

Alyce Miller

My Summer of Love

I was the son and only child of two flower children named Reed and Marie Braxton who met at Berkeley and were married by a clown named Lenny Penny, who joined them “for as long as it feels good.” My parents were staunch socialists and believed in sharing everything, including each other. My arrival was in strict contradiction to my father’s philosophy about the over-population of the world. When I remained small for my age, my father blamed my mother, a resolute vegetarian, for refusing me meat.

Since my parents believed in openness about everything, I grew up with few secrets in a community of their friends near the Haight, knowing a little about a lot: marijuana, orgone boxes, meditation, birth control, and the relative uncertainty of adult relationships which permutated like kaleidoscopes. My mother worked part-time as a receptionist at an art gallery on Haight Street and volunteered at the free clinic. My father had earned a teaching credential in college and occasionally taught at an alternative private high school where students didn’t receive grades.

The day my parents took me to the train station my mother was wearing a red flowered skirt and a white blouse, set off the shoulders, and sandals. She and my father passed their morning joint back and forth as we drove down through the Panhandle. They had fought miserably the night before, something about the couple, Dana and Lightning from Los Angeles, who had been “crashing” with us since Easter. My father spent the whole night sitting outside on the front steps “getting his head together.” Now my parents huddled in the front seat like two bad children, eyeing each other, as the acrid smell of marijuana enveloped us all in a forgiving haze.

At the station, my mother put on pink-rimmed granny glasses to hide her puffy eyes. She assured me over and over that my going to Aunt Evie was the best for now while she and my father worked through their “philosophical crisis.” “You know how much I adore Evie,” she said several times as if to reassure herself. “I wouldn’t trust anyone else with you.” She asked me not to discuss their troubles with either Aunt Evie or Uncle Ned. “*Especially* Uncle Ned.” Then from her shoulder bag she pulled out my collapsible travel chess set and pressed it into my hands.

“You forgot this. Don’t forget me,” she whispered, her hot tears staining my cheek. I gratefully stuffed the chess set into my knapsack, along with three chess books and my wooden chess clock.

My father paced, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his cut-off sweat pants. His thick dark brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, which meant he was most likely going to practice yoga in the Park later. He hugged me hard against him and I closed my eyes. Unlike Polonius with Laertes, my father kept his advice short. “Stay cool,” was how he summed things up.

As I boarded the train, he reminded me, “If anyone on the train asks, you’re *sixteen* years old.” My mother burst into tears.

“Okay, Reed,” I replied.

My father had decided it was dishonest for me to call him “Dad” anymore, since that implied an inequality in our relationship (a slavish dependence on my part, and a perverse dominance on his) and so in keeping with our new parity, I repeated, “You stay cool, too, Reed,” and slapped him five.

I spent the entire train trip, all three days and two nights of it, among my miniature chess pieces, studying combinations for pinning, double attack, discovered check, smothered mate, and even a surprise checkmate by a pawn capturing *en passant*. The last was so poignant it brought tears to my eyes. As requested, I phoned my parents each night from public phone booths, reversing the charges and assuring them the trip was going well. Other than that I gave my parents very little thought, relieved to be free of their conflict. Just like that, I stored them on a small shelf in my mind and closed the door. I ignored the other passengers and the countryside whizzing by, and concentrated on the endless possibilities of attack and defense on sixty-four squares. In reaction to the brown rice and soy bean curd we ate at home, I downed copious amounts of Fanta root beer and dozens of Reese’s peanut butter cups. A kind of gastronomical rebellion overcame me. At every opportunity I bought huge greasy burgers, still red in the middle, and topped with anemic tomatoes, stringy onions fried in fat, and tart, mouth-withering pickles.

With an endless supply of Oreos, I pored over variations of the King’s Gambit accepted, and memorized a Spasski/Sakharov game from the 1960 USSR championship, as the train sang along the tracks. King-pawn openings were still my favorite and the controversy around the King’s Gambit didn’t diminish my appetite one bit for it. I was a romantic at heart and the chance for positional advantage through sacrifice only fanned my ardor. At thirteen, I hadn’t yet discovered girls and chess was my passion. On our arrival in central Ohio, I emerged from the train with an upset stomach, into gray, muggy weather. It was early evening, and the air had thickened with mosquitoes.

Aunt Evie and Uncle Ned lived in one of those typical, spacious old midwestern houses, with ample lawn, and a full attic and basement. I was given a room in the very back of the house which faced east, so that I got the early morning light. I shared a bathroom with my cousins Patsy and Edmund, whom I’d known intermittently over the years.

Edmund was about to start his senior year in high school. He’d always been a dopey sweet boy who loved sports, but hated reading. Years ago, during a family trip to Ohio, he nicknamed me Professor, which struck me as worse than corny. Now he had grown into a taller, more gangly version of his old self.

Patsy, one year behind him in school, had changed more dramatically. Now at sixteen, she was sarcastic and wild, and her childhood prettiness had ripened into a formidable adolescent savagery. She drew hard dark lines under her eyes that lengthened on either side to her ears; her hair was bound up with a rubber band and flowed from the top of her head like a waterfall. She painted her toenails purple and wore two-inch green platform sandals. She dressed in flowered halter tops and hip-hugger jeans which widened like umbrellas at the ankles.

She was teasing and sly with me, offering sticks of Wrigley's spearmint gum which she chewed in abundance, or sips of milk shakes that she stirred thoughtfully with a long iced tea spoon while staring out from the screen porch into the steamy grass below. She explained to me shortly after my arrival that acid was the only reality, and that her parents were merely two mindless puppets being manipulated by some larger unseen force.

Patsy, I often thought ruefully, should have been my parents' child.

Aunt Evie looked exactly as I'd remembered her: the same ageless wide pale face and light gray hair parted on the side and held back from her forehead with a headband. For my evening meal, she welcomed me with baked chicken, applesauce, and homemade noodles. The tomatoes and cucumbers were straight out of her garden. She sat with me as I ate, begging for details of my trip. When I went upstairs to bed, she fussed around my room as I brushed my teeth, then tucked me in almost apologetically.

"While you're here," she told me, "I thought maybe ten o'clock would be a reasonable bedtime for you. What time do you normally go to bed?"

I had never had a bedtime before, having been allowed to fall asleep wherever and whenever I wanted, so I accepted the bedtime from Aunt Evie like a present. Since I was a small child, I had always adored Aunt Evie, and now those feelings spiraled out of control. I lay awake for some time after she'd closed my door and left me to sleep, cushioned by a sense of well-being.

In the weeks that followed, I seized every chance to sit on the kitchen stool while she baked or ironed or washed dishes. Sometimes she was silent, listening to the Saturday Metropolitan Opera broadcast on the radio, while I worked quietly on chess. In her more talkative moments she told me stories, interesting things about her childhood: how she'd babysat her two younger brothers for a whole week when she was ten because her mother went to the hospital for a gall bladder operation; how she'd fought with her father about going to college to become a teacher (she wanted to be a doctor); how she'd gone to Mexico for a month when she was twenty-one and lived with an Indian family in a mountain village where there was no plumbing or electricity. My curiosity aroused, I would ask questions and Aunt Evie would tell me all about the Depression and how later she worked in a factory during World War II, making machine parts. She ended up doing as her father wanted and becoming a teacher, though she had done little more than substitute the last few years.

"I don't understand children these days," she confided sweetly in me. "I have nothing to teach them, and I can't stand yelling at them to behave."

Around the house, when she cooked and vacuumed, Aunt Evie wore an apron. Even when she was sitting on the front porch in a chair, reading the newspaper, or stretched out on the sofa for a quick nap, her front was covered by the blue and white checked cotton—quite a contrast to my mother, who had never worn an apron, much less anything at all.

Since I could remember, my mother had wandered the house nude, her body slender and tanned, her breasts full and oblong-shaped like pears. She even courted disaster, cooking with hot oil, unprotected, believing, as did my father, that nudity was the key to spiritual freedom, and clothing represented hypocrisy and repression. Personally, I preferred wearing clothes, though I was assured repeatedly by both my parents that it was fine not to. There was a time when my preference for clothes caused them great concern, and my mother would gently point out how the other children my age at the nude beach were getting all-over tans, wouldn't that be nice to do.

I came to associate Aunt Evie's apron with the aroma of Toll House cookies steaming up the humid kitchen on summer afternoons. As the long sweltering hours after lunch piled up like days, and the yard sizzled and hissed in the white-hot sunlight, I holed up with my chess set on the shady screen porch, waiting to be summoned to lick the raw dough from the beaters and, later, to test the first batch of cookies as they emerged from the oven. In that thick, tight air, the aroma of baking overpowered me like a drug, and sometimes I just lay flat on my back on the floor and delighted in the expectation.

If there was a thunderstorm, Aunt Evie and I would sit together on the screen porch with a plate of cookies and glasses of iced tea, and watch the lightning crackle and count the seconds before the thunder rolled.

"That one was close!" she'd say. "Just over there."

The rain that followed would dramatically lower the temperature, enough for me to run inside for a sweatshirt, and in the fine misty air, so delicious I wanted to drink it, Aunt Evie and I would play gin rummy or Scrabble, and watch the water drip off the green plants jammed against the screened walls.

"I see you're something of a chess player," Uncle Ned commented one afternoon, as he stood in the doorway looking out across the yard. He caught me off guard by addressing me directly. His tone did not invite a response; his posture was rigid and exuded loathing. I kept my head bowed and my eyes on the board.

Uncle Ned almost never spoke to any of us, including Aunt Evie. He reminded me of a white-flour-and-water paste my mother used to make for me when I was little. Aunt Evie never walked *by* my Uncle Ned, but always *around* him, the way you would a sleeping snake. He, on the other hand, looked straight through her, as if she were made of glass. Even when he addressed her, his eyes focused somewhere beyond on the wall or the ceiling. If he was reading, his eyes remained on the page. Uncle Ned ignored me, Edmund tolerated me, Patsy confided in me, and Aunt Evie loved me.

I overheard Aunt Evie tell my cousins, "You be nice to poor little Oscar this summer, his mommy and daddy are going through a rough time."

Upon hearing that, I felt so sorry for myself that I went off and cried. Every time after that when I was feeling lonesome, I'd look at Edmund as sorrowfully as I could, hoping he'd recall his mother's advice. But he didn't, not really. Edmund was too preoccupied with his own life to be concerned with me. After all, we were five years apart. He played a lot of basketball that summer and when he wasn't doing that he was lounging on the front porch of a girl named Sabra who lived two blocks over.

When I became a man in my thirties and I met Edmund again at a family reunion I found him unimaginative and removed from life, not unlike his father. He had married a woman named Marjorie who looked almost exactly like Aunt Evie, but was far more severe, and they had three daughters, all of whom dressed like hookers and chewed gum.

That summer Patsy informed me repeatedly that Edmund was "just a dumb jock." A deep sigh would follow, out of some well of melancholy that stirred inside Patsy, expressed repetitively through her walls in the form of Jim Morrison's echoing monotone droning out, "Come on, baby, light my fire," or Grace Slick's untamed "Plastic Fantastic Lover." Over and over Patsy would listen, as if in a trance for what seemed like hours, until the beat throbbed like a pulse in the house. I had glimpsed her when her door was cracked, meditating on the spider she liked to draw on her hand in ink, her eyes lit up like candles.

"When I get out of high school," she told me many times, "I'm heading out to Frisco. It's the only place to be. Think Reed and Marie would let me crash with them?"

I shrugged.

"God, Oscar, you're so lucky. Tell me about the Haight."

Not sure what to say, I described the people on the street and the music in the Park. I even told her about chancing on a manzanita thicket one afternoon and discovering two wild-haired people in the throes of lovemaking there on the ground. I had actually run like a startled deer, but suggested to Patsy that I had lingered, and served up several imagined details as truth.

"Is it true they sell dope right on the street corners?" Patsy wanted to know. "I mean, everyone just walks around buzzed in public, right?"

Unlike my parents, Aunt Evie and Uncle Ned never argued, at least not that I ever heard. I couldn't imagine Aunt Evie throwing pots and dishes the way my mother did when she was provoked. Things frequently zoomed by my father's head. He in turn would laugh at her and call her a "crazy bitch," leaving me with a sick, sinking feeling that neither could be trusted. Like so many of their friends at the time, my parents experimented with drugs, and things tended to get confused. Much of the time everyone had a good time hanging out, rapping and smoking, and cooking outlandish meals that took all day to make. Our house was always full of people, some of my father's high school students, old college friends, and neighbors. But often, as my mother needled my father (and she seemed to do it purposely!) I fled to the basement and sat weeping between the cat box and the washing machine.

And yet there were times when the routine silence between Aunt Evie and Uncle Ned grew darker than the open rancor between my parents, and I began to suspect a

seed of evil germinating in the small callus of Uncle Ned's heart. I mostly ignored Uncle Ned, finding him both inaccessible and unremarkable, with one exception: his impeccable table manners. Though he came from Pennsylvania mining people, he ate like continental aristocracy. He switched hands when using a knife and a fork, laying the utensils carefully to the side of the plate as he chewed. He took only mouse-sized bites into his mouth, pondering each one like a nugget of wisdom.

Before each meal, he insisted on being called five minutes in advance so he could wash his hands and brush his teeth.

In the kitchen, where I kept Aunt Evie company, she would interrupt my chess study long enough to ask me, "Oscar, why don't you call your Uncle Ned to dinner." (She'd given up on Patsy and Edmund for this task.) I disguised my distaste for relaying messages to Uncle Ned. After all, it was Aunt Evie asking. At the sound of my voice, he remained motionless in his chair, but his lips would move imperceptibly in an "Mmmm, hmmm" over the top of his book or the edge of a magazine.

Soon he would arrive at the table like a dark cloud, seating himself with grave precision. He made a point of scooting the chair out just so far and settling himself against the cushion until it was just right.

"So, this is lovely," he would remark, as Aunt Evie set his food before him. Patsy and Edmund always exchanged disgusted looks when he spoke. "Everything looks excellent."

Aunt Evie always saw to it that meals were colorful so they would appeal to the eye as well as to the digestive system. Uncle Ned would use his fork to gently prod what was on his plate, first examining each mouthful carefully. "Now, let's see, how many tablespoons of flour were used in the gravy?" he would ask in a tidy little voice.

Aunt Evie's tone was as flat as the street they lived on. "Six," she might say, never breaking her momentum at the stove. "Now you all go ahead and get started before your food gets cold."

Sometimes, without looking at any of us, Uncle Ned would issue a verbal dissertation on the difference between certain types of avocados or grapes, depending on what Aunt Evie served. He would hold forth on alternative ways to cook whatever it was that Aunt Evie had prepared, pausing only to wipe his mustache with his napkin. Like Patsy and Edmund, I was relieved when he wasn't around; the whole house seemed to loosen its joints and flex its muscles. Aunt Evie was at her best when it was just the two of us.

My summer progressed, smooth and monotonous. I was left alone in the afternoons to do as I pleased, but there was little I chose other than chess. There were no neighbor children my age, and even if there had been, my poor experience with socializing left me unequipped to pursue friendships easily. In the shade of Aunt Evie's backyard arbor I memorized the dragon and its counter-moves. At night, on the front porch, my legs swabbed with mosquito repellent, I went over and over the King's Indian and its variations. I tried to teach Edmund, but he couldn't get the hang of it.

"God, it takes so long," he would say, shifting uneasily opposite me. While I studied the board he would throw imaginary basketballs into the air and send them

through hoops with a “poof!” from his lips. Soon he would abandon me for better things.

After dinner Aunt Evie often summoned me for a walk in her garden.

“Did you know you can eat pansies?” she asked me one evening, offering several flowers as proof. I watched as she ate one herself. “They are beautiful in salads, you know. Go ahead, try it.”

She knew exactly how much to water each bed (she did it all by hand with a hose) and how far back to trim her roses. “Gardening is meditative for me. It gives me such a peaceful feeling, but then you understand the importance of that, with your chess and all.” With her yard shears she would clip a rosebud or an azalea and thread it through a buttonhole on my shirt.

“I’ve given up trying to get Patsy and Edmund interested in gardening. They honestly couldn’t care less.” She said this without accusation. “Too bad I can’t keep you all year, Oscar.”

In the twilight we would sometimes sit on the stone bench at the very edge of her yard and stare out across to the spread of a small park on the other side. “I’m so glad you could come be with us, Oscar,” she often told me. “My own children are at an age where I no longer understand them, when I have done my job as a mother, and now it is up to them to make sense of their lives. People eventually must become responsible for themselves, you know.” She sighed. “Part of your job in life is to forgive them for the ways they disappoint you.”

What was it, I often wondered when she and I sat like this, that stood between her and Uncle Ned. Why the insidious silence that began slowly to disturb me as much as the raging battles between my parents. Uncle Ned lived so removed from the rest of us. He came and went each day without incident, like a casual guest. Sometimes when I looked at him I saw only a dull man whom I hated; at other times when he turned inwards, I saw a selfish little man preoccupied with unnamed grief.

Once I peeped through the open door of their bedroom and discovered they slept in twin beds, pristinely covered in brown spreads, and neatly separated by a nightstand with a lamp. I resisted the urge to go in and look further, knowing that a question had been raised in my mind and the answer lay somewhere beyond, perhaps even in that room.

“I think, Oscar, you’ve put on a little weight here,” Aunt Evie remarked to me one evening at dinner in front of everyone. I was having seconds of everything, as was my custom. “Or maybe you’ve grown an inch or two.” I didn’t mind her saying things like that.

“He’s been eating my desserts, that’s why,” remarked Patsy snidely. She was trying to stay slim. On hot days she wore skirts so short they seemed pointless, and her bare stomach was exposed, flat as an ironing board, from under her halter tops as living proof that Patsy wasn’t eating much. That summer Patsy worked part-time at a drive-in restaurant on the outskirts of town, called Dog-N-Suds, where teenagers would go for whatever it was that teenagers did, and she claimed being around all that greasy food made her too sick to eat.

“Well, I think our Midwestern fare is agreeing with Oscar.” Aunt Evie smiled and winked at me. “You’re going to surprise your parents when they see you.”

My mother wrote and phoned several times a week. Her voice was often whiny and tinged with guilt. She made small talk about who was visiting or what someone in the house had said or how she’d seen a schoolmate of mine or what my dog Caesar had done. If he was around, Reed would get on the phone and tell me about the retreats and music festivals and demonstrations he was going to. I did not mention to them I had become a carnivore.

“So, how are they treating you back there in that vapid desert wasteland called middle America?” Reed asked with a chuckle. “Did you survive that great contradiction of patriotism and hypocrisy, the Fourth of July?”

“Sure, Reed,” I told him. “Everything’s just great.”

I didn’t bother to mention I had started going to a chess club on Tuesday and Friday nights two towns over in Tuscarawas County. I knew he hoped I was out meeting people my own age, boys who rode scooters and whistled at girls.

I looked forward to the chess club. Usually Ned, on his way to some meeting or other, drove me to these events in his air-conditioned white Cadillac. The unpleasant smell of his sweet cologne pervaded the air, and I tried holding my breath as long as I could to avoid inhaling it. We traveled in silence, while Ned fiddled with the radio dial until he found elevator music. When he dropped me off, he said, “Good night,” with such finality that I half-expected never to see him again.

Either Edmund, roaming town in his asthmatic Chevy, or Aunt Evie in her Rambler, would pick me up when I phoned to say I was ready, sometimes not until eleven or so at night. Playing the Friday night tournaments I managed to get my rating up to 1650 and was steadily being matched with stronger opponents. There was a man named Bill who would go over my games with me afterward and analyze my strengths and weaknesses. “You’re a good player,” he told me, “but you’re going to have to work harder. You’re not seeing things you should.”

On a couple of the Friday nights that Aunt Evie picked me up I know for a fact that Uncle Ned was not home when we arrived. His side of the garage was empty and Aunt Evie pulled in cheerfully, without comment. She fixed me iced tea and we sat on the screen porch together while I gave her a blow-by-blow account of my games. Even though she didn’t play chess herself, she said hearing about it was like listening to music, and she would close her eyes and absorb it the way you would a symphony.

One night, after Aunt Evie and I had iced tea, the caffeine kept me awake. Or maybe it was the heat threatening to cave in and suffocate me. I leaped to my open window and began sucking in air through the screen. It was a particularly humid night; thunder rolled distantly in the sky, and occasionally a streak of lightning crossed the sky. Heat lightning, they call it back there, but Aunt Evie explained it was really cloud reflections of lightning farther away.

Sweating in my pajamas, the silence thick around my head like a scarf, I began to go over a game I’d lost earlier. I’d blundered about six moves into the play and never fully recovered. I had a lousy position and played down a knight for most of the

game. The correct move soon became obvious to me; I'd forgotten the traps for black in Ruy Lopez, and had fallen into one head first.

Vaguely, from the other side of the house, I heard a small high-pitched sound that I couldn't readily identify: a cat yowling, I thought, no, a violin being tuned, no, a baby crying. The crickets under my open window started a staccato chatter, and the faint wail ran like a thin melody above.

I climbed off my chair and went to the door. The sound came not from outside after all. I opened my door a crack and peered into the long black hallway. At the opposite end I saw a thin string of light under Aunt Evie and Uncle Ned's door. Though I had grown up hearing my mother cry, I was greatly disturbed by the idea that a man would. I recognized it as such, a small anguished sound that started deep inside the chest. Murmurs, then sobs, followed by an outburst of bitterest tone. Then I heard Evie's voice, soft enough to soothe a burn: "That's enough now, Ned, that's enough." I realized immediately I had been privy to something I should not have been, and shut my door. Despite the heat, my teeth began to chatter. But not before a strange sensation passed over me, as if I'd seen a ghost.

The next morning I was relieved that Uncle Ned was nowhere to be seen. I had not slept well, and sat at the breakfast table like a lump. Aunt Evie called for Edmund and Patsy to join us, she had something important to discuss.

"I've got to get to work," Patsy complained, swaying on one foot in the doorway. "What is it, Mother?"

Aunt Evie nailed her shut with a look. She spoke in a brisk, business-like way. "Your father is going away to an insurance convention for several days and we're going to have a party, just the four of us, this weekend."

Edmund guffawed. "A party! Yeah, right."

Patsy rolled her eyes and started giggling. "What kind of a party?" she wanted to know, in that sassy tone she used when making fun of her mother.

"A *party* party," said Aunt Evie. "You know, food, drinks, dancing. Just as I've always said I would, but haven't gotten around to, for one reason or another."

"Dancing?" blurted out Edmund. "We're going to dance—*here*?"

He spread his arms as if to encompass the hopelessness of such a concept in the crowded, forbidding living room that Aunt Evie had kept so neat and orderly all these years.

Aunt Evie's face was flushed with excitement. She produced a written list of the things she wanted each of us to do, dividing the tasks among us. "Edmund, I'd like you to scrub down the front walkway and mow the lawn. Inside, I'll need you to vacuum every inch of the living room. Patsy, you'll help me shop for the food. We'll have smoked turkey and potato salad for the main course." She turned to me. "Oscar, I'd like you to dust everything before Edmund vacuums."

"I don't believe this," Edmund muttered to me, shaking his head. "The old bar's off her rocker."

"And if any of you breathe a word of this to your father, I'll cut your throats! We're going to have a little fun around here."

I was so drawn to this turn of events that I abandoned my chess playing for the next few days and threw myself whole-heartedly into Aunt Evie's party preparations.

Patsy and I worked on invitations.

“Come on, little Oscar,” she suggested, as we spread the note cards and envelopes out on the kitchen table, “let’s make them really freaky. Let’s put a little blotter acid on the invite and draw an arrow with the words ‘Lick here one hour before you arrive.’ Whoa, can you imagine?”

Aunt Evie appeared with a sample card. We were, she instructed, to write “SHSHSHSH” on the front of the invitation and then on the inside announce her event as a surprise party. She didn’t say for whom or why.

“How’s Daddy not going to know about this?” mused Patsy as we labored over the invitations. “Everybody knows everything in this town.”

I wanted to ask Patsy if she’d heard crying the night before, but I was afraid. An almost imperceptible uneasiness stirred inside me, but remained unnamed.

Patsy and I hand-delivered the invitations door-to-door on her bicycle in the twilight. I sat on the handlebars while she pedaled. While she held the bike, I ran up and stuck the envelopes through the mail slots.

“This is probably going to be so square,” Patsy moaned. “I’m going to have to get really stoned just to make it through the night.”

The day of the party I was worried. What if Uncle Ned came home unexpectedly? What if no one showed up?

Aunt Evie’s excitement was infectious. She strung paper Japanese lanterns on the screen porch and over the backyard patio. I trimmed candle wicks and filled two candelabras and a number of candlesticks with rose-colored candles. The local florist delivered a dozen red roses and a series of wildflower bouquets which Aunt Evie set on the mantel, the piano, and the dining room table. She combined these with flowers from her own garden. Patsy complained and polished silver for a couple of hours, and from the intensity of her concentration I knew she hadn’t smoked or dropped anything yet.

Aunt Evie’s friend Lucy Campbell arrived early, dressed in black like a concert performer, to play popular songs from musicals on the piano. She started out with, “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair,” and went on to tear-jerkers like, “When You Walk Through A Storm,” which had Patsy all teary as she lounged in her fringe vest and jeans on the living room floor.

Aunt Evie appeared on the stairs in a beautiful red linen dress and matching red open-toed pumps. Her hair hung to her shoulders in soft gray waves. Edmund let out a low whistle. “She’s got lips!” he teased. Aunt Evie’s red mouth smiled mysteriously.

Edmund served as the bartender, standing proudly behind the sideboard, with a wild paisley tie Patsy had found at a head shop wound around his neck. I was to take sweaters and jackets, if there were any, and lay them on Aunt Evie’s bed upstairs, though the evening was so warm it seemed doubtful. The guests began to arrive, first one or two, then a whole herd at once. They were people Aunt Evie had known for years, teachers and doctors and neighbors she’d never gotten around to inviting for afternoon tea. The house was suddenly jammed with people and their chatter and the clink of glasses. The smoked turkey lay seductively in its platter of lettuce; there were

potato and fruit salads, freshly-cut vegetables, and rounds of cheeses overflowing the dining room table like a cornucopia. Candles flickered and cast a cathedral light over the house.

I kept hearing Edmund clear his throat and ask in a funny formal voice, “Would you like something to drink?”

Patsy’s best friend Anemone arrived, dressed in white hot pants and a red halter top, with two boys I’d vaguely seen Patsy hanging out with, Skip and Richard from down the street. They both had long hair (Patsy called them “heads”) and Richard kept his tinted granny glasses on, though the light was so dim I wondered how he could see anything.

Guests flocked over to where Lucy Campbell pounded out, “I’m Just A Girl Who Can’t Say No” on the piano. Everyone started singing, including Aunt Evie whose voice soared over the rest. The older people started dancing.

I took a seat on the window ledge where I could watch guests drinking and laughing on the patio under the Japanese lanterns and couples in the living room dancing to Lucy Campbell’s music. A chorus went up of, “Ducks and chicks and geese better scurry. . . .” The party became a swirl of color, an abundance of happiness. It was the first party I’d ever attended that wasn’t celebrating something specific. Edmund slipped me a vodka tonic that adhered to my brain and rubbed at my cranium like sandpaper. I ordered another, and then agreed to dance with one of Aunt Evie’s older women friends. Everyone laughed as I allowed myself to be twirled like a baton.

Patsy and Anemone and the two boys sat lined up on the sofa like criminals, laughing and hooting at the dancers, and passing a plate of food among themselves.

Though Patsy patted the empty spot beside her as an invitation for me to come sit, I preferred being off by myself, overwhelmed as I was by an unexpected feeling of awe. Perhaps it was the vodka tonics, but I found myself suddenly consumed by fear as to what was going to happen to my parents and, ultimately, to me. Sadness gathered in the corners of my eyes, pulling the skin there tight. A desperation rose as I worried about what my parents had decided and what was to be done with me. For the first time I knew what it felt like to sit outside the principal’s office at school, waiting to be reprimanded. A cloud of melancholy settled over me each time Aunt Evie floated by, her attention elsewhere. What would happen to her after I’d gone, I wondered. What would become of me.

The thing that stuck in my mind from that night, after everything else became a blur of tinkling glasses and Lucy’s piano playing, was one particular image of Aunt Evie. About midnight she returned to the living room floor, led by a handsome man in his early forties with black curly hair and dark eyes. Patsy crossed the room to me and leaned on my shoulder with her elbow. She reeked of marijuana smoke.

“Look at that,” she remarked in my ear, “Mom’s dancing with Mr. Chalk—he’s a queer, you know.” It turned out that he was the librarian at her high school, and an old friend of her mother’s.

He moved fluidly like water, and Aunt Evie became a swimmer in his arms. Her red dress took on a life of its own, the material shimmering in the candlelight. Mr. Chalk guided her, lifted her, spun her around.

Eventually Patsy and her friends strolled out on the back patio to look at the night sky, and one by one the guests began to leave. As long as Lucy played, Aunt Evie and Mr. Chalk continued to dance. At one point when Aunt Evie turned, her face a glowing moon, I thought I saw my mother, and tears came unexpectedly to my eyes. Why had Aunt Evie reminded me of my mother? Was it the passion in her expression, as she twirled and twisted in Mr. Chalk's arms? Perhaps it was my mother's tears and sadness that I could not comprehend. A longing for my mother welled up inside me and joined with panic. The only thing that soothed me was the sight of Aunt Evie moving across the floor, because then I could be convinced it was her joy that made me cry, and not my mother's sadness.

Mr. Chalk turned her suddenly, spinning her backwards, and the heel of her shoe knocked against a small end table. A glass of red wine teetered on the edge of the table, then fell to the carpet. Mr. Chalk instinctively leaped forward but she signaled him not to bother. Laughing together, they continued dancing together all around the pool of red wine that slowly ripened like a bruise at their feet.

When it was all over, Patsy and I sat on the patio for a long time looking at the stars. Around her neck was a ring of dark purple bruises from where Skip or Richard had put his mouth. I fought off a deep urge to kiss her, now that my head was level with hers. But it wasn't really Patsy I wanted to kiss anyway; any pretty girl would have done. Patsy looked like the color yellow, with her hair frothing over the top of her head, and her face glowing in the moonlight. Later on, the women I came to know would become a collection of colors in my mind, like a rainbow.

"I can't believe it," said Patsy. "What a trip."

"It was great," I said. "Your mother is great."

Patsy chuckled. "That's a laugh." She paused. "I hear your parents are getting divorced, huh, Oscar? God, they're so cool, I can hardly believe it. I always secretly wanted to be their daughter."

I didn't mind the bluntness of her remark. "I don't know what they're planning to do," I said simply.

"I wish mine would divorce," Patsy muttered. "You know they can't even stand each other one teeny tiny bit only they're not honest about it. They try to fake it and it makes me sick. My mother has some weird idea about the nobleness of commitment. My father, well, you know he's a royal monster."

I waited eagerly for her to go on. What did Patsy know? But she shrugged her shoulders in resignation and looked directly at me. "I've been thinking of changing my name to Sapphire. Is that too cool or what?"

The opportunity had come and gone. It was to be a long time before I had any sort of explanation.

I slept in late the next morning. Prompted by curiosity, I crept down the stairs and surveyed the living room through the railing. Everything was back in its place. The house looked exactly as it always did, Uncle Ned's chair strategically positioned between the bookshelf and the television set. But on closer inspection I saw the deep red wine stain had darkened overnight like blood. Immediately I went to the kitchen

and got a rag and some soapy water. I came back into the living room and knelt down on the carpet, rag in hand. I poured a little soapy water onto the stain.

"Don't bother with that, Oscar."

I wheeled around. Aunt Evie stood in the doorway. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she was wearing a loose kaftan.

"Leave it," said Aunt Evie. "It's a good memory."

She made us coffee and poured me a cup. We went out on the front porch and drank our coffee together. There was a heavy gray sky and the humidity hung like a curtain. Everything on the street, the shingle houses, the spacious lawns, seemed to leap out at us like a magician's levitation trick. The foliage went bright green like a jungle. The air was heavy.

"Tornado weather," remarked Aunt Evie. She searched the sky with her eyes. "I'm going to go through some of Edmund's things and see if we can't find some clothes to fit you properly." She leaned forward meaningfully. "I think Edmund has a razor you can borrow."

I reached up and felt my chin. Later, I checked myself in the mirror. There was a patch of dark stubble near my chin and a thick dark line above my top lip. I passed my fingers over it disbelievingly, then went and sat in my window before I could get up the courage to use the razor.

When I was married (and I did marry!) and in my forties I went, out of an odd sense of duty, to visit a very old Uncle Ned in a rest home down in southern California where Edmund had arranged for him to be. I did it for Aunt Evie who was still alive in Ohio and sent me charming Christmas cards each year, which oddly ended with "Love Aunt Evie and Uncle Ned," though she had not seen him for years and never mentioned him in her letters.

Uncle Ned was a bent and crippled thing, pathetic to see. I doubted that he recognized me.

"It's Oscar," I said.

"Yes, yes, Oscar," he murmured, his head in his neck. He was sitting in a wheelchair in the television room.

I reminded him about the summer long ago that I came to live with him and Aunt Evie in Ohio.

"Evie," he muttered. "Evie." His voice took on a thickness like milk. "She was my greatest sorrow, that woman was."

This caught me by surprise. I assumed the years had not been kind to Uncle Ned's memory.

"Aunt Evie was wonderful to me," I said soothingly.

His head shot up and opaque eyes skewered me without a blink. "Evie was a whore." The word "whore" fell from his mouth so unexpectedly I felt a jolt.

"When I met Evie," he went on in a chiding tone, as if I were to blame, "she was pregnant with another man's child, you know, that Dick Boston she'd met at her fancy college. Everyone knew about it." His voice was filled with contempt. "I married her as a favor, I did, because her father was so desperate to keep her name out of the

mud. I lived with her all those years knowing that I saved her, and there wasn't a day I looked at her and didn't see that wickedness in her face."

I'd never heard this story before, not from my mother, and not from Patsy, and wondered momentarily if Edmund were actually Dick Boston's. Uncle Ned went on.

"I was a naive young man, and she was beautiful and sophisticated. I thought I could make her happy. I worked hard, yes I did. And she wanted children so I gave her two, and you see how they turned out. We lived for years like brother and sister and I went to other women to console myself. Oh, you don't know what it means to a man to live with that kind of sorrow."

I wasn't sure what sorrow Uncle Ned meant. What happened to the child fathered by Dick Boston? I asked him.

Uncle Ned's eyes narrowed like a hawk's. "She killed it, you know. That's what she did, sure as I sit here." He turned and stared at the ground, and I was certain he had forgotten I was there. "Even after what I did for her, she never did make her wrong a right."

I left shortly thereafter and never saw him again. He died about six months later. Aunt Evie is still alive and plans to go on living to a hundred. I have resisted the urge to inquire about Dick Boston and the child, though the story has haunted me since.

I thought how I heard Uncle Ned cry that night. So he'd played the martyr all those years, judging Aunt Evie with every look and gesture, his face a constant reflection of some past indiscretion, either real or imagined.

I contrasted that with the brightness in Aunt Evie's eyes the night she danced with Mr. Chalk, and the respectful way he touched her at her waist and held her hand. It was a wonderful flower that bloomed for years in my memory. I chose to ignore the dingy undergrowth of Uncle Ned's unhappy tale.

Getting back to that summer: several nights before I left Aunt Evie cooked me marinated flank steak, baked potatoes, green beans, stewed tomatoes, and apple crisp.

"Did you brown the meat first?" asked Uncle Ned.

"No need to," said Aunt Evie, an odd smile on her face. She looked over at me before she said, "Actually, I used a neighbor cat, and simply parboiled it first, in case it had rabies."

She winked at me. I held my breath, in shock, but Edmund and Patsy both began laughing uncontrollably, kicking each other under the table. Uncle Ned didn't miss a stroke with his knife and fork. "This is very good," he remarked, as if nothing unusual had been said, "though a tad more salt would have enhanced it."

In addition to the apple crisp, which we all downed heartily, Aunt Evie brought out an applesauce cake and ice cream. She had removed her apron to reveal herself in the same red dress she'd worn the night of the party. A small strand of pearls shone at her neck. No one commented. Edmund and I ate seconds and thirds. Patsy excused herself and went up to her room to phone Anemone.

Later, as Aunt Evie and I walked in the garden, she confided to me that it was her fifty-third birthday. I was horrified and wanted instantly to go out to the mall to get her a present.

“No, Oscar, just walk with me. That’s all I want.” We did, for some time, and then we stayed up late together and had more cake and ice cream on the screen porch, laughing over everyone’s forgetfulness. There was no self-pity on Evie’s part; she was enjoying herself immensely.

“I will miss you, Oscar,” she told me, slicing me one more piece of applesauce cake. “You are going to be a very interesting young man.”

I took out my chess board and showed her the *giuoco piano* opening, which she patiently practiced with my assistance. “They call it ‘the quiet game’ because it’s just the opposite. It leads to really wild, tactical play,” I explained. Then, on a whim, I ran upstairs to get her my book on openings. “Here, I want you to have this. You could practice from this, and we could play postal chess after I’m gone. We’ll send each other moves in the mail.”

“How thoughtful of you, Oscar,” said Aunt Evie. “This is a wonderful gift, though I doubt I’d be much of a match for you.” But she held onto the book long after we’d stopped playing the game, her finger marking the page I had showed her.

So it was that whatever my parents had to settle they settled, and I left Ohio shortly before September to return to my mother. Aunt Evie measured me the day I left and sure enough, I’d grown several inches.

Reed got on the phone long enough to explain to me he had moved down to Los Angeles, with Dana and Lightning, and was in San Francisco just to pick up a few last things. “You’ll have your own room when you come for visits. And I know you’ll really get into the beach,” he assured me, despite the fact that I couldn’t swim a stroke.

The train ride home passed much too quickly. Along the way I met a girl from Colorado Springs who promised to come visit her cousin in San Francisco. She was traveling with her mother who would allow her to come sit with me in my compartment. We necked a lot in between looking at chess combinations. Her name was Sylvia and she was the color red. We promised to love each other forever.

My mother screamed when she saw how tall I’d gotten.

“Oh, my God, Oscar, you’re a man! What in God’s name did Evie feed you back there?”

She said nothing about Reed, and seemed terrifically relieved in general. She announced to me that she was going to begin graduate school in the spring and become a social worker and realize her full potential.

That fall, when I returned to school, I continued chess, but also took up soccer.

On Labor Day Weekend, I caught a PSA flight down to visit Reed. I stood only inches under him.

“We’re having a thing at the pad tonight,” he told me when he picked me up at the airport, “in your honor. Wow, did you grow or something?”

The “thing,” it turned out, was a party, with a bunch of Reed’s new friends and their dogs and cats and children in attendance.

Reed and Lightning worked in the kitchen frying up chicken for everyone. People lounged around on mattresses and drank beer and smoked marijuana. Grace Slick’s “White Rabbit” blared from Reed’s stereo speakers. A tanned girl in bare feet danced

next to me, while I sat on the floor and watched. She twirled and twisted, her eyes closed. I hadn't learned to coordinate my new long limbs yet, but watching the girl, who moved so rhythmically, I became convinced I could do it too. When she beckoned to me, I folded up my chess set and rose as if in a fever. She reminded me of Patsy; she had painted a flower on her cheek.

It was then, in slow motion, that I had a replay of Aunt Evie whirling in Mr. Chalk's arms, charmed by the movement itself, slipping like sand through a timer, slow and elegant. All those years, I thought, she'd suspected it of herself, and I had gotten to see it, what everyone else had missed: her yearning unwinding like a piece of string, and fluttering upwards like the tail of a kite.

For years after, I would often think how she and Ned collaborated in silence to live together (they went on until their children were quite grown, and Patsy was already on her second baby). I was haunted by the image of Uncle Ned, day after day in that large, empty house, sitting in his recliner, with the wine stain growing larger and larger between the two of them. As was his nature, he would never mention a word; it would simply be one more arrow through his cowardly heart for which he could blame Aunt Evie.

But for now, my mind was on the girl with the flower on her cheek. She invited me to come kiss her on the beach, which I willingly did, against the backdrop of a chilly, pounding surf. She lit up a joint and offered me a toke. As I inhaled, I imagined, floating from out of nowhere, Aunt Evie's old blue and white checked apron, looping and bucking against the wind, soaring above our heads. I planted my mouth against the girl's tanned skin and imagined the two of us spinning round and round on a wine stain that spread wider and wider like a moving current, drawing us onwards.