

## Saratoga

by Cheryl Latuner

Lydia inspects her hands, folded flat, one over the other in her lap. They are the pale color of eggshells—of good cloth. She uncrosses her feet at the ankles, and her right toes press forward—the same tentative motion she wearies of, day in and out, depressing the sewing machine pedal. Her body follows, leaning toward the great wooden desk.

“A little girl, please,” she says, her tongue lingering stubbornly on the “t”s and “l”s, so un-American, sticky, when she wants her words to be crisp and clear. The woman who has the power to give—or not give—Lydia a foster child is tiny behind the huge desk. Her face is tiny behind large pink plastic eyeglass frames. The effect for Lydia is of things receding to a pinpoint—just the tendency in her life she’s hoping to reverse. She runs her tongue over her lips. A companion, she almost says. “Please, not an infant.”

She has filled out all the forms, has printed in the strong, embellished letters taught her in grade school. Her English is good and she’s good with numbers. Very good. She is expert with homework. In fact, she wants to declare outright that she is intelligent; but in America such a claim would be boasting, rather than simple fact.

“There’s not a good chance,” says the woman with the small face. “The fact is, we really only place children in families.”

For “Spouse, of course,” Lydia has had to print “deceased”; but she has been careful to note in “Comments” that she is close with her son, Mark, who is married and a lawyer.

The woman bureaucrat smiles. “It’s expensive to raise a child.” She looks away from Lydia and addresses a row of books on the wall. “You realize there wouldn’t be any money left over.”

Outside the building, the Poughkeepsie sun is brutal as usual, undiscerning. Lydia hurries across the street to the relative shade of the bus stop. In her life, she has never known a city by a river to be so rude.

“Mrs. Chivu?” The voice of the woman at Lydia’s door—a black woman as large or larger than any man—is surprisingly high and sweet, but her eyes are practiced in official wandering. Lydia feels diminished, not by the woman’s actual size, but by the enormity of the evidence mounting against Lydia—which the woman’s size seems to represent. Lydia knows it will do no good to point out the photograph of George on the wall, smiling George pulling up radishes at their old Yonkers home. She knows it will do no good to explain that her move here was her choice, a lightening of the load, a shedding of houses and possessions—it will not do any good since what will be more important from her visitor’s standpoint is that

Lydia has lied.

"You've written on your application that your apartment has two bedrooms," the woman says.

Lydia has, in fact, afforded her apartment (on paper) a full complement of rooms—living room, dining room, sewing room. She has merely exaggerated the boundaries between the areas that function as these rooms. An unexpected strength bolsters her voice. "It has two beds," she tells the woman. The strength of the liar protecting her lie.

But this is an efficiency," the woman argues. She has not lifted her arms, from which hang a black purse and a dark brown portfolio. She does not lift them now. She turns. "We'll be in touch with you."

In her concentration, the heavy grocery bags weighing in her arms, Lydia almost doesn't see the little girl on her stoop. The girl makes no attempt to move out of her way. She's like a little brown Sphinx rooted in stone. Her skin is the color of the last autumn leaves. Her face reminds Lydia of a pug.

Lydia says, "Where did *you* come from?" The girl points across the street. Lydia knows the girl doesn't live in any of the houses across the way. But there are alleys, and several blocks beyond, like a dark inner city, a housing project, as desolate as the slums of Bucharest, a place of odors and stillness and despair. Lydia has bought fresh lemons. "Would you like some lemonade?" she asks. The girl nods. "What's your name?" says Lydia. The girls' voice is like a cricket's. "Coh-REEN," she answers.

In her mailbox, Lydia finds a third note this week from her landlord. She stuffs it in her pocket and unlocks the heavy front door. The little girl slips in in front of her, climbing the flights of steep stairs two at a time, with big awkward steps.

After Lydia has squeezed each half lemon, she sets it on the counter. Corinne picks it up and sucks the rind. The girl's face is pale as ashes, her tongue long and off-color as a slice of smoky salmon.

"Does your mama know where you are?" Lydia asks. After she's said it, she thinks this is a bad question. Perhaps there is no mama.

Corinne shakes her head. "She's at WORK," she pipes.

"Ah!" says Lydia. "What sort of work is your mama doing?"

The palms of Corinne's hands are flat on the counter, fingers spread, padding about like dusty duck's feet. She shrugs. She lays a whole brown arm against the white surface, her fingers arching like inchworms, making toward the little group of ceramic vessels that hold Lydia's condiments, closing on the salt shaker. She sprinkles some grains into her palm and licks it clean.

Lydia remembers something she's seen done in cocktail lounges. She wets the rim of Corinne's glass and presses it into a mound of salt, then fills the glass with lemonade. To her own glass she adds a teaspoon of sugar.

She takes the landlord's note from her pocket and files it with the others. She decides she will finally pay the rent, today. She doesn't know why she likes to keep the landlord waiting for her rent check. Perhaps it's a private protest the coming of another month that will fail to liberate her spirit. Perhaps she would feel freer living right in the streets, making a home in the wide air, outside the confines of even these four, small walls. Perhaps she is inviting her expulsion.

The room is silent, except for Corinne's noisy slurping, her tongue licking her lips broadly after each sip.

"Is it good?" Lydia asks.

Corinne nods.

Lydia decides it's not important to ask Corinne questions. She is seated on a stool behind her counter, elbows stippled with salt, when Corinne drains her glass of the last lemonade and slips out the door.

Lydia is at the sewing machine, setting another skirt placket into another new suit for a regular client.

Corinne's head appears in the doorway to Lydia's room. Her pug face twists in the hot, dim air like the head of a snake looking for a crevice to bury in.

Lydia wonders how the front door came to be unlocked, but doesn't ask. "Come in," she says.

Corinne walks about the room, guardedly looking over Lydia's belongings. Lydia resumes sewing. Then Corinne is behind Lydia's shoulder and her cricket's voice is shrill. "It's LOUD!" she says.

Loud? Lydia has never thought of the machine as loud, only as full of sound, the only sound Lydia thinks she hears sometimes, all day. "Loud?" she says. She pulls the iron-textured gabardine from under the foot. "I can make it softer. Come and feel." She sweeps the table clean and locates a piece of red felt in the scraps box. She draws Corinne, leans over the child's boxy shoulders—and smells the depths of dirt and disgrace in her hair and clothes. "Hold your hands here," she instructs. "One on either side steadies the cloth. I am going to press this pedal with my foot. Are you ready? Now we go."

Lydia raises her voice above the gentle rattling. "Is it loud?"

Corinne's head shakes vigorously, the frizz between her pigtailed jiggling under Lydia's nose. It's like HORSES. Like on TEE-VEE," Corinne says.

"Horses?"

"You KNOW!" Corinne squeals. "HORSES! They RUN! They're FAST! You KNOW!"

Lydia reverses the cloth, starts another row. "Do you like horses?"

Corinne's head nods. "I saw a horse once." She rocks against Lydia. "He was BIG! He was all BLACK! He LICKED my HAND!" She pushes away from Lydia and the sewing machine and hurtles around the

room.

Lydia tries to remember the last time she had a real outing, the last time she thought it would make any difference to go. She studies the cross-eyed figure that drops to her living room floor. "I'm having an idea," she tells Corinne. "How would you like to go to Saratoga?"

Corinne is asleep on the steps of Lydia's house when Lydia descends and pulls the big front door behind her. "You're here!" Lydia says. "Why are you here? I was to pick you up. I was to meet your mother."

Corinne lifts her head, her face riddled with patterns of concrete. "You CAN'T!" She yawns, and digging with the backs of her fingers, rubs her eyes. "She's not HOME!"

"Not home? Well, where is she?"

Lydia seats herself on the steps, waiting for Corinne's reply.

Corinne stands and rubs her hands down the front of a pair of dark, stretchy shorts. "Let's go," she says.

Lydia says, "But where can I find your mama? We have to ask her."

Corinne is still. Her face takes on the texture of stone. Her eyes have stopped in their orbits, and rest like glass.

Lydia rises. She should not go. No one has given her permission. But--she is tired of the company of old people, oppressed by the shape they would make of her future--small and box-like and suffocating. Besides, there's no one available to give permission. Look! Corinne is lucky to be with her! She could have picked anyone! Lydia starts down the sidewalk. "We're going," she says.

Lydia hands the conductor two tickets, which he punches: to Saratoga Springs. She sits backwards, watching how the view pulls away, closes up behind the train. She imagines the headlines that might be written: "Woman Rejected by Foster Care Agency Kidnaps Small Girl." It gives her a pleasant feeling, like a thrill at a movie, that vicarious sense of danger.

On their trips out of Bucharest, George would sit just so, look up from his legal briefs, sigh loudly and gratefully. They were fleeing, for a few hours, his highly placed clients--wandering toward the Danube, out over the plain, or up into the rugged hills. Lydia often sat as Corinne sits now, her face so close to the window that her reflection seemed to flit like a ghost over water and shore, mountains in the distance, sky. What does Corinne imagine? The desert, Lydia thinks, horses coming over the blue hills; and a cowboy, red bandanna flapping at his neck, sand like salt blowing against his skin. The train sways like a cow.

A single white taxi stands in the train station. Corinne runs to it and pulls on the handle. Lydia lets her in. The taxi carries them through town--along a main street of silent stores and a few straggling shoppers who look up with blank expressions as the taxi passes--then into the park.

The taxi windows, rolled down, rattle loosely, and a freshness, cool and green, leaps over them and into Lydia's face, her lap. Outside, wide swaths of lawn have the plushy look of wetness, light and dark, under the rows of tall, soldierly, possibly ancient oak trees. "Horses, horses, horses," Corinne chimes. "We've come to see them," Lydia assures her. Outside the track, where the taxi drops them, Lydia stands and breathes the charged air of expectancy.

And finding herself amidst the confusion of the wide public space outside the betting windows, Lydia is reminded of her girlish fervor for such places—for the pressing crowds at the central railway station in Bucharest, people surging toward the shortest lines at the ticket windows, hanging impatiently over one another's shoulders. Such welcome chaos! Pent up energies with somewhere to go! She elbows toward the old men shuffling past the windows, the couples talking loudly over racing forms, the single men and women retracing their small, tight trajectories between the odds board and a view of the horses showing on the track. She has been to the racetrack twice before. Never again! George had said, though it hadn't been her betting that he minded. It was her losing sight of the odds, her willingness to get caught up in it all. George had called her reckless! She tightens her hold on Corinne's hand. Corinne's body tugs absently, wanderingly, at the other end of her arm.

By the time she leads Corinne down to the stands, Lydia has collected two white straw bowlers with black bands—replicas of the hats racegoers wore in the twenties and thirties—drinks and hot dogs, a racing form and a two-dollar bet on a horse named Jangle Jewels. Jangle Jewels was Corinne's pick.

"HORSES!" Corinne screams. They are in time for the second race and the horses are already on the track, trotting and pawing and tossing their high-strung heads. "BALLOONS!" she chirps.

Lydia turns to find a vendor at her shoulder carrying a bouquet of helium balloons. "What color?" she must ask Corinne. And all at once, plucking the green one requested by the little stranger, she has visions of her arrest by the police, the fierce indignity of the mother, and more than anything, the hideous explanations to Mark. She is sickened by the sight of the balloons' helpless bobbing, each puckered neck tethered to a short, common string.

She glances at Corinne in the white straw hat: Corinne now looks like a little pygmy, a little bush person. Lydia imagines the two of them in the lens of a camera, the tall white mama and her heedlessly-abducted bush baby. The picture is so offensive that Lydia stifles a moan of anguish.

"Which one is Jangle Jewels? Which one is Jangle Jewels?" Corinne's voice is high-pitched enough to sound like a whole schoolyard of children.

"Shhh," Lydia says. "Not so loud. He's there. Number twenty—the one with the jockey in red and green."

"What's a JOCKEY?" Corinne squeals.

"It's the little man on top," says Lydia.

"That KID?"

"It's not a kid, it's a young man." Lydia sees a few heads turn from the seats below in their direction. She sits up taller. As if of their own volition, her shoulders lift and square.

"He's so FINE!" Corinne cries. The horse is a deep cherry brown, a little shorter than some, but as sleek as any. His head is cocked at an odd and hurtful-looking angle. "He's MINE!" she squeals in Lydia's ear. Corinne's face already bears the bright stain of orange soda. Her shirt—a dingy white shirt with a row of half-torn out snaps at the shoulder—is streaked with a bloody smudge of catsup. "I picked him and he's MINE!"

Corinne grips the edge of her seat and Lydia tries to see the race through Corinne's eyes: the horses plunging with all their bridled strength toward the rail; the jockeys clinging low at their necks, bottoms raised—like stunt clowns at the circus; the whole herd like a cloud of magic dust in the back stretch; the hair raising approach of the final turn; the earth-pounding drum of hooves at the finish line...

Instead, she foresees the whole afternoon—the repetitive races under the hot sun, Corinne's flagging interest, the fatiguing trip home. George's admonishment pounds in her conscience. Reckless! Reckless!

"He WON!" Corinne screams.

"No," Lydia says. "Not this time."

"He DID! He WON! Jangle Jewels WON!"

Corinne scoots back in her seat and lifts the container of orange soda that's empty now and chews on the straw.

Lydia sighs. There's something in Corinne's posture, in the idle poking of her tongue around the straw that Lydia takes to mean, This is finished now. Like everything else, this is done.

She lifts the small hand on the seat beside her and examines the pink scars on the knuckles, the black lodged under the fingernails. "Guess what?" she whispers. Corinne seems too far away to have heard. "Guess what?" Lydia repeats. "More is coming."

"Huh?" The response is distant and foggy.

"More. More races. More horses for us to see. More horses for you to pick." Lydia reaches under her seat for the racing form. "Here. In this next race are seven horses. You can pick Potter's Molly, Holy Highness, Equilibrium, Star Sister—"

"I want Star SISTER!"

"Don't you want to see them first? The horses will be on the track. It will be any minute. You can look before you decide."

"Uh-uh. I want Star SISTER."

"Okay, then," Lydia says. She has the strange, lightheaded sensation of not knowing what comes next. She takes a tissue from her purse and wets it with saliva, wipes a caked smudge of catsup from Corinne's

cheek.

"Freeda has THAT hat," Corinne says.

Lydia, next in line at the betting window, folds the twenty-dollar bill she has taken from her purse into the palm of her hand. "What?" she says, pulling Corinne closer. "What did you say?"

"THAT hat."

A woman in the next line is wearing a white painter's cap, set on her head with the brim to the back. "A hat like that?" Lydia says. "Who has a hat like that?"

"Freeda."

It's Lydia's turn at the window. She slips her twenty-dollar bill and, inadvertently, her ticket from the second race under the plastic window. The man takes her ticket and slaps four dollars back at her. "Two-to-one on Jangle Jewels," he says.

"Excuse me?" Lydia says.

The man speaks as though he's talking to his top shirt button. "First horse disqualified. Two-to-one on Jangle Jewels."

Lydia retracts her twenty, limp and creased in her hand. Corinne has begun rocking—possibly dancing?—at her side. She pushes the twenty back under the plastic window. "Twenty dollars for Star Sister—for showing," she says. The fluttering in her ribcage seems loud enough to be heard.

She moves Corinne away from the window and toward the concessions. With a little difficulty, she squats down to Corinne's height. "Jangle Jewels," she says. "He did win!"

"Jangle Jewels WON!" Corinne squeals.

Lydia's thighs burn in this position. Corinne sets her lips together and trains her eyes on something over Lydia's shoulder. "Now," Lydia says, "Who is Freeda?"

The girl's face screws into a wily smile. "My SISTER," she says.

"I see," Lydia says. "And is she little, like you? Or is she a big girl?"

Corinne rolls her eyes. "BIG!" she squeals. "She works at Taco BELL!" She has begun dancing in excited spasms. "I go there. Mama tells me, 'Don't you go there by yourself!' But I go there. Freeda has a hat like THAT!"

Lydia rocks on her heels attempting to stand. "Of course," she says. "You go to Taco Bell. You go there whenever you like." Her anxieties, her fears of indiscretion subside. Having found her balance, she reaches for Corinne's hand. "Let's get a hat like that," she says.

"Let's get one!" Corinne echoes.

Shielded from the sun now by matching white painter's hats, Lydia and Corinne unwrap two more hot dogs waiting for the third race to start. Corinne is intent on the horses, the jockeys, the movement on the track.

Lydia points out Star Sister, a tall, dark-brown, spirited horse.

"What's that on her head?" Corinne asks.

"That's a hood," Lydia explains. "It keeps her from looking sideways and watching the other horses."

"How can she SEE!" Corinne thrusts her face nearly to Lydia's nose.

"There are holes for her eyes," Lydia says, feeling a slight glow of body heat from Corinne's skin.

"She's got SOCKS, too!" Corinne turns and secures Lydia's face with her hand. "She's the queen," she says softly. "Star Sister is the queen."

She turns toward the track. "Yellow and Green," she says. "I'll be watching for yellow and green. Star Sister is yellow and green, isn't she?" Lydia nods. Corinne stands and thrusts her chest out: a rooster crowing. "GO! STAR SISTER!"

There's the gun and the race begins, and Star Sister is quickly at the rail. Lydia presses forward, eyes fixed, tracking—yellow and green. Star Sister moves out with the front horses, and Lydia hears an urge inside her, over and over again, like a voice riding her own heartbeat, repeating Star Sister's name. The horses enter the final turn and Lydia's breath is short, as if she's been running, and just then the race is eclipsed—she hasn't seen the finish. Corinne has jumped on top of her, scrambled into her lap.

Lydia's head is thrust toward the sky. Corinne in her lap is solid and coarse. Lydia feels the boundaries between the girl's wiry body and her own soft flesh. Above her the clouds are wispy—possibly the "mare's tails" forerunning unsettled weather. Lydia only sees how they add perspective to the wide sky—make it seem broader, deeper, vaster than any sky of solid blue.

Lydia trembles when she collects her sixty dollars at the betting window. She moistens her fingers and counts it again and again—six tens. She taps it into a stack, and shaking, pushes it back through the window. She plays it all on the Daily Double.

Corinne listens carefully to the horses' names. She doesn't hesitate. She knows just what she wants: Super Shoe and Whycancho Try in the fourth and sixth.

On impulse, Lydia lifts Corinne to show her a bird's-eye view of the track. Corinne is heavier than her size suggests—a dead weight. Mark, when he was this size, would wrap his legs around Lydia's hips, make himself light. Mark was this size when Lydia came to America.

Lydia always remembers those first years in America with great clarity. Arriving in New York, the largest, most modern city they had ever seen. Settling in Yonkers, the only house they ever owned. Enrolling Mark in the huge American public school. Everything appeared to be adorned



with a banner attesting to its value: promise.

It didn't take long to learn to scale back expectations. George's credentials as a lawyer were not satisfactory here; he worked as an accountant. Lydia's abilities as an accountant were exploited in the only jobs she could get—as a bookkeeper in small, private firms. To augment his salary, George took on extra clients and he and Lydia did the bookwork at home. In addition, Mark's career in the public school was short-lived. After enduring a year of ridicule for his uncommon language, and suffering from the mediocrity of his courses, he agreed to let Lydia and George enroll him in a private school. It drained their income of every other luxury.

She sets Corinne down, leads her just outside to the highest rung of chairs. The racetrack is far below. One would need binoculars to see well from here.

Still, the fourth race goes by clearly enough. Super Shoe, in red and blue, leads after the half. When he crosses the finish line with a lead of three heads, sighs of disgust rise around Lydia, and a man in a pink shirt nearby tears up his racing form. Lydia turns to the big board, with its spread of numbers, behind her. The odds on this horse were sixteen to one.

Lydia leads Corinne back to her seat. The green helium balloon tied to their bench bobs dizzily in a sudden gust of breeze. Corinne stands up on the bench and stamps her feet. "Super SHOE! Super SHOE!" Lydia sits quietly, letting her eyes wander where they will—over the faces of people jostling in the crowd, over the track in its peacefulness, in its lull before the next event—and tries to still her heart.

By the sixth race, Lydia is damp with perspiration—the sun is hot, the breeze has died. She knows it's completely unreasonable to expect—even to hope—to win this race, but her mind is full of plans. There they are at the Mall—cool shops, haughty salesladies, lunch at Hardee's, Corinne in white sneakers and brand new size-seven jeans. And there—at the circus. the Bronx Zoo, the Horse Show at Madison Square Garden. She surprises herself. "You're a silly woman," she says under her breath. "Stop that nonsense."

But she is not a silly woman. She knows that. She is intelligent—always full of expectations. She cannot stop her visions now—visions that balloon, spirit-like, like secret wishes too-long trapped in a stuffy box. She conjures herself and Corinne as adventurers, cutting the City down to size, refusing to take excuses, boldly going into the crowds and among the people with power, finding possibilities. The track is before her and the odds on Corinne's favorite are only three to one. The little voice inside her—the one so good with numbers—can't let her forget that.

Corinne turns to her, "Are you a Grandma?"

"Yes," Lydia says. "I have a grandson. Why?"

"I don't KNOW! You LOOK like a GRANDMA!"

Corinne scoots to the edge of her seat. "I know a song," she says.

She turns and plucks the string of the balloon with her index finger. She sings:

Twinkle, twinkle little star  
How I wonder where you are...

Lydia hums along. She remembers this melody, though she had forgotten the words. The horses for the sixth race have come out on the track. Corinne watches them absently, plucks the balloon, sings the song three times through.

The gun for the race goes off. "LISTEN!" Corinne says. She's staring at Lydia. She sings:

Bringing home a baby bumblebee,  
Won't my mommy be so proud of me...

Lydia folds her hands around Corinne's hands which are cupped in front of Lydia's chest.

"NO! Don't hold my hands! The BUMBLEbee's IN there."

"Oh," Lydia says. "Silly me."

"I'll start AGAIN," Corinne says.

Bringing home a baby bumblebee,  
Won't my mommy be so proud of me...

Lydia stands. The horses rounding the final turn are like one huge animal. She can discern no leader. The colors are undetectable in the cloud of caramel dust she reaches her arm out for Corinne's shoulders, while, at the finish line, a herd of horses, none distinguishable, charges by. She spins around, listening on all sides for a voice, any voice, to say what the outcome was.

Ouch! He bit me!

"Oh!" Lydia drops into her seat and pulls Corinne into her arms. "What!"

Corinne is squealing, laughing. "I GOT you! I GOT you! It's the SONG! It's the BUMBLEbee!"

Lydia reaches around Corinne, who is standing between Lydia's knees. She fumbles in her handbag and finds a handkerchief. She dabs her face, her neck, between her breasts.

"LISTEN!" Corinne is saying.

Lydia stands and is surprised at her own strength when she whirls Corinne around, pulling on her arm, nearly dragging her up the rows of

steps. Corinne is singing songs and calling riddles to Lydia. "Why does the chicken cross the road? Because his MAMA's on the other SIDE! How does the elephant hide in the pea patch? He paints his TOEnails GREEN!"

Lydia reaches the payout window and presents her ticket. The man looks at her ticket without interest. He palms the ticket and tosses it aside.

Lydia turns away.

"Hey, lady!" The man is calling to her. "You want your money, or not?" Lydia's chest heaves. With her next breath she feels capable of just about exploding. "Yes" is all she can say.

The man with dirty hands and fingernails counts her money. He is quite competent to count. There are over three thousand dollars.

Lydia folds the wad of bills into her purse and leads Corinne away from the window, back outside.

The track is quiet. A few horses trot by below, pulling at their bits, trying to yank loose the reins. Lydia breathes deeply, loving those horses, knowing soon the jockeys will give them their heads; and their bodies, following, will surge, as if unbridled, nearly wild. For a moment, they will be barely controlled--and perfectly free.

She returns to her seat, settles Corinne against her body. She clasps Corinne's fingers, and remembering those extraordinary, everyday moments of intimacy with Mark, shows Corinne the finger games--the birds and spiders and small animals of all kinds. She tells the parts of the stories she can still recall. They come back to her more easily than she would have suspected.

Corinne presses against her belly. Her fingers are dusky in Lydia's palms. Her heartbreaking scent is familiar and emboldening. Lydia whispers something to her, but Corinne is too rapt in their fingers to hear.

"Be reckless," Lydia has said.

In the last race, Lydia wagers no money. She notes the slant of the sun over the racetrack, the late afternoon creeping into the color and texture of the light. On her trips out of Bucharest, this time of day meant stopping for dinner, or, on the final day of the weekend, it meant turning home. Lydia has never been able to reconcile the two strong feelings this sunlight gives her: one of rest and comfort, the other of resignation, even weariness.

She unwraps Corinne's fourth hot dog, tucks a paper napkin around the girl's collar and smooths it against her chest. "This is the last one," she says. "I can't take you home with a bad stomach."

Corinne is swinging her feet under the bench, catsup seeping from the corners of her mouth. She says, "Lamont and Jamal never saw the horses."

"Who?" Lydia says.

Corinne stuffs another bite of hot dog in her mouth. "Lamont and Jamal," she mumbles. "They give Mama a bad time. They fight. They got

a gang. THEY never saw the horses.” She tweaks the string of her helium balloon.

“Untie it,” Lydia says. “Soon we’re leaving. Untie it now.”

Corinne rubs her mouth and hands brusquely on her napkin and balls it up. She unties the balloon.

“Let it go.”

Corinne lets the string of the balloon slip through her fingers. She follows the silent ascent with her eyes. “I still see it,” she tells Lydia from time to time. “I still see it.”

“I see it too,” Lydia tells her. She sees it in her mind’s eye, even when it has slipped entirely out of sight.

The grass in the park under the old oaks is even and cool. Lydia instructs Corinne to take off her soiled, laceless sneakers. She takes her hand and leads her toward a pasture where a racehorse is grazing. Corinne calls it by all the names of the horses she has picked that day. “That horse can’t hear me,” she tells Lydia. “That horse is hungry.” Lydia knows Corinne is not hungry.

At the train station, Lydia takes Corinne in the restroom and washes her face and hands. She attempts to scrub the catsup stains out of her shirt. She very nearly uncoils the girl’s pigtails to wash her hair.

It’s early evening, about five-thirty. Somewhere nearby, the sunlight is falling full and golden on the countryside. From the train depot, there’s not much to see: the tracks stretching away, angling toward the next station.

But Lydia feels giddy, even though she wishes they were both going anywhere but Poughkeepsie. She gives a fleeting thought to the police, to Corinne’s gang of brothers, to the worthless three-thousand dollars in her possession. The important thing, she thinks, is to have been to Saratoga.