

Because
I Have Loved
and Hidden It

ELISE MOSER
a novel

Because
I Have Loved
and Hidden It

ELISE MOSER

a novel



Cormorant Books Inc.

Copyright © Elise Moser 2009
This edition © Cormorant Books Inc. 2009
This is a first edition.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a licence from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright licence, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll free 1.800.893.5777.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for its publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Printed and bound in Canada

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Moser, Elise
Because I have loved and hidden it / Elise Moser.

ISBN 978-1-897151-36-5

1. Title.

PS8626.O8425B42 2009 C813'.6 C2009-903865-X

Cover image and design: Angel Guerra/Archetype
Text design: Tannice Goddard, Soul Oasis Networking
Printer: Friesens

CORMORANT BOOKS INC.
215 SPADINA AVENUE, STUDIO 230, TORONTO, ON CANADA M5T 2C7
WWW.CORMORANTBOOKS.COM



Mixed Sources

Cert no. SW-COC-001271
© 1996 FSC

*In loving memory of
Dorothy Cohen Moser
and
Albert Cohen*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

I write

because poetry is to the body as energy is to mass; it lives
in me as in you, and perhaps
because we have little else to give one another, you and I
because history repeats with the cocooning of secrets

because I have loved and hidden it
in cycles sure as Mississippi floods:
stupendous litany of ampersands
it swells and washes and carries the house
away

and to find it again I must describe it
to you

Have you seen the shark's eye glint on my bone-handled knife,
the lime that bleeds May?

— Susan Elmslie, *I, Nadja, and Other Poems*

SHE WAS ALL SURFACE. All her consciousness was concentrated on her skin, every molecule of air passing over her, twitching through the fine hairs and bouncing into and out of the invisible landscape of her, triggering quakes along her nerves, sideswiping her senses. His breath was more intense still, its warmth making her shiver. She could feel his hair brush the side of her face and she knew he was lowering his head so he could kiss her neck and she thought she might implode. Then he did and she didn't die from it, but for just a second her mind boiled over. It foamed with the brief hot softness of his lips and breath. She felt her own breath catch in her throat and she heard it, a heavy wetness smacking against air. She thought she might never breathe again and she thought she might dissolve right there, with him bent against her and breathing the heat out of his lungs across her

Because I Have Loved and Hidden It

shoulder. Her nerves quivered with disbelief and a pleasure she doubted even while they vibrated with it.

She took the heat of his body from his mouth and from his skin and she began to feel the dense textures of his hands, sculpted by work and by daily life, the strength of his muscles making his fingers and his palms and his wrists dense and hard. He held her hands down, away from them both. She could not move her hands inside his hands, her arms straining up against him. She closed her eyes, her mind moving back to inhabit the insides of her eyelids where they sealed her away from the irrelevant sight of the wall, the room beyond his head, his chest and shoulder, and she felt her collarbones suddenly spring into existence under his lips. She was grateful for the bones of her body, which had never meant anything to her before, but now received this gift, this touch, these invisible traces of moisture from his own warm skin.



JULIA SITS BY HER OPEN window in the dark. Montreal is uncharacteristically silent — she rarely sees it during its few quiet late-night hours. Only Sunday mornings, in her Plateau neighbourhood, are equally serene. The street looks like a rare exterior shot from a film noir, deep blacks cut by occasional shining planes of light. Her chest aches with an anxiety that is salted with regret and a pinch of shame. Her lover is missing, and everything she did not say, did not do, every awkwardness and thoughtlessness eats at her now. She is embarrassed to be regretting her own defects at a moment when she ought to be consumed by thoughts of him.

He must be somewhere, his body must be somewhere even if his spirit already roams the ether; what street is he on now? If death had a street it might look like this, buildings that seem to be vacant in the stillness, empty cars rooted to black pavement. Nicholas's absence has always lived in Julia's veins; he has often deprived her of his company through carelessness or preoccupation. This absence, occurring not through his choice but possibly through some violence or grave misfortune, is much more painful. Julia's throat is tight. She rubs uselessly at her temples.

There is a movement outside, a flick of shadow — a dried leaf in invisible wind, or a cat perhaps, slipping under a car. A scrap of life, breaking the hypnotic spell of death's street.



AT HER MOTHER'S FUNERAL, JULIA stood in the thick damp heat regretting that she'd worn pantyhose; they clung to her legs like evil. She hated being too hot. She'd really hoped to feel cool — composed — for this particular event.

Carol had requested that her body be displayed at the funeral home. This didn't surprise Julia on religious grounds; Carol had picked and chosen among the traditions of her forebears, forgoing leavened breads during Passover but regularly chowing down on cheeseburgers. She did find it bizarre considering the state of her mother's body post-cancer — yet it was self-absorbed in a way that was entirely in character for Carol. Julia thought she wouldn't care to see her mother, even in death, but upon entering the air-conditioned dimness of the funeral home and identifying herself to the man at the

door as Carol's daughter, she was ushered immediately into the viewing room with unctuous solicitude. "Of course," he'd said, his head ducking to one side as if attached by a string to his ankle, "the Goodman party." Not much of a party, Julia thought. With the man retreating silently behind her, Julia stood before the casket. Her irritation lifted and, curious, she stepped forward.

In the coffin was a corpse she recognized as her mother only after adjusting mentally for the years of age and disease, and the effects of the undertaker's ministrations. Her mother's body, planetary in shape for much of her life, had melted away to what looked like a bundle of dry sticks; her ankles, sticking out past the hem of her dress, could have been filched from a turkey carcass. Julia pictured her mother the last time she'd seen her, crossing a windblown street with a plastic shopping bag in each hand, her grey hair wild about her head. Now she lay in her box, primly wrapped in the too-ample folds of a shiny purple polyester dress, the belt of which was pulled so tight the end had been tucked around under her back. Her hair was neatly combed back from her face and sprayed into a hard shell. Her face looked as if all the flesh had been boiled away, revealing sharp bones and gristle, the ridges of a chaotic landscape. Her mouth was oddly pursed, as if she'd been blowing someone a kiss when she unexpectedly died. Julia felt sorry for her mother, seeing Carol's habitual appearance — which Julia had found unattractive and embarrassing during Carol's life — effaced at the last moment by a stranger. She wondered if she would be so reduced when her time came.

Julia was considering the possibility of getting a coffee before the formalities began when she heard the chunk-chunk of her Uncle Paul's walker. She turned to watch him enter, dressed in a dusty black suit that hung on him like a bathrobe. He made his way slowly to the open coffin and thunked his walker onto the carpet with a determined finality. "Hi, dolly," he said to Julia, his voice low and phlegmy. He patted her hand with his own puffy one. He was more liver-spotted than she remembered, his skin slung as loose on his old skull as his suit was around his shoulders. She gave him a quick, gentle hug. "Where's Judy?" she asked. Paul waved a hand. "Not feeling too good today." Julia knew that Judy, Paul's second wife, had never really liked Carol. It was entirely like Judy not to attend a funeral simply for form's sake. Good for her, Julia thought. She wondered what negotiation had taken place at home.

They stood for a few minutes in silence. Julia had the urge to step over and hug her uncle again and, this time, hang on to him — but she felt held back, she wasn't sure why. Instead she found herself gazing at him, mentally placing a hand on his bowed shoulders, his bent head.

Uncle Paul looked up and jerked his head toward the exit. "Let's get this show on the road," he said loudly, and then picked up his walker and began to manoeuvre it around again. "I don't want to hang around in this place," he said under his breath, cocking his head toward Julia so she could hear him. "I'm gonna be back here soon enough."



Because I Have Loved and Hidden It

AT THE GRAVESIDE, BEFORE HER mother's uninscribed half of the double headstone, Julia, Paul, and Paul's son, Bill, stood across the opening in the earth from a couple of people her mother must have known during her last years, perhaps from her apartment building. After Bill read a very brief account of Carol's life, Uncle Paul leaned down from his walker and picked up a handful of the moist grey earth and threw it clumsily into the rectangular hole. Julia heard it smack the wood of the casket.

"I say goodbye to my sister," Paul said, his chin raised, his arm sweeping across the open pit of the grave. "She was a good sister, and now she's dead." Julia grinned to herself privately without lifting her head. Then Paul grabbed his walker and jerked it out of the soil at the edge of the grave, where it had sunk, and began the process of turning around to leave. Julia waited until the others had all moved off and then rummaged at the edge of the pile of dirt for a pebble. She laid it on her father's side of the headstone and took a minute to think of him. Then she caught up with Paul and fell into place beside him, walking slowly to keep pace. She was dying to peel off her damn pantyhose. They walked in silence to Bill's car. Bill loaded the walker into his trunk while Uncle Paul levered himself into the back seat. "Julia, dolly, come sit here, I have something for you," Paul said, patting the seat next to him.

As they pulled out of the cemetery, Uncle Paul drew a crumpled manila envelope from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "This is for you," he said. "Your mother gave it to me for safekeeping when she went into the hospital. But I think you should have it."

“What is it?” Julia asked, tenting the envelope to get at the paper inside, but Paul put his hand over hers.

“Don’t look at it now,” he said, turning his head to gaze out the window. “You don’t ever have to look at it if you don’t want to. I just thought you should have it.”



AT HOME, SHE’D KICKED OFF her shoes before the door was even fully closed. She pulled off her pantyhose on the way to the kitchen, the nylon stretching up from her feet like hot cheese from a pizza. She poured a glass of water from the kitchen tap, sat down, and took a sip. Then she opened the flap of the envelope and shook out the contents. A single piece of paper, sepia with age; it was a birth certificate. Baby Goodman, born October 1, 1963. Sex: F.



JULIA SETTLES IN AGAINST THE pillow and pulls the duvet up to her waist, folds it over. She is readying herself for her nightly confrontation with sleep. For some, sleep is a calm and restorative companion for nights that pass away in unconscious meditation. For Julia, it is a moody and inconstant lover, ardently desired and, when it comes, welcomed with gratitude and relief — but when it refuses her, she is resentful. Waiting to see which or when it will be, she lies with anxiety.

Sleep rarely abandons her for an entire night, but often forces her to wait in a stew of unpleasant emotions while it dallies elsewhere. The sheets are cool against Julia’s skin, the pillows against her cheek and neck. She has her secret rituals, meant to call sleep and convince it to visit her — to stay with

her and confer its grace upon her: the clean sheets, the good pillow, the duvet snapped in the air so it floats down like a bird landing on water. Julia attempts to clear her mind.

She knows it is a false clarity. Since she fell in love, began to think constantly of Nicholas, sleep took offence and has kept its distance. And why not — what lover can accept with equanimity the thought of another, even if no rivalry is possible? The first night she tried to sleep in her now-quiet bed after having made love with Nicholas, sleep turned its jealous back completely. Since then, it has kept a wounded silence many nights, only coming to Julia when she has finally worn down the thought of Nicholas by the constant turning of her mind. She exchanges one moody and inconstant lover for another, insinuated the second into her life, giving him the cloudy jar of her mind every night. Now she has two lovers, both of whom want her but neither of whom wants to be burdened with her. Both of whom will let themselves come so close — but no closer. And sleep is not appeased by the absence, even the possible mortal end of its rival, Nicholas.

Julia tries to find a mental neutral, an emptiness that will leave her free of Nicholas, her longings for him, her anxieties. It never works; Nicholas is inside Julia whether she likes it or not. He lives in her tiny firing synapses, in sparks of electricity jumping through her brain. She'd like to find a way to dull the hot glinting slivers, make her brain a quiet place — the way the streets were quiet in the damp late night when Nicholas left her door. Then she would stand on the sidewalk, arms crossed against the cool dark, to watch his straight back recede under the streetlights, his taste in her mouth, his smell on her fingers. She wishes he smelled stronger; he's a fastidious man

— which has its pleasant aspects, to be sure. He is always clean, his white shirts spotless, his shoes well shined. Even when he says he smells, in the dense wet humidity and high heat of these climate-change summers, Julia can hardly get a whiff. He's never gamy, never rank.

There's something almost feminine about his cleanliness, while Julia, on the other hand, finds herself embarrassingly aromatic. In the summer she's afraid her underarms are rancid, her vagina strong and sticky; her skin accumulates grime. Nicholas appears not to mind. She doesn't trust what he tells her; her insecurities are too strong to be calmed by his reassurances. In the past he has embraced her, told her in the heat that he wants her slimy, slipped his hands into her underwear and pressed the lips of her together until they released their wetness, declining her offer to wash because he said he wanted her sweat and her smell. In spite of all this, she has lain in bed and wondered whether this time he didn't call her because of her smelly cunt. She knows this kind of speculation is futile and, worse, self-indulgent. She is fully aware that her feverish desire scares him much more than her over-fragrant genitalia. And she is not even sure if his erratic interest in her has anything to do with her at all. It could easily be all about him, and she could be any woman, any version of herself — twenty pounds fatter, her breasts ten years more wasted, wine dribbling out of the corners of her mouth as she laughs too loudly in public and pounds her fist on the table in some bar where he knows the bartender. Or maybe she could be taller, with smoother skin, a mind like a steel trap, tender shivering fingers that fill men with yearning at their feathery touch — and Nicholas still wouldn't call her.

Because I Have Loved and Hidden It

Julia turns her head once, slightly, from side to side, feeling the cool pillowcase on her face, smelling the clean cotton. She feels the edge of the duvet cover, also fresh cotton, under her palms. Before Nicholas, she used to be able to touch herself to sleep, the spasm that tensed all her muscles leaving her relaxed and warm in its wake. Not anymore. Now she touches herself and imagines herself with Nicholas, and although she intends to think of them making love, to imagine him pulling the fabric of her shirt away from her waist, up so he can slide his cool dry hands around her hips, up until they cover her ribs, his fingers long and powerful as if he wanted to squeeze the breath out of her and breathe it into his own mouth, pull it down into his own lungs just because it has been inside her — even though this is what she would like to think about, and what she begins to imagine, the scenario invariably fades. Without intending it, she finds herself imagining instead some scene of rejection, disdain, inadvertent contempt. This is not what she wants to be thinking, knowing he may be in danger or worse, but he never comes to her mind, his sweet-soft skin and tender fingers, without the disapproving set to his beautiful mouth or the flicker of his eye away from her, toward something else. She invents conversations between them that have never happened, that end with Nicholas leaving her in her doorway, dignified but nursing a wound that will not stop bleeding. She knows this is her mind telling her what she does not want to know, that this is the real substance of her affair with Nicholas — but he has always been just tender enough, or just in time, to tug her back to him. He can be beautifully, meltingly gentle, a fragile curl of butter turning liquid in the heat of her inner elbow. Then his

tenderness is a tiny pool of rainwater in the hollow of her collarbone — but it only happens now and then. She doesn't know how the part of him that can be so gently, warmly nourishing can be so thoroughly absent at other times.

Julia turns on her side and pulls the duvet up over her shoulder, the cover making her realize that her skin has turned cold in the night air. She lifts her knees up high, feeling the small of her back creak and stretch as the tension is tugged up like a drawstring being pulled through the neck of a bag. Only this strain will not come out, not tonight. As she lies here in her bed thinking of Nicholas and his strong hands and stern expression, the tension collects at the base of her spine and forms a ball. She can see it, a tangled ball, and then as she thinks it, it begins to move, becomes a tight writhing mass of worms. The image is revolting and she desperately tries to distract herself.

What is Nicholas doing now? Something involving wine, she hopes. Some foreign version of the way she often conjures him in Montreal, sitting in the bar he frequents, chatting up some young woman he is interested in. Only in Morocco he will be speaking French, or he will be allowing some tourist to practise her English on him. Julia knows he tells himself it must be innocent since they are in public, he and this young woman. He lets himself do it, telling himself that he has no intention of sleeping with her. The girl is complaining about her boyfriend, who will be here in twenty minutes to pick her up; they are going to a club with friends. Julia imagines Nicholas congratulating himself — see, the purity of his intentions is proved by the fact that he cannot bring this woman back to his room, by the fact that he will be sitting

here with her when her boyfriend arrives, some strapping Dutch boy with a blond beard, and Nicholas will meet the boyfriend and they will enjoy the camaraderie of acquaintances, of fellow travellers. Julia sees this in her mind and smiles sideways to herself because she dislikes this part of Nicholas and is mystified by it, yet it does not stop her from wanting him, doesn't even make a dent in her wanting. It is part of him, makes him the complicated, unknowable person he is.

She wonders whether, given a good opportunity, she would sleep with someone else who came along, for the simple and fleeting pleasure of it or in the hope of love. She'd like to think so — it makes her feel independent. Yet she must admit to herself that her desire for Nicholas overwhelms any thoughts of other people, and she resents him for drawing her so strongly. She feels him a massive, powerful magnet and herself an ordinary, flimsy straight pin; she sees herself wheel through the air in slow motion and land, stuck, on his metal edge, her little flat head left jutting out over the side, winking, dull silver, in the light from the window.

She remembers the simple affection with which he gave her a farewell peck on the lips after the second time she slept with him, as they said goodbye out on a busy street where anyone — his wife, for example — could see them. Like a suburban husband saying goodbye to his spouse at the commuter train, or an elderly man dropping his wife of fifty years at her weekly mah-jongg game. Julia sighs and turns over again, kicks the duvet down to her hips, pulls the pillow lower. If sleep persists in ignoring her tonight, she will have to get up, read a book, occupy herself. Do something that she can

do with her head resting on the arm of a chair — because, awake though she may be, she is very, very tired. *He never showed up at his hotel in Casablanca*, Deepa said.



THEY'D EVENTUALLY SLEPT TOGETHER. "NOW we've consummated our affair," Nicholas had said, his voice still soft and husky with desire for her. Although still steeped in afterglow, Julia found this faintly ridiculous. She'd been sipping wine, cross-legged on the bed, and spat up a giddy mouthful, laughing, spattering his white shirt, which lay crumpled across the sheets. "It sounds like soup," she'd cried, unable to control her hiccups of laughter. Even while it was happening she was embarrassed at her mirthful incontinence, but Nicholas was still glazed with adoration, and only seemed to be happy that she was amused. He'd lain back, naked, his long, muscular body stretched out like a piece of fine cloth displayed for a buyer. He folded his arms behind his head and lay for a time, silent, not looking at Julia. Then he said, "I'm ... married."

Julia had despised him, just a grain's worth, for not having had the guts to say so before "consummating" with her. Then she became curious. Julia had seen his wife around town for years, and since their flirtation had entered a serious stage she'd been wondering whether he was cheating, or had some kind of arrangement; she tried to tell herself he might not even still be married to the woman. Now she knew he was still married, but none of the details. "I'd like to keep this between us," he'd said, "so as not to cause ... pain." God, Julia had thought, he can't even make himself say "my wife." But there he was, naked, warm as a fresh baguette, and he'd

made her literally weak in the knees an hour earlier. She tossed back what was left of her wine, feeling the too-large mouthful dam painfully at the entrance to her throat. Why was it that liquid could sometimes be as hard to swallow as stone? She coughed and felt an unpleasant roughness behind her tongue, had to clear her throat. She looked at his graceful legs. Away from his face.



JULIA WAKES IN THE MIDDLE of the night after a vivid dream and feels an unpleasant buzzing in her chest. Her heart seems to lurch to a stop. She is lying in her bed in the dark and she is thinking, therefore she is still alive, so she is sure her heart has not actually stopped. She puts her hand on herself and tries to feel it beating, and cannot. Her chest feels empty. She is like a doll stuffed with crumpled paper. She probes the flesh around her sternum, lays her hand across it. Nothing. Finally she pushes her fingertips into the little hollow under her ear and finds her arterial pulse. It's plodding away, slow, like an ox in a field, the weight of the plow and the resistance of the earth pulling against its muscles with every step.

Having confirmed her continuing existence, Julia's mind turns to Nicholas. Why, at 6:20 a.m., woken from a nightmare involving her parents (as they usually do) and a plate of spaghetti (as they rarely do), her heart dull as waste within her — why then does she, without even choosing it, immediately think of Nicholas? There is a little spasm in her chest as she remembers he is missing, feels the beginnings of grief. Shaking her head, she tells herself she is too emotional, that he is simply busy, and has forgotten everyone else; he's often

done that in the past. She turns on her side and thinks of his beautiful hands, imagines caressing his shoulders, pressing her face against his back while he talks on his cellphone — a liberty she has not taken in real life. Normally she folds herself up on the bed while he speaks with a kind of relaxed joviality he doesn't use with her. She imagines him finishing his call, snapping closed his phone, turning to face her and retracting into himself — and she reaches in past his reserve and pulls him down onto the futon to sit straddling her waist, where she can feel his weight. She laces her fingers through his and feels the size of his strong hands, open and wide as dinner plates against her smaller ones. This is the last thing she remembers before she falls asleep again.



THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE LAY IN Julia's hand like a flake of debris wafted away from a burning house by the heat of the fire. Her first thought was: how could she have lied to me about my age? Julia felt as if she suddenly had a cataract over her mind. Seeing the simplest thing, like this piece of paper, was a struggle. Everything was opaque, unclear.

Her second thought was: Paul knew about this. *He has always known about this.* And she felt a wave of hatred rise through her, a powerful muscular seizure as if she were about to vomit. She closed her eyes, let it pass. Be reasonable, she thought, pressing a soothing palm against her disturbed stomach. Who knows what Paul knew, and when. Her eyes opened again. Although if Carol was pregnant in 1963 rather than 1965, everyone would have known it, wouldn't they? Julia's head was beginning to feel tight and painful. None of

it made sense. Why would her mother have told her that she was two years younger than she really was? Julia had a moment of disorientation, as if she'd suddenly found herself in the wrong body. She caught herself thinking, that's why my breasts have shrunk, I'm really forty-two! She smiled, with a certain amount of bitterness.



JULIA HAD EXPECTED TO FEEL grief when her mother died — or anger, relief, or possibly a wrenching sense of loss. This bewilderment — this she hadn't expected at all. She stared down at the paper in her hands. It was crumbly as baked phyllo dough and almost as brown, the lettering swollen with time. She was finding it difficult to understand what she was holding. She turned it over as if there might be instructions for her printed on the back, but it was blank.

Her mother's brother, Paul, had called her in mid-July. Carol was in hospital. It was "the cancer." Julia's heart had leaped painfully, but she'd kept her voice calm. How serious was it? Uncle Paul paused, sighed. They didn't know how long she had, he said. Hard to tell. At forty, Julia knew that plenty of her peers were taking care of aging parents or had already experienced a parental death. Yet she'd been completely out of contact with her mother for so long that Carol's illness — and, even more, her impending death — felt like an ambush, a strangely ambiguous one. She didn't quite know what to say to Paul; she didn't even really want to thank him for letting her know, although she did.

After the conversation, Julia had had a moment of silent rage, her temples knotted down to her jaw. Why couldn't her

mother just die quickly and easily, spare herself and everyone else the anguish? Then Julia had put her head back and closed her eyes and willed her shoulders down, tried to follow her breath in, down, back up and out again.

Poor Uncle Paul. He was a good guy. He'd never understood why she didn't talk to her mother, although he hadn't held it against Julia, at least not to her face. Now he had the unpleasant job of being the bearer of this news, which must be tough for him to deal with, too. Probably tougher for him — he actually liked Carol, or at least had preserved a connection with her. Julia opened her eyes. Aside from his son, Bill, and grandson, Matthew, Carol and Julia were Paul's only surviving blood relations, and Carol was the last of his generation. He was much older than she was — twelve years (Carol had been a middle-aged accident for her mother) — and there was no other family left. He did have his second wife, Judy, who Julia actually liked more than anyone she was related to by blood. (Blood, Julia thought. What does that mean? Everybody has blood.)

Julia wondered what it would be like to be the last man standing, in a genealogical sense. She supposed it all depended on your past relations with your family. With the technical exception of Bill, who was a pleasant but distant person with whom Julia had no contact at all except at family events, she was alone in her generation. It wasn't the same, though: Paul was the oldest person in his family. Everyone who had preceded him was long gone, and he had had a reasonable expectation that his much-younger sister would outlive him. (Julia wondered what it would mean to her, really, when Paul died.)

It took Carol six weeks. Julia wished more and more fervently for her mother to be spared pain and suffering, her desire increasing in proportion to her mother's reported decline, although she didn't have any desire to take the bus across town and visit. On the contrary, in spite of Carol's worsening condition, Julia continued to feel her usual violent aversion to seeing her. Paul called weekly or more often from the Côte-des-Neiges apartment he shared with Aunt Judy to give Julia medical updates — fluid in the lungs, metastasized to the liver, morphine drip. Every time, he suggested that Julia come see Carol, but the anxiety that her mother provoked in Julia would kick in. She shut him down as nicely yet firmly as she could, one hand gripping the phone and the other, palm open, pushing against her chest, feeling the rise and fall of breath. Paul finally extracted from her a promise to attend the funeral, which Julia regretted as soon as the phone clicked back into its cradle, realizing that he was probably running back to Carol's bedside with the news already.

Well, what difference did it make? Julia went out and bought black summer-weight pantyhose, a new pair of black shoes. At home, unaccountably tired, she sat on the bed to put the shoes in the closet and found herself struck with a sort of painful, amused resignation as she leaned down and saw the lineup of black shoes, almost every pair she already owned. I've been preparing for this for years, she'd thought to herself, pressing her hands against her side where a sharp pain levered itself momentarily between her ribs.

And now this, this single piece of paper, nibbled at the edges by the decades.

