What was I supposed to do? I did not want to go back to my apartment in order to sit alone and stare out the window. I had to find something exciting to do, somewhere special to go; I had at least to find a movie theater and a restaurant. Maybe I could find someone to join me, an old friend,

or if all my friends were busy, which they no doubt would be, a delightful stranger. People in the movies were always meeting delightful strangers to spend the evening with, so could I. Perhaps I would meet a French director, or an Italian producer. Perhaps I would meet a movie star; after all, I was in New York, land of the celebrity. If only James Dean were still alive or Marlon Brando a bit younger; if only Dustin Hoffman or Bobby De Niro were to stroll by alone and talkative; if only I had someone to talk to and something to do....

I walked slowly down Fifth Avenue in the early evening light. I passed between the magnificent Temple Emanu-El with its high Moorish-Romanesque arches and the delightful Childrens Zoo with its large smiling whale which reminded me of Moby Dick...all I needed was a Mecca for my pilgrimage, a white whale, a purpose for my strivings. Everyone around me seemed to have a goal; they were all working for something...but for what? for food? for shelter? for clothing? They had those necessities a hundred times over; then perhaps for some higher order psychological fulfillment? Such personal satisfaction did not really seem to exist. Everyone went through the motions, did their work, made their bread, and went on vacations...but what did it come to? Why did they pretend to be so interested in what they were doing? Why did they think that their work was so important? What was driving them? I could not understand it. I could not understand any of it.

And then, in an instant, as if the price of questioning were self-mockery, my thoughts flipped and I envied every working person, every capable human being, every doctor, lawyer, banker, broker, teacher, factory worker, mechanic, salesperson, waiter, cook, and cop, everybody but myself who had something to do, who worked for herself and for her neighbors. I was a parasite, a leech, and a worm. I was the lowest of the low, and I was thoroughly disgusted with myself. If only I could find a job; I would do anything to be of service to anyone; how

ugly and useless I was, and how noble and deserving was every perseverant worker; how honorable to suffer continually for others, for family, and for friends; how dignified to create a space to live in, to have a career, to help, and to contribute; I was the greedy one; I was a useless young lady who suffered only for herself...but why?

I had no right to mourn for the rest of my life just because the brakes had failed, just because my parents had...oh, but it was all my own fault, all my own fault! I did not have to call them from the party; they did not have to come pick me up; I could have taken a taxi...why did I do it? Why had I killed them? I remember my mother sitting in the front seat; I was lying drunk in the back. I heard her scream, but before I could look up I was thrown to the floor of the car where I did not even get hurt. I did not even get knocked unconscious, but I sat up after the accident; and what a horrible sight...my poor mangled parents...what an awful bloody sight! I remember trying to get out, but the doors were jammed, and that is when I fainted; when I could not get out of the bloody mess, when I realized that I was trapped with my dying parents in the wreck, when I felt the metal and glass collapsing in on me...that is when I lost consciousness.

The accident changed everything; it shattered my life and completely altered the world around me; it left me confused, depressed, disturbed, and numb; it cracked all my frameworks; it destroyed the foundations of my knowledge and the nature of my perceptions. The unexpected and the incomprehensible had entered my life. An error as simple as the loss of control, the failure of a pair of brakes, had changed the course of my life and of all subsequent history. An accident had become the most profound influence on my faith; and henceforth, I firmly came to believe that no accident is without cause, and that no cause is without purpose.