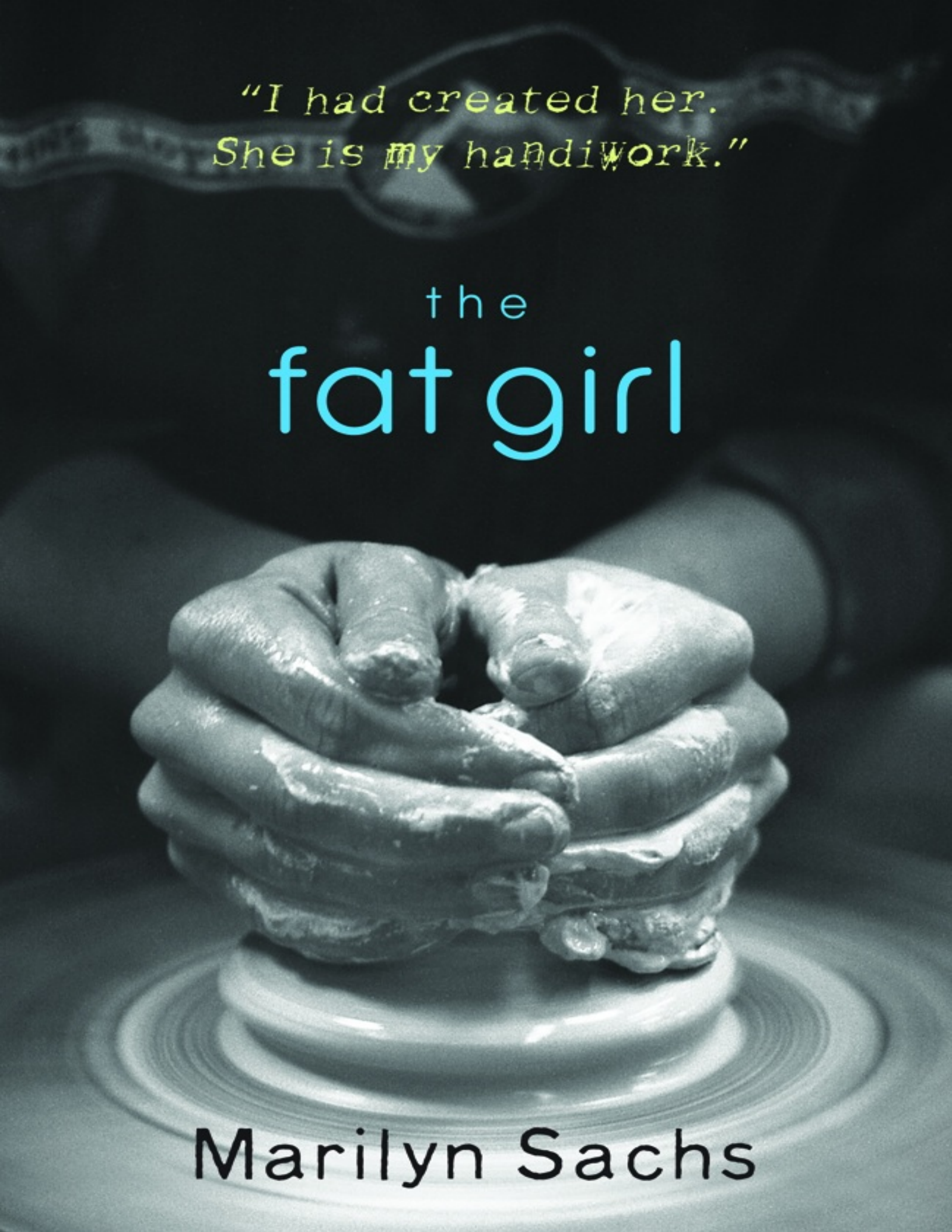
"I had created her.
She is my handiwork."
the
fat girl
Marilyn Sachs

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one

The only way I could get out of Mr. Wasserman's chemistry class was to register for something else at the same time. There weren't many choices.

"Since when have you been interested in ceramics?" my advisor asked, his nose twitching suspiciously.

"Oh, I've always been interested in ceramics," I told him, trying to get the right look of honest enthusiasm into my face.

"Come on, Lyons," he said, "get off it. Guys like you give me a pain! You're only trying to get out of Mr. Wasserman's class. You can't fool me."

"Uh uh," I said earnestly, shaking my head. "I really want to take that ceramics class. I've been wanting to take that class ever since I started high school, but I never could fit it in."

"Well, you can't fit it in now either. It conflicts with your chemistry class."

"There is another chemistry class," I reminded him gently, "in the fourth period."

"It's filled," he said.

"Well, I did go over and talk to Mrs. Humphreys just before I came here, and she said if it was all right with you, she could squeeze me in."

My advisor looked at me with disgust. Behind me, at least ten other students waited to see him, and a low, restless growl permeated his small office. He was pressured and I knew it, and he knew I knew it. "You're just handing me a line of bull," he said. "None of you kids want to work. That's the trouble. That's the way it is with all of you. But I'll tell you something, Lyons. If you're planning to

go to college, you'll learn a lot more about chemistry in Mr. Wasserman's class."

As usual, my advisor was missing the point completely. I did want to go to college, and that was why I couldn't afford to take Mr. Wasserman's course. I already had a couple of Cs and didn't need another one. Everybody knew that Wasserman was a tough marker, so I wasn't taking any chances.

"I really want to take ceramics," I told him. "I've always wanted to take ceramics."

Later, on the way to the ceramics class, I figured I would wait a couple of weeks before dropping it. My advisor wasn't particularly vindictive, but he might've just switched me back into Wasserman's class if I had irritated him too much.

I never did drop ceramics that term. Instead, I fell in love and spent the best and the most miserable year of my life. All because Mr. Wasserman was such a hard marker. None of any of this would have happened if it wasn't for him.

The fat girl and I arrived at the door at the same time. Since she was twice my width, it was obvious that we couldn't get through the door at the same time. So I gallantly stood back and held out my arm, directing her to go first. Somebody behind me snickered, and she looked up at me as if I'd goosed her.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

She hurried inside and I turned, raising my eyebrows at the guy in back of me. "What a butt!" he said. "Did you ever see anything like that before?"

Inside, people were already working. You have to understand that ceramics is a religion to its disciples. They don't do anything else but worship clay. They eat, sleep, drink pots. Nothing else matters. Some of the people in the class had been taking ceramics for years. They came before classes started in the morning and during their lunch hours, and they stayed as long as they could into the afternoon until Ms. Holland, the teacher, threw them out.

She wasn't in sight when we first arrived. The fat girl moved off to a corner, and the rest of us newcomers stood around at the front of the room, waiting and watching the regulars. At the back of the room, a girl was slamming clay down on a table. She threw it down, picked it up, and slammed it down again. A few kids were sitting at a long table, working on various clay projects, their faces solemn and intent. At one side of the room, two others were turning pots on

potter’s wheels. Then somebody cried out, “Oh, my God, how gorgeous!”

A girl came through the door at the back, from the kiln room, holding up a large, round bowl. She was caressing the bowl, running one hand up and down its side in a way that made me feel warm.

“Look at this,” she hollered. “I added a little copper oxide and just look at that color. It’s so beautiful I can’t stand it.”

A few people stopped their work to murmur approval. The guy next to me, in a low voice, made an unflattering comment about what he thought the pot could’ve been used for. But I hardly listened because I had fallen in love.

The girl looked like what I had been dreaming about ever since I started dreaming about girls. She was tall and slim and very fair, with long blonde hair flowing down her shoulders and deep, deep blue eyes.

I cleared my throat. “It’s beautiful,” I said. “How did you do it?”

“Well, I mixed copper oxide with my standard mottled semigloss glaze and . . .” she began, moving over toward me and speaking in an excited voice. Close up, I noticed a tiny ridge of pimples between her eyes and also that her ears were rather large and stuck out. But aside from that, she was about as perfect as a girl could be.

Her name was Norma Jenkins. She sat next to me once the class started and gave me a lot of useful information about clay. I didn’t hear any of it. I was busy admiring her even, white teeth and blessing Mr. Wasserman.

On Friday, I helped her carry four pots home from school.

“Don’t you do anything else?” I asked her. “I mean besides make pots?”

“Sure I do,” she said, “lots of things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I . . . I . . . No.” She began laughing. “Not too much. I’ve had a love affair with clay since I was eight, I guess.”

“Only clay?” I said, my elbow brushing against hers.

“Be careful,” she cried, holding out her arm. “That pitcher . . . I’m going to give it to my mother for her birthday.”

There was a clay smudge on her chin and her fingernails were caked with a pale, green glaze. Around us, a cold San Francisco fog pressed down against our heads. I remember looking at her pink cheeks, at the alarm in her face over the

thought I might break her pitcher, and I felt warm and happy to be alive.

“Only clay?” I repeated, cradling the pitcher against my chest.

“What?”

“I mean, you’ve had a love affair only with clay? Nothing . . . nobody else?”

Her cheeks grew even pinker. “Well, there was this boy . . . he took ceramics last year . . . he made some nice mugs but . . .” She shook her head. “He really didn’t understand glazes.”

“Is that why you broke up with him?”

“No . . . Anyway, he broke up with me.”

“Because you knew more about glazes?”

“Now you’re laughing at me.” She tilted her head and laughed up at me. I was so happy, I pressed the pitcher hard against my chest and heard her shriek, “Watch out, you’ll break it!”

“So why did he break up with you?”

“Because he found somebody he liked better,” she said carefully.

“The jerk!”

“No,” she said softly, “he wasn’t. I mean, he isn’t a jerk. He’s very nice, very smart, but I guess he just found somebody he liked better. I guess she’s a nice girl. She’s more interested in the kinds of things he likes to do. I don’t know her—she never took ceramics—but I guess she’s nice.”

I snorted.

“I felt bad for a while, but I’m over it now.”

“I’m glad,” I told her, and we both smiled quickly at each other and looked away.

“How about you?” she asked. Our elbows brushed again, but this time she didn’t yell anything about her pot.

“Oh, I went around with a girl in my sophomore year. She was the big one in my life. Then there were a few in between, and this summer there was somebody I met at the hardware store—I work part-time at a hardware store—but she was kind of a birdbrain, talked on the phone all the time, and had a weird laugh. That’s all over now.”

“How about the girl in your sophomore year?”

“Kendra Gin?”

“Kendra Gin? I know her. She’s gorgeous.”

“Yeah, I guess she is.”

“Was the girl this summer . . . was she pretty too?”

“Yeah, I guess she was.”

“I guess you like pretty girls.”

“I guess everybody likes pretty girls.”

“Well,” she said, very seriously, “it doesn’t matter to me. I mean, I don’t care whether a guy is good-looking or not. It’s what’s inside that counts.”

“Sure,” I told her, “that’s important too, but I don’t think I’d ever be attracted to a girl who wasn’t pretty. I mean, she has to be pretty for me to get interested in her, and then, after that, there has to be something inside for me to stay interested.”

She argued with me. She said that physical beauty was only skin-deep. She said to look only for physical beauty was superficial and demeaning. Her voice was husky and filled with warmth. We walked together through the gray fog, arguing—comfortable and happy in the certain knowledge that both of us were good-looking, and that something powerful was beginning between us.

two

I didn’t tell my mother about Norma for a couple of weeks. Not that she wouldn’t have been interested. She was interested in everything I did and in everybody I liked. She was always asking me to tell her what was happening in my life, but whatever I told her, it was never right. Most of the time I didn’t tell her anything. But that wasn’t right, either.

“So how was school today, Jeff?”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Anything unusual happen?”

“Nope.”

“How are your marks?”

“Pretty good, I guess.”

“Whatever happened to that friend of yours you used to be so close to last year? What’s his name?”

“Jim?”

“No, the other one—short boy with very good manners. I liked him.”

“Fred? Oh—Fred Waller. He moved, Mom. His family moved away to Chicago.”

“You never told me.”

“Mom, it’s six months at least.”

“Well, you never said anything. You never tell me anything.”

I don’t like to tell her anything because she always feels bad when I do. Like when she found out about Norma.

“Who is Norma, Jeff?”

“She’s in my ceramics class, Mom.”

“Well, she calls you an awful lot. Wanda says you’re on the phone with her all the time.”

“Wanda’s got a big mouth.”

“And I know you’ve been spending a lot of time over at her house. You’re never home weekends anymore.” My mother was smiling now. “You can tell me, Jeff. I’ll keep your secret.”

“Well . . .” I looked over at her. The two of us were sitting together at the kitchen table after dinner. My sister, Wanda, was out of the room, probably taking another shower.

“Well . . .” I started laughing and my mother laughed too. She’s a little woman with a thin, dark, worried face. She doesn’t smile too often. Maybe she used to before my father left her, but it was so many years ago I can’t really remember. Anyway, I get this happy feeling when she laughs. It catches me off guard, makes me forget that it never lasts.

“Another notch in your belt, Jeff?”

“Oh no, Mom. Norma’s different. All those others were just pretty faces. She . . .”

“Doesn’t have a pretty face?” My mother was still laughing. She reached over and patted my hand.

“Oh, she’s gorgeous, Mom, but she’s really a special person, a wonderful person.”

“So when do I meet her?”

“Well . . .”

“Why don’t you invite her over to dinner this weekend? You’re always over at her house. You eat there all the time. Her mother must be a great cook.”

“No, she’s a lousy cook, Mom. Not like you.”

My mother has two little dimples in her face when she smiles. I don’t see them very often, and I watched them as I went on.

“She’s a lousy cook, but she likes to can things. Her kids complain because she’s got like hundreds of jars down in the basement—things like quince jam and pickles and figs. She keeps telling me to take some, but . . .”

“I like quince jam,” said my mother, still smiling. But suddenly there was a little edge there, like she was thinking why didn’t I think of her? Why didn’t I remember she liked quince jam and bring her a lousy jar?

“Her kids complain all the time,” I hurried on, “but she keeps right on canning things.”

“What does she do,” said my mother, still pleasant, “when she’s not canning?”

“Oh, she doesn’t work. Norma says she’s one of the few women left in the world who doesn’t feel guilty about being a housewife.”

“Just stays at home,” my mother murmured, and picked up a few crumbs on the table with one hand and dropped them into her other hand.

“Well, she doesn’t really have to work. They’re loaded. Mr. Jenkins is a lawyer, and they live in a big house on Jackson Street. It’s a great house, but it’s kind of a mess because Mrs. Jenkins isn’t much of a housekeeper. All she does is can stuff and listen to opera records.”

My mother’s face relaxed. I should have stopped, but I didn’t. That’s the trouble. Once I start, I never know when to stop.

“But she’s gorgeous, Mom. They’re all gorgeous in that family. Norma says she’s the ugly duckling, and I guess she’s right. Because as beautiful as she is, her two sisters are even more beautiful. And her mother—her mother’s a real knockout. Even though she must be around forty, she’s got to be the most beautiful woman I ever . . .”

My mother stood up, her little dark face tight again. “Sure she’s gorgeous,” said my mother. “All she’s got to do is sit around her big house and do nothing. What’s she got to worry about with a rich husband and more money than she knows what to do with?”

“The house is a mess,” I cried desperately, but it was too late.

“No wonder you’re never home anymore,” said my mother, that tight, sharp edge twisting in her voice. “I guess you like mingling with the beautiful people.”

My mother turned her back to me and started washing the dishes. I tried to remember exactly what I had said that changed everything this time.

“What did I say?” I said. “What are you all worked up over?”

She turned off the water and twisted around to face me. “Nothing,” she said. “You didn’t say anything. You never tell me anything. I have to pull it out of

you.”

“But anything I tell you, you get upset. Even if you just ask me the time and I tell you, you get upset.”

“Because you’re selfish,” she said, not shouting, never shouting. When my mother gets angry, her voice sinks lower and lower and comes out between her teeth. “All you think about is going off with your rich friends and forgetting you have a mother and sister. I’m working forty hours a week, and I don’t have the time to sit around listening to opera and looking beautiful.”

“Mom, Mom . . .”

“And all I ask is for you to help just a little . . . pick up a few things at the store, run the washing machine once in a while, check up on Wanda. But you only think of yourself . . . just like your father.”

Then I was shouting. I always ended up shouting, and banging my chair into the table, and storming off into my room and slamming the door.

Just like my father! Sooner or later, when she really wants to insult me, she says I’m just like my father. She knows it will hurt me, even though I never understand exactly why it does. When we were little, Wanda and I used to wait for him to come home from work, because that was when the good times started, when my father came home from work.

After he left, he always said we could come and stay with him whenever we wanted. He doesn’t live far away, but now the good times belong to his new wife, Linda, and his new little kids, Sean and David. They’re cute kids, and they wait for my father now, their father too, and whoop it up and jump all over him when he comes home. I don’t go over there very much anymore.

My mother is a nurse. She works at San Francisco General Hospital five days a week and then spends the rest of her time cleaning our apartment and cooking fantastic meals for the three of us. Nobody can cook like my mother. If I ever eat a meal at a friend’s house and tell her how good it was, she’ll always cook the same thing for me at home, only better.

Norma came for dinner the next weekend. My mother had set the dining room table with a white cloth, and you could still smell the silver polish on the candlesticks, which hadn’t been used since last Christmas. Norma brought a jar of quince jam and two jars of tomato chutney.

“I hope you like it, Mrs. Lyons,” Norma said. “We keep begging my mother to stop, but she won’t.”

“Please thank your mother very much,” said my mother formally. She was dressed up in high heels and a green silk dress.

Norma was wearing jeans and an Indian blouse. Her idea of dressing up was washing her face and combing her hair. As ever, there was a distinct line of dark clay and glaze under her fingernails.

My mother’s eyes kept returning to those fingernails whenever Norma reached for something on the table, which was often.

“I never tasted homemade rolls before,” said Norma, taking a third. “These are marvelous.”

“They’re a little heavy, I think,” said my mother.

“What a wonderful soup!” Norma said, accepting a second bowl. “My mother once made *avgolemono*, but it didn’t taste anything like this.”

“It’s too watery, and I don’t think I used enough lemon,” from my mother.

Norma managed to eat all her chicken and walnuts and have doubles on my mother’s apple torte. “You must be the best cook I’ve ever met,” she told my mother, her cheeks even pinker than usual from all the exertion of eating and her blue eyes bulging. “You could win a prize with that apple torte.”

“The apples were too mushy,” said my mother.

Norma offered to help with the dishes, but my mother refused. She said Wanda would help.

“It’s not my turn,” Wanda said.

“All right, I’ll do it myself,” said my mother in her suffering voice.

“I’d really like to help,” said Norma. “I do them more than anybody else in my house, except maybe my father. The others don’t mind how many days they pile up in the sink, but the two of us can’t stand the smell. My mother even forgets to turn on the dishwasher.”

My mother gave her a pitying smile. “It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t have any special plans for tonight, so why don’t the three of you just run along and enjoy yourselves.”

“I’ll help,” Wanda said in a sulky voice. She’s fourteen and looks and sounds a lot like my mother.

“They’re real nice,” Norma said when we were sitting in my room, “your mother and your sister.”

“It’s all right, Norma,” I told her. “You don’t have to say it.”

“No, I mean it.” Norma’s head was resting on my shoulder. I kissed her hair and smelled the slightly sour clay smell that never left her.

“And she’s a marvelous cook.”

“I told you she was,” I said, stroking her warm arm.

“And your little sister’s cute. She looks a lot like your mother. They’re both dark and small. But who do you look like?”

“My father.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

I opened the dictionary on my desk to *O* and pulled out one of the pictures I had of my father. It was taken when I was about five, a couple years before he left. The two of us were standing on the beach, both wearing blue trunks and both grinning at each other.

“He looks just like you,” she said. “But why do you keep this picture in the dictionary?”

“Because I don’t want my mother to feel bad.”

“Why would she feel bad? He’s still your father, isn’t he?”

I put the picture back in the dictionary and sat down on my bed again. But it was hard to concentrate on Norma. Neither of us could relax the way we could at her house

three

The first time I noticed the fat girl watching me was while I was rolling out some clay for a slab plate I was planning to make. I just looked up suddenly and caught her staring at me, her little eyes deep, deep inside all that fat in her face. She looked away, and I checked my fly and went back to my clay.

But after that, it happened all the time. I'd be working away and suddenly I could sense her huge shape, off to one side or sometimes even behind me, motionless, watching.

"Why is the fat girl watching me all the time?" I complained to Norma. "She even watches what I'm making. The other day I caught her looking at my tiles on the drying rack."

Norma was turning a deep, narrow vase on the potter's wheel, and I stood next to her. She murmured something, but all her attention was focused on the spinning shape before her. I watched her hands join with the clay, shaping it and pulling it up and out. Her body moved rhythmically back and forth as the wheel turned, almost as if she were praying.

There were three great potters in the class—Norma, Roger Torres, and Dolores Kabotie. Ms. Holland joked around with them as if they were her friends and let them come in to work on their own projects whenever they liked. In exchange, they helped her load and unload the kiln, worked with the beginning students, and generally supervised the shop when she wasn't around. They were the inner circle.

"I guess I've been studying the longest, ever since I was eight," Norma told

me. “But Roger took classes with Ida O’Neill, the best potter in the city, and Dolores says her grandfather was a famous Indian potter.”

“But we know who really is the best, don’t we?” I said.

“No, Jeff, really . . .”

“Come on, Norma, you know you’re the best.”

Norma’s cheeks turned pink, but she shook her head. “I can throw pretty well on the wheel, maybe better than the others. But Dolores makes most of her pots by the coil method anyway, like the Indians do, and her shapes are wonderful. Her designs are better than mine too. And Roger’s glazes—especially his blues and greens . . .”

“Well, I’m an impartial observer, Norma. And when it comes to shapes, nobody’s can come up to yours.”

I was happy with Norma, but I was jealous too. Jealous, to begin with, because she was so tied up with her pots and so good at it. And then I was jealous of all the attention she was always getting from other guys. When a girl’s a beauty like Norma and like all the girls I ever liked, you know every other guy’s going to be after her. I hated it with my old girlfriends, and I hated it with Norma. I’d wait for her in the hall sometimes and watch her come along, admiring that quick, bounding step she had, her long, blonde hair spraying out behind her shining face. You could see guys watching her, calling out to her, smiling at her. I hated it, even though Norma didn’t play games like so many of the other girls I’d gone out with. She didn’t flirt, I knew that, and I knew I didn’t have to worry about her, but I still hated it.

She taught me to throw on the wheel, how to center the wobbling clay, and how to begin to shape it.

“That’s it, a little more water! Brace your elbow against your body! Fine! Fine! Now get your left hand around the clay. Keep the wheel going. Get your right hand ready to open it up. That’s right! That’s right! That’s *right!”*

I caught her passion and started coming into the classroom on my lunch hour, and sometimes I even stayed after school with the inner circle. In their presence, I was humble. I watched as magnificent shapes rose up under their hands, and I cursed and fumed as my own clumsy, thick-walled pots never seemed to improve in beauty.

“Patience, patience!” Norma urged. “Rome wasn’t built in a day. You’re doing very well—much, much better than most of the beginners. Just look at Ellen De Luca’s pots.”

“Who?”

“Ellen De Luca.”

“Oh, the fat girl. Thanks a lot for comparing me to her.”

The fat girl couldn’t do anything right. Not only was she fat, but she was clumsy as well. She was always slamming doors, bumping into people, and dropping things. Any time you’d hear a crack, you could be sure the fat girl had broken something, and you could only hope it wasn’t something that belonged to you, like the time she knocked my teapot off the drying shelf.

“Oh, Jeff, I’m sorry!”

“Sorry!” I yelled as I picked up the pieces and cradled them against me. “Sorry!”

“I know it was such a beautiful teapot. I was being so careful.”

“It was beautiful,” I snarled. “Damn it! It was the best thing I’ve done so far. Damn it! Damn it!”

Well, maybe it was the best thing I’d done so far, if you like heavy, clumsy pots with pug-nosed spouts. I’d never really appreciated it as much as when I saw it in pieces on the ground.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could do something.”

I looked at her in disgust. She was wearing one of those pale-blue-polyester-pants-and-matching-short-sleeve-blouse outfits that middle-aged women wear, and her huge arms came billowing out of the sleeves. Her features seemed very small in her fat face, and her muddy-colored hair hung limp on her head. What a sight!

“I’m really sorry, Jeff. I wish I could make it up to you.”

And how did she know my name? I could never remember hers. And why did she keep watching me? And what right did she have to admire my pots anyway?

“Look,” I said, “do me a favor. Just keep away from my things. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said. She had a very tiny, squeaky voice, which seemed bizarre coming from such a hulk.

“Okay,” she said, nodding and smiling a kind of pleading, frightened smile

that made me want to punch her. I moved away as fast as I could.

Norma worked with her. Before you could begin throwing on the wheel, you were supposed to make a slab tile, a pinch bowl, and also a bowl made by the coil method. The fat girl managed to turn out a lumpy tile and a clumsy, lopsided pinch bowl, but she couldn't seem to get the hang of coils. Norma worked with her patiently. You could hear how she slowed her voice down, as if the fat girl were a retarded eight-year-old.

"Now just don't push so hard when you're rolling the coils. No, no, keep them even! Try not to let them lump up in the middle. No, you're leaning too hard! Just roll them lightly. No, no . . ."

Her coils bulged, and so did her pot.

"It looks like her," I told Norma.

"Shh! Shh! She'll hear you. Stop it!"

The fat girl caught me kissing Norma in the kiln room one day. Another time, she was watching while I ran an appreciative hand down Norma's back as she bent over to dip one of her pots in the glaze bucket. Any time I'd look in her direction, she'd quickly look away, so I knew she was spying on me. I didn't know why, and I hated it.

"I'm just going to tell her off one of these days," I told Norma.

"Forget it, Jeff. Leave her alone, poor thing. She can't help it."

"Can't help weighing over two hundred pounds? The slob. Why doesn't she just stop eating? She's disgusting."

"Maybe it's a medical problem," Norma said. "Don't be so hard on her."

"I'm not hard on her. I just want her to leave me alone."

But Norma was brushing leaf patterns on some large square plates she was planning to give her family for Christmas, and she didn't answer.

Norma's house was filled with bowls and vases and mugs and pitchers and teapots and urns. It was a wonderful, messy house where none of the rooms seemed to have limits. In my house, each room had a distinct function and purpose. The kitchen was for cooking, the dining room for eating, the bedrooms for sleeping. But in Norma's house, all activities spilled from one room into another. Even though most of the cooking took place in the kitchen, Mrs. Jenkins had her stereo there too, so she could listen to her opera records while she

worked. All of the kids did their homework in the kitchen, and books, papers, and pencils mingled with the pots and pans. The living room looked like the dining room, and the dining room table was generally too crowded with Norma's pots to allow anybody to eat there without a great effort. None of the children ever seemed to stay in his or her own bedroom.

"Carmen wanders around at night and usually ends up sleeping on the couch. And Joey usually sleeps either in Lucia's room or mine. He's afraid of vampires and can't sleep by himself," Norma told me.

Joey was the youngest, seven years old, and the only boy. There were two sisters between him and Norma—Carmen, who was fifteen, and Lucia, who was twelve.

"Your mother should try to make him sleep in his own room," I said.

"Why?"

"Because he's got to get over it."

"Why?"

"Well—kids will make fun of him. He's a boy, and he doesn't want to be a sissy."

Norma was looking at me and smiling. There was a sore, jealous place in my stomach. "I used to be afraid of the dark," I told her.

"And?"

"My mother—she made me get over it." It was a long time ago, but I could still remember her voice outside the closed door, saying over and over again, "Stay in your room, Jeff. There's nothing to be afraid of." And me, pleading, "Just don't lock it, and I'll stay inside. Please, Mom, don't lock the door."

"How?"

"She put a lock on the outside of the door to stop me from coming out and waking her up."

Norma stopped smiling. She patted my hand. "Poor Jeff," she said.

"No, no!" I protested. "She never used it. She just showed me it was there, and it worked. Honestly, Norma, she's not like that. I did get over it, and I'm not afraid anymore."

"Everybody's afraid of something," Norma said. "It's not so terrible to be afraid."

Sometimes the noise in Norma's house was deafening. Arguments could start in an upstairs bathroom, crackle down the stairs into the living room, explode in the dining room, and echo all through the house. There would be Mrs. Jenkins' opera stars screeching away in the kitchen, Mr. Jenkins' TV set going full blast in the upstairs den, Joey's cars and trucks hurtling through the house, while Carmen, who took ballet lessons and looked like a pale green-gold water goddess, danced in all of the rooms.

"My mother named each of us for an opera," Norma said, making a face. "I mean each of us girls. I think I got off easy."

"How about Joey? Who is he named for?"

"Joe DiMaggio."

"Is that an opera?"

"Come on, Jeff. You know Joe DiMaggio was a famous ballplayer for the Yankees. My father's crazy about baseball. My mother wanted to call him Giovanni after Mozart's opera, but my father insisted on Joe."

I loved Norma's house, loved being lost in the litter that overflowed everywhere. My own house was so neat and orderly, a person always stood out. Here, I never felt the spotlight on me—I blended into the clutter. Sometimes my own training was too much for me though, and I found myself straightening crooked pictures on the wall, hanging up Norma's jacket when she flung it on the floor, and mopping up ancient milk spills under the kitchen table.

It wasn't always easy to find a quiet, private place in Norma's house. And often it was fun being with the others, listening to Norma's old Maria Callas records, looking over Mr. Jenkins' historic collection of baseball cards, or playing Dungeons & Dragons with Lucia and her friends.

But the best times were with Norma. We'd climb upstairs to her messy room filled with years of pots, and turn out the cat or the dog or Joey, and sit down on her unmade bed and hold each other and kiss and touch and be in love. We never went all the way. What was the hurry? I knew there were going to be years and years of love between Norma and me. And there would have been. If it hadn't been for the fat girl.