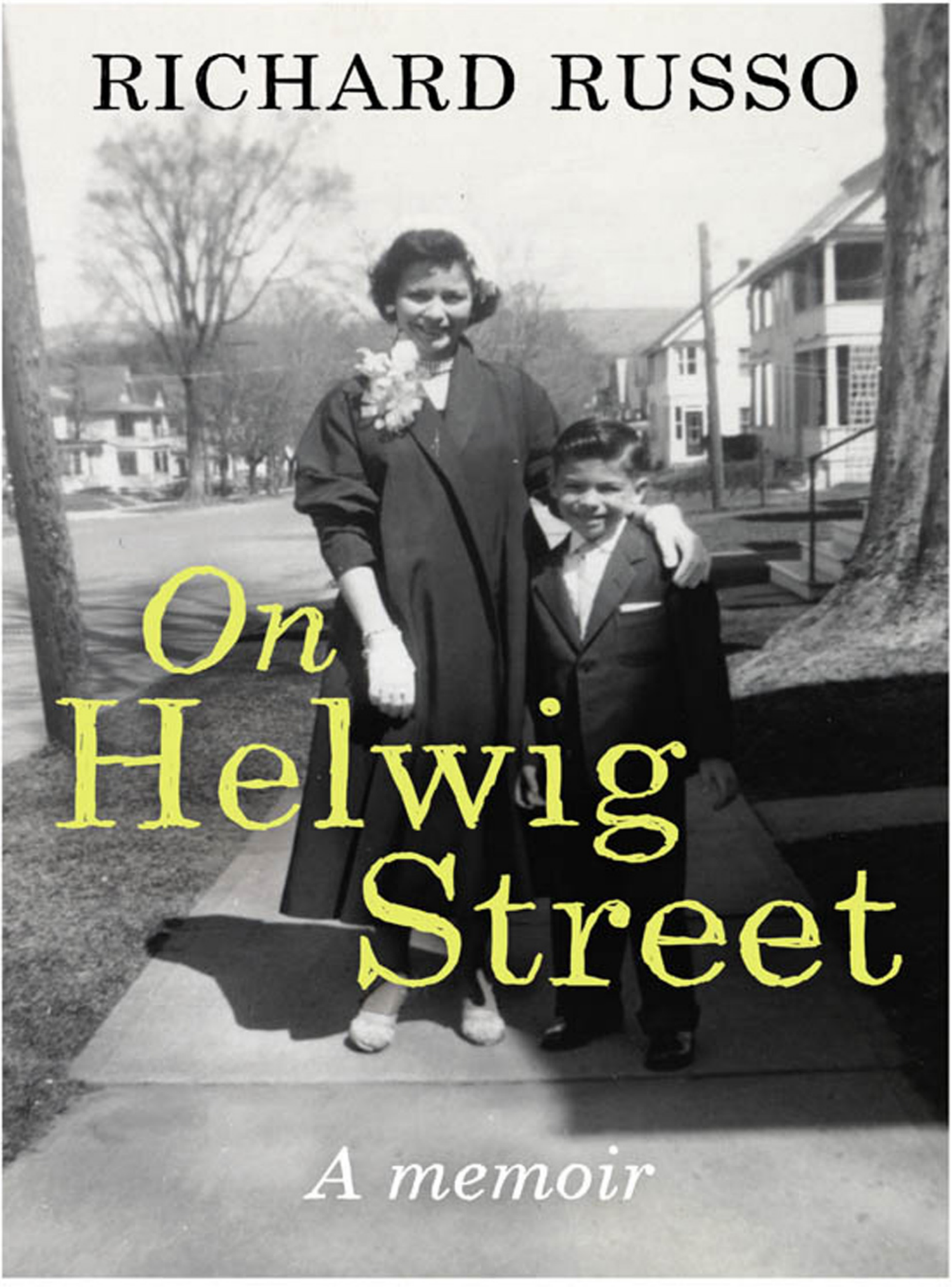
RICHARD RUSSO



On Helwig Street

A memoir

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Richard Russo
Dedication
Title Page
Prologue

Independence
A Good Talking-To
A Diagnosis
Unsettled
Real Time
Here and There
High and Dry

Acknowledgments
Copyright

About the Book

Jean Russo was a single mother in the 1950s, badly paid and living with her parents in Gloversville, New York, a dead-end town whose heyday as the hub of the leather-goods industry was just a distant memory. ‘You are getting out of Gloversville’ was her mantra throughout Richard’s high school years. And when he finally made his intrepid escape from the family home on Helwig Street – fleeing to a far-flung college in a banger nicknamed The Gray Death – Jean saw her chance of a better life elsewhere, and jumped in for the first of many ill-conceived adventures. But life on the run from home took its toll on them both, and in this captivating memoir Russo describes how childhood segued into adulthood and parenthood in the company of his restless mother, for whom the grass was always greener in the place where she was not. At the same time he recounts with touching honesty how his own contentment and literary success were at odds with her lifelong battle against disillusionment and anxiety – and the siren call of Gloversville.

About the Author

Richard Russo won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for his fifth novel, *Empire Falls*. He is also the author of *Mohawk, The Risk Pool, Nobody's Fool, Straight Man, Bridge of Sighs* and *That Old Cape Magic*, as well as a collection of stories, *The Whore's Child*. His original screenplay is the basis for Rowan Atkinson's film *Keeping Mum*. He lives with his wife in Maine and in Boston.

Also by Richard Russo:

Mohawk

The Risk Pool

Nobody's Fool

Straight Man

Empire Falls

The Whore's Child

Bridge of Sighs

That Old Cape Magic

For Greg

ON HELWIG STREET

A Memoir

Richard Russo

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Prologue

A few years ago, passing the sign on the New York State Thruway for the Central Leatherstocking Region, a friend of mine misread it as saying *laughingstock* and thought, That must be where Russo's from. She was right. I'm from Gloversville, just a few miles north in the foothills of the Adirondacks, a place that's easy to joke about unless you live there, as some of my family still do.

The town wasn't always a joke. In its heyday, nine out of ten dress gloves in the United States were manufactured there. By the end of the nineteenth century, craftsmen from all over Europe had flocked in, for decades producing gloves on a par with the finest made anywhere in the world. Back then glove-cutting was governed by a guild, and you typically apprenticed, as my maternal grandfather did, for two or three years. The primary tools of a trained glove-cutter's trade were his eye, his experience of animal skins, and his imagination. It was my grandfather who gave me my first lessons in art—though I doubt he would've worded it like that—when he explained the challenge of making something truly fine and beautiful from an imperfect hide. After they're tanned but before they go to the cutter, skins are rolled and brushed and finished to ensure smooth uniformity, but inevitably they retain some of nature's imperfections. The true craftsman, he gave me to understand, works around these flaws or figures out how to incorporate them into the glove's natural folds or stitching.

Each skin posed problems whose resolution required creativity. The glove-cutter's job wasn't just to get as many gloves as possible out of a hide but to do so while minimizing its flaws.

Leather had been tanned in Fulton County, using the bark of hemlock trees, since before the American Revolution. Gloversville and neighboring Johnstown were home not only to gloves but to all things leather: shoes and coats and handbags and upholstery. My paternal grandfather, from Salerno, Italy, having heard about this place where so many artisans had gathered, journeyed to upstate New York in hopes of making a living there as a shoemaker. From New York City he took the train north to Albany, then west as far as the Barge Canal hamlet of Fonda, where he followed the freight tracks north up to Johnstown, where I was born decades later. Did he have any real idea of where he was headed, or what his new life would be like? You tell me. Among the few material possessions he brought with him from the old country was an opera cape.

Both men had wretched timing. My father's father soon learned that Fulton County wasn't Manhattan or even Salerno, and that few men in his new home would buy expensive custom-made shoes instead of cheaper machine-made ones, so he had little choice but to become a shoe repairman. And by the time my mother's father arrived in Gloversville from Vermont, the real craft of glove-cutting was already under assault. By the end of World War I, many gloves were being "pattern cut." (For a size 6 glove, a size 6 pattern was affixed to the skin and cut around with shears.) Once he returned from World War II, the process was largely mechanized by "clicker-cutting" machines that quickly stamped out presized gloves, requiring the operator only to position the tanned skin under the machine's lethal blades and pull down on its mechanical arm. I was born in 1949, by which time there wasn't much demand for

handmade gloves or shoes, but both my grandfathers had long since made their big moves to Fulton County and staked their dubious claims. By then they had families, and so there they remained. It was also during the first half of the twentieth century that chrome tanning, a chemical procedure that made leather more supple and water resistant, and dramatically sped up the whole process, became the industry standard, replacing traditional vegetable tanning and making tanneries even more hazardous, not just for workers but also for those who lived nearby and, especially, downstream. Speed, efficiency, and technology had trumped art and craft, not to mention public safety.

That said, between 1890 and 1950 people in Gloversville made good money, some of them a lot of it. Drive along Kingsboro Avenue, which parallels Main Street, and have a gander at the fine old houses set back from the street and well apart from one another, and you'll get a sense of the prosperity that at least the fortunate ones enjoyed until World War II. Even downtown Gloversville, which by the 1970s had become a Dresden-like ruin, still shows signs of that wealth. The Andrew Carnegie Gloversville Free Library is as lovely as can be, and the old high school, which sits atop a gentle hill, bespeaks a community that believed both in itself and that good times would not be fleeting. On its sloping lawn stands a statue of Lucius Nathan Littauer, one of the richest men in the county, whose extended arm appears to point at the grand marble edifice of the nearby Eccentric Club, which refused him membership because he was a Jew. Down the street is the recently restored Glove Theatre, where I spent just about every Saturday afternoon of my adolescence. There was also a charming old hotel, the Kingsboro, in whose elegant dining room Monsignor Kreugler, whom I'd served as an altar boy at Sacred Heart Church, held weekly court after his last Sunday Mass. Once it was razed, visitors had to

stay in nearby Johnstown, out on the arterial highway that was supposed to breathe new life into Gloversville but instead, all too predictably, allowed people to race by, without stopping or even slowing down, en route to Saratoga, Lake George, or Montreal.

How quickly it all happened. In the Fifties, on a Saturday afternoon, the streets downtown would be gridlocked with cars honking hellos at pedestrians. The sidewalks were so jammed with shoppers that, as a boy trapped among taller adults, I had to depend on my mother, herself no giant, to navigate us from one store to the next or, more harrowingly, across Main Street. Often, when we finished what we called our weekly “errands,” my mother and I would stop in at Pedrick’s. Located next to city hall, it was a dark, cool place, the only establishment of my youth that was air-conditioned, with a long, thin wall whose service window allowed sodas and cocktails to be passed from the often raucous bar into the more respectable restaurant. Back then Pedrick’s was always mobbed, even in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. Mounted on the wall of each booth was a minijukebox whose movable mechanical pages were full of song listings. Selections made here—five for a quarter, if memory serves—were played on the real jukebox on the far wall. We always played a whole quarter’s worth while nursing sodas served so cold they made my teeth hurt. Sometimes, though, the music was drowned out by rowdy male laughter from the bar, where the wall-mounted television was tuned to a Yankees ball game, and if anybody hit a home run everyone in the restaurant knew it immediately. I remember listening intently to all the men’s voices, trying to pick out my father’s. He and my mother had separated when I was little, but he was still around town, and I always imagined him on the other side of that wall in Pedrick’s.

I also suspected that my mother, if she hadn’t been saddled with me, would have preferred to be over there

herself. She liked men, liked being among them, and on the restaurant side it was mostly women and kids and older people. Though I couldn't have put it into words, I had the distinct impression that the wall separating respectability from fun was very thin indeed. There was another jukebox in the bar, and sometimes it got cranked up loud enough to compete with whatever was playing on ours, and then my mother would say it was time to go, as if she feared the wall itself might come crashing down. To her, music getting pumped up like that could only mean one thing: that people were dancing, middle of the afternoon or not, and if she'd been over there, she would've been as well. A good decade after the end of World War II, Gloversville was still in a party mode, and regular Saturday festivities routinely continued right up to last call and often beyond, the town's prosperous citizens dancing and drinking at the Eccentric Club, the more middle-class folk in the blue-collar taverns along upper Main Street or, in summer, at the pavilion at nearby Caroga Lake, the poor (often the most recent immigrants with the lowest-paying tannery jobs) in the gin mills bordering South Main in the section of town referred to as "the Gut," where arrests for drunkenness or indecency or belligerence were much more likely to be recorded in the local newspaper on Monday than comparable exploits at the Eccentric Club.

By the time I graduated from high school in 1967, you could have strafed Main Street with an automatic weapon without endangering a soul. On Saturday afternoons the sidewalks were deserted, people in newly reduced circumstances shopping for bargains at the cheap, off-brand stores that had sprung up along the arterial. The marquee at the Glove Theatre bore the title of the last film to play there, though enough of the letters were missing that you couldn't guess what it was. Jobless men emerged from the pool hall or one of the seedy gin mills that sold cheap draft beer and rotgut rye, blinking into the afternoon

light and flexing at the knees. Lighting up a smoke, they'd peer up Main Street in one direction, then down the other, as if wondering where the hell everybody went. By then the restaurant side of Pedrick's had closed, but since I turned eighteen that summer, now of legal drinking age, the other side was no longer off-limits. Now, though, it was quiet as a library. The Yankees were still playing on the television, but Mantle and Maris and Yogi and Whitey Ford had all retired, and their glory days, like Gloversville's, were over. The half-dozen grizzled, solitary drinkers rotated on their stools when the door opened, like the past might saunter in out of the bright glare trailing ten-dollar bills in its wake. Every now and then that summer of '67, I'd poke my head into Pedrick's to see if my father was among those drinking Utica Club drafts at the bar. But, like time itself, he, too, had moved on.

WHAT HAPPENED? Lots of things. After World War II, about when men stopped wearing hats, women stopped wearing gloves. Jackie Kennedy did wear a pair at her husband's inauguration, and that turned the clock back for a while, but the trend proved irreversible. More important, glove making started going overseas where labor was cheap. Gloversville went bust the way Mike Campbell declares his bankruptcy in Heming-way's *The Sun Also Rises*, "gradually and then suddenly." The "giant sucking sound" of globalism arrived decades early and with a vengeance. My maternal grandfather, who, despite being a veteran of two world wars, had been branded a Communist from the pulpit of Sacred Heart Church for being a union man, saw it coming even before crappy Asian-made gloves showed up in the shops, where a few buttons could be sewn on and the gloves stamped MADE IN GLOVERSVILLE. Around Thanksgiving, the trade's off-season, workers in the skin mills got laid off, and every year it took a little longer for them to be called back. Worse, they weren't all rehired at once, which

practice allowed the shop owners to remind their employees that things were different now. What mattered was moving inventory down the line, not quality. After all, Asians and Indians were doing what the local stiffs did for a quarter of the cost.

My grandfather, who came home from the Pacific with malaria and soon afterward developed emphysema, was by then too sick to fight. He continued to work as always, refusing to cut corners and, as a result, making considerably less money than men for whom slapdash was good enough. The bosses could exploit him, give him the most flawed skins, and treat him like a robot instead of the craftsman he was, but he claimed the one thing they couldn't order him to do was a bad job. But of course they didn't need to. You only had to look at how his narrow, concave chest heaved as he struggled to draw oxygen into his failing lungs to know he wouldn't be anybody's problem much longer. His wife, who'd also survived the Depression, foresaw a diminished future. She began stocking the pantry with cans of wax beans and tuna fish earlier every year, aware that the layoffs would run even longer, and her husband, growing sicker by the day, would be among the last called back. Jesus on his best day could do no more with loaves and fishes than my grandmother did with a pound of bacon. Still, it was just a matter of time.

None of which had much effect on me. As a boy I was happy as a clam in Gloversville. My mother and I shared a modest two-family house on Helwig Street with her parents. They lived in the two-bedroom, single-bath downstairs flat, my mother and I in the identically configured one above. My grandfather, who'd never before purchased anything he couldn't pay for with cash out of his wallet, bought the house, I suspect, because he knew his daughter's marriage was on the rocks and that she and I would need a place to live. Our block of Helwig Street was neighborly, with a corner grocery store situated diagonally

across the street. My mother's sister and her family lived around the corner on Sixth Avenue, which meant I grew up surrounded by cousins. In kindergarten and first grade, my grandmother walked me to school in the morning and was there to meet me in the afternoon, and in the summer we took walks to a lovely little park a few blocks away. On weekends it was often my grandfather who'd take my hand, and together we'd head downtown for a bag of "peatles," his peculiar word for red-skinned peanuts, stopping on the way back to visit with friends sitting out on their porches. By the time I was old enough to get my first bike and explore beyond Helwig Street, I'd discovered the magic of baseball, and so, wooden bat over my shoulder, mitt dangling from my handle-bars, I disappeared with friends for whole mornings or afternoons or both. At my aunt's there was a hoop over the garage, and during the long winters my cousin Greg and I kept the driveway shoveled meticulously so we could shoot baskets, even when it was so cold the net froze and you couldn't dribble the ball. Come autumn I raked leaves, stealing this job from my grandfather, who loved to do it, though he didn't always have sufficient breath. Sometimes he'd start the job, and I'd finish while he snuck a cigarette around back of the house where my grandmother couldn't see him. Summers I mowed lawns, and winters I shoveled sidewalks. An American childhood, as lived in the Fifties by a lower-middle class that seems barely to exist anymore, in a town that seemed unexceptional then, and not, as it seems to me now, the canary in the mine shaft.

WHAT FOLLOWS in this memoir—I don't know what else to call it—is a story of intersections: of place and time, of private and public, of linked destinies and flawed devotion. It's more my mother's story than mine, but it's mine, too, because until just a few years ago she was seldom absent from my life. It's about her character but also about where

she grew up, fled from, and returned to again and again, about contradictions she couldn’t resolve and so passed on to me, knowing full well I’d worry them much like a dog worries a bone, gnawing, burying, unearthing, gnawing again, until there’s nothing left but sharp splinters and bleeding gums.

I keep returning to that wall in Pedrick’s, the one separating the restaurant from the bar. How close she was to where she wanted to be. How flimsy that wall must’ve seemed, the music and laughter leaking through so easily. But then my mother was forever misjudging—not just distance and direction but the sturdiness of the barriers erected between her and what she so desperately desired. I should know. I was one of them.

Independence

THE NIGHT BEFORE we scattered my mother's ashes in Menemsha Pond on Martha's Vineyard, I had a dream in which she featured vividly. She'd been visiting my sleep regularly since her death in July, and it was now the last week of December. Was there some duty other than the scattering of her ashes that I'd left undone? Some other subconscious reason for her to pay me a visit? A lot had happened since July. I'd gone on a long book tour, our daughter Kate had been married in London over Thanksgiving, and we'd returned home just in time for the hustle and bustle of Christmas. Was she feeling abandoned? That, of course, was another way of asking whether I was feeling guilty about neglecting her in death as I sometimes worried I'd done in life.

We'd delayed scattering her ashes for so long because both my daughters wanted to be present. Emily had recently started a new job at a bookstore near Amherst and didn't feel she could request time off until after the holiday rush. And Kate and her husband, Tom, still very much newlyweds, couldn't get a flight to the States until after Christmas. Thus we convened on the island during the week between Christmas and New Year's to make good on what I'd come to think of as my final promise to my mother,

the last in a long, unbroken string of obligations that extended back almost as far as I could remember.

In the dream my mother and I were on foot, heading toward some vague destination we'd apparently agreed on. That we were going at all must have been my idea, because I was feeling particularly guilty about how long it was taking, and for not knowing the way and taking several wrong turns. Of course, getting my mother, who didn't drive, to wherever she needed to be—the grocery store, the doctor's office, the hairdresser's—had been my responsibility, off and on, since I got my driver's license in 1967, so in that sense my dream was cribbing from reality. That I was lost was a more unusual and troubling aspect of the narrative, since I'd always been the one responsible for knowing the way. My mother's poor sense of direction was legendary, and it long had been a joke between us that she was a compass whose needle pointed due south. No doubt my feeling lost and helpless in the dream had to do with her real-life condition during the long months before her death. Diagnosed with congestive heart disease, she'd been given two years at the outside, which meant that for the first time in decades she was going somewhere on her own.

In the dream she wasn't dying, just weak and fatigued as we soldiered on through the darkening streets, looking for signs or landmarks where there weren't any. Finally, she was unable to go on, and I had to carry her. Initially, this wasn't a problem. My mother had always been petite, and now she was frail, while I was strong from tennis and running. But gradually I began to feel her exhaustion, as well as her frustration with me for landing us in this predicament. There were just the two of us in empty streets that stretched on forever, with no option but to slog ahead.

That was the dream. My mother and I going on and on, forever and ever, until finally I awoke to the old knowledge that she'd been dead since the summer, that in reality the

burden of her long illness and longer unhappiness had at last been lifted from her shoulders. And from my own.

Some dreams require no interpretation, and this was one of them.

FROM THE TIME I was a boy, my mother valued few things more than her perceived independence. The legal separation she'd negotiated with my father stipulated that he contribute to my maintenance, though he seldom did. For a while she tried to compel him but quickly gave up, probably figuring that in the long run she was better off. Even if he wasn't helping out, at least she wasn't saddled with his gambling debts. She paid rent to my grandparents —at market price, she always proudly claimed—for our flat in their house on Helwig Street. Her job at GE in Schenectady paid well; before taxes she made just over a hundred dollars a week, more than many of the men who worked in the skin mills. Most women in Gloversville who worked were sewing gloves in the shops or at home, underpaid piecework that complemented the earnings of husbands who got laid off every winter and whose wages otherwise were kept artificially low through the collusion of the mill owners and the local government they held sway over. She was much better off working for a big company in Schenectady, though there were attendant expenses. For one thing she was a professional woman and had to dress like one. That suited her fine, because she loved nice clothes, but of course they weren't cheap. Also, because she got home from work too late and too exhausted to cook, she had to pay my grandparents for my board. Then there was the cost of her ride to and from GE with coworkers; when we went places with my aunt and uncle and cousins, she always made a point of chipping in for gas.

She ferociously defended her hard-earned independence against all comers, even (and especially) my grandparents, who were in many respects its true source. In particular

she didn’t appreciate unsolicited advice about my upbringing, and when they crossed that line she reminded them that theirs was primarily a financial arrangement. She paid her rent, promptly, the first of each month, which to her way of thinking meant they had no more right to intrude into our lives than any other landlord. If her parents were ever angered or hurt by the curtness of this, they never said so, at least not in front of me, but who could have blamed them? After all, my grandfather had bought the house, at least in part, so my mother and I would have someplace to live. To my knowledge they never reminded her of this, and she clearly saw it differently. She let it be known there were lots of places for rent in both Gloversville and Schenectady, and if her parents couldn’t mind their own business, she’d move into one and take me with her. I don’t doubt my mother’s threat was sincere—when angry she was always sincere—but there wasn’t much danger of her following through, and my grandparents must have known that, too. *“Jean,”* one of them would say when she got on her high horse, and I’d think that this time they were going to have it out with her for sure, but then they’d look at me and let their voices fall.

Gradually I came to understand that my mother’s seeming ingratitude was simply self-preservation. Her view of herself as a woman who could get things done on her own required constant tending and bolstering. She had to assert her independence, to say the words out loud, at every opportunity, if she herself was to believe it. She had to remind herself constantly that she had a *good* job at a *great* company in a *real* city. Not just a job, but a better, more responsible *position* than just about any other woman in Gloversville. She not only paid her own way in the world but also fed, clothed, and raised me. Moreover, she was broadening my horizons beyond the smug, complacent, self-satisfied, dimwitted ethos of the ugly little mill town we lived in. Tired as she was at the end of her long day, she

made sure I'd finished my homework and done it well. If I brought home a form, she filled it out, never needing to be reminded, and if a check was to be attached for the rental of a uniform or a musical instrument, somehow she managed. I had clean, crisply ironed clothing to wear every day, even if it meant she had to stay up until midnight doing laundry. She would skip dinners to meet with my teachers to make sure I wasn't just learning in school but flourishing, that I wasn't being dismissed as an irrelevant, fatherless boy. These were real accomplishments. No other woman my mother knew struggled under such burdens or challenges, and she was doing it, she told herself, all by herself.

Except she wasn't, not really, and sometimes that terrible truth would punch through the defenses she'd erected and fortified at such a high personal cost. To her credit, she almost never shared her doubts, her temporary losses of faith, with me, her principal audience. She kept the narrative of our lives consistent and intact. We, the two of us, were all we needed. As long as we had each other, we'd be fine. For my part I never let on that I suspected the truth: that, yes, she had a good job, but that as a woman she was still paid less than men with the same duties. They had families to support, she was told, as if she didn't. By the time she paid for her ride to and from work and the clothes she needed to look the part there, she could have done almost as well working in Gloversville. Yes, she paid her rent faithfully, but at Gloversville, not Schenectady, prices, and my grandparents, though they never said so, could have charged anybody else more. And what would it have cost if she'd had to pay someone to look after me while she worked, a job my grandmother did, lovingly, for free?

Even so, most of the time she was able to make ends meet, and our lives proceeded smoothly enough to maintain the necessary façade of independence. Every month my