



This is a picture of my twin sister and me taken when we were six years old. I'm on the left.

Maxine Rosaler's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in or are scheduled to appear in the *Southern Review*, *Witness*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, and other literary quarterlies, and has been cited in *Best American Short Stories*. "The Red Cart" is part of a collection of stories based on her experience as the mother of a handicapped child, and the experience of mothers like her. She lives in New York City and is currently at work on a novel.

THE RED CART

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maxine Rosaler', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Maxine Rosaler

Luke and I started our morning, as we had every morning for the past three days, working on a letter to my doctor at the pain clinic. The purpose of the letter was to refute charges that I was doing something suspicious with the narcotics she had prescribed for my bladder condition. The letter had a subtext (the most important part for me), which was to make my doctor feel ashamed.

Although Luke was helping me, he also hated me, for we were in the middle of a fight that had been going on for weeks. As was so often the case, by now neither of us could remember what the fight was about, but that didn't stop us from hating each other's guts. It was a powerful force, this hatred of ours; it led us by an invisible leash wound tightly around our respective necks and we did whatever it told us to do.

"Why can't you *ever* learn to keep your big fat mouth shut?" Luke was asking me.

We had come up to the part of the letter where we were explaining that I had not exactly "threatened" to take my mother's methadone (discovered when I was cleaning out her medicine chest in the aftermath of her recent death), as the duplicitous Dr. Schellenberg (always so kind and cordial when we met face-to-face) had put in bold capital letters in her report, but that, in fact, the reason I had told her I

was holding on to my mother's methadone was because I wanted to convey just how desperate my bladder (that dead, damp weight in the center of my body that had tormented me for most of my life) could make me feel. The stash of methadone, combined with the fact that I had tested negative for Percocet, had turned me from a patient with a maddening medical condition into a second generation drug addict scamming the Benjamin Baruch Center for Pain and Palliative Care for narcotics. I felt so respectable, it had not occurred to me to explain that my eighty-year-old mother had been prescribed methadone for back pain.

"Well I'm keeping it shut now!" I responded. "I'm not saying a word. I won't say a word ever again. Not to you! That's for sure! Not a word! Not a single word!"

Luke and I, when we weren't busy rolling around in the mud of our terrible hate, had been trying to figure out what exactly it was I could be suspected of doing, because Dr. Sackheim's charges appeared to contradict each other: on page four of her report, which I had read in astonishment for the first of several times on the subway ride back from the clinic the previous week, was written: "intentional dilution of urine suspected" and a few pages after that was written "diversion possible," which Luke and I learned from the internet meant that I was suspected of selling the Percocet, instead of taking it.

"If I was diluting my urine, wouldn't that mean I didn't want them to know I was taking the Percocet?" I was asking him.

"And if you were selling it on the street, then why would you dilute your urine?"

"Yeah, wouldn't I want it to show up in my urine? I mean I would think I would save at least one pill for myself, you know, for the test." The image of myself standing on a street corner somewhere, whispering to passersby, Percocet! Want Percocet? Got Percocet! popped into my mind and I started to laugh.

"What are you laughing about?" Luke asked me.

"I just realized what a respectable person I am."

"Why? Because you're not a drug dealer?"

"Yes. Yet for some reason I feel that I am."

“I know what you mean, because I, too, know that you are not, and yet, somehow, feel that you are,” Luke said. “Let’s finish this thing.”

It occurred to me that maybe the drug addict I had made friends with at the clinic last week would be able to shed some light on my situation. He had been sitting next to me, at the end of his sad and broken life, with his faded tattoos and his cane and his hacking cough, mumbling to himself as he filled out the questionnaire attached to the clipboard that was handed to all us patients by the surly receptionist upon our arrival at the clinic. I taught him how to spell “bowel movement.”

This is someone who doesn’t care about anything, I said to myself as I transcribed his words onto the back of a flier for eight-dollar shoes that a dejected-looking clown on stilts had handed to me on the corner of 14th Street and Fourth Avenue. “Normal routine: don’t have none.” “Sleep? Two hours a night—maybe two hours. Tops two hours.” “Enjoyment of life: what the fuck does that mean?” He had a nonchalance I admired. What a concept. To have absolutely no expectations. That would be a kind of freedom, wouldn’t it?

I was due at the clinic at one thirty, when I was scheduled to pee into a jar, have the remainder of the pills that Dr. Sackheim had prescribed for me the previous week counted out, and get a prescription for another week’s supply of the new drug they were testing me on—a form of morphine, with many more side effects than the drug I had been previously taking, but presumably with less street value.

I pursed my lips and kissed Luke symbolically on the cheek. Despite everything, I knew that one day we would find our way back to love, and I thought a kiss—premature and insincere though it might be—could give things a nudge in the right direction. Then home I went to print out the letter.

I ran into the exterminator in the elevator. He was a big man with a big red face and a big bald head, every inch of which was covered with beads of sweat—some of them so large it would be more accurate to call them bubbles. I told him how happy I was to have run into him. “My apartment is infested with mice!” I said. “I see them crawling out of the stove! It’s disgusting! It’s like something out of a horror movie!”

“No time,” he told me. “Been fumigating for forty-five minutes.”

“That’s very alliterative of you, but you can’t do this to me,” I told him. “Please. I’m infested with mice! I’m going to call your office.” I proceeded to dial the number, which I had stored on my cell phone. “You might as well come with me now. Your office is just going to tell you to go back anyway.”

Ignoring me, he escaped with his gigantic canister of poison with its jointed brass hose through the door of the basement apartment, and when he found me waiting there for him eight minutes later, he said, “You win.”

“My apartment is on the sixth floor,” I told him as I pressed the elevator button. Something told me that one of my neighbors was holding the elevator door open (after years of New York City living one develops a sixth sense about such things), and I started banging on the door. I prayed that I wasn’t going to have to wait forever until someone on the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth floor or in the basement—most likely it was the basement—finished up one of those brotherhood-of-man conversations (Isn’t this weather brutal? You look great! Did you lose weight? At least twenty pounds, I bet!) that transpire in the elevators and sidewalks of the city.

“How can you go around dressed like that on a day like today?” I asked the exterminator, hoping to divert him with the kind of small talk in which I have always excelled. He was wearing navy blue pants and a matching long-sleeved shirt with “Mike’s Exterminating: Just Say No to Pests” written above the pocket. “I couldn’t bear to wear any kind of sleeves on a day like today, much less long ones. And that fabric,” I said, grabbing hold of one the shirttails he had liberated from the confines of his long pants. “That’s a heavy polyester blend. At least they could give you something lighter.”

“This is what they give us.”

“That’s so heartless. Mailmen get to wear those cute little shorts. And so do policemen, don’t they? Or is it the UPS guys? I forget. Yeah, it’s the UPS guys. Why not exterminators?”

He shrugged, which involved some effort with all the stuff he was carrying.

“Finally,” I said, as the elevator arrived. “Don’t you have any water?”

I asked him. “You should carry around a bottle of water with you. Put it in the freezer at night and it will stay cold all day long. That’s what I used to do when my son was little.” Suddenly I felt the sadness creeping up on me. I was thinking about the summers Luke and I used to spend at the beach with Jake, before his diagnosis. Luke and I would bury him up to his neck in sand and Luke, who had always been so good at finding ways to delight our child, would mold octopus arms out of wet sand. My job was to give Jake sips of water from the bottle I had put in the freezer the night before and to scratch the occasional itch that would appear on his beautiful face. We hadn’t started worrying about him yet; we were still going through the phase of thinking, So what if he isn’t like the other children? Why should he be? We’re weird. He’s weird. What else should we expect?

“I did that, but it’s all gone,” the exterminator told me.

We were friends now. I could relax.

“What’s your name?” I asked him. “I’m Mimi.”

“Lou. My name is Lou.”

I opened the door of my apartment and went off to fetch a glass of ice water while Lou went off to drop little pellets of poison behind my stove.

“Here,” I said, handing the glass to him. “And I’ll give you a bottle to bring with you.” I scrambled around in the havoc of my kitchen cabinets looking for a plastic bottle. When I found one I filled another glass with ice and water and poured it into a funnel, which I held scientifically over the mouth of the water bottle. It felt good to be performing this simple act of kindness.

“Do you have roaches too?” Lou asked me.

“Not really. The gel controls them. Do you have any gel? Please use the gel. I hate the spray. I hate the smell, and besides it doesn’t work.”

“That’s because they don’t mix it right. The spray works much better than the gel. You just gotta mix it right. Most people don’t mix it right. I do. That’s what I use in my apartment.”

“I prefer the gel.”

“I don’t have any gel. Besides, like I told you, the spray works better.”

“Okay, I believe you. Spray away. And you might as well give me some glue traps. Though they don’t work. The little fuckers walk right past them. I used to worry about them being inhumane. The glue traps. But now I don’t care. Let them die a slow, wriggly death.”

“It’s us against them,” he said.

“That’s life in a nutshell,” I responded.

“You can say that again.” And with that he was off. This might be the best part of my day, I thought to myself.

The clinic was just twenty blocks away from Jack’s ninety-nine cent store. Talk about addiction: that’s what Jack’s, with its profusion of useful and useless things, was for me; so in happy anticipation of the unknown bargains that lay in store for me I went to fetch my broken-down cart from the hall closet, where it had sat, among many other broken-down things, for three years now, waiting to be put out of its misery.

When I got to the clinic, I signed in with the receptionist and she handed me a form and I handed her the envelope containing the letter Luke and I had worked on, which I asked her to give to the head nurse. I sat down in a chair by the window and started filling out the form, cramming the margins with complaints about Dr. Sackheim, but when I was finished with my scribblings and looked at the paper I thought they resembled the ravings of a drug addict, so I tore up the piece of paper and asked the surly receptionist for another form.

“I just gave you one,” she told me.

“Well—yes, I’m sorry, but I made a mistake, could you give me another?”

We hated each other. The week before I had sat there waiting for over an hour, and every time I went up to ask her when I would be seen, she looked at me through the slits of her eyes and said that I would have to wait my turn like everybody else. “You’re not the only patient, you know.” Those were the same words the head doctor uttered to me fifteen minutes later when I tried to present to her my various theories of why my urine might have tested negative for Percocet.

“No more Percocet for you!” she had said with a smile. She had an unpronounceable name and everyone called her Dr. G.

When I asked for the results of my last screening Dr. Sackheim told me that I had tested positive this time.

“That’s strange,” I had said. “I wonder why I tested positive this time, and negative the time before.”

“That’s because you were taking it!” Dr. G. exclaimed as she clicked her way out of the room. She was a short, fat woman with a bad complexion who dressed in ill-fitting frilly dresses and stilleto-heeled shoes. She had administered a nerve block to me a month before, a painful procedure that involved sticking an enormous needle into my lower back. I think I insulted her professional pride when I told her that it hadn’t worked, that I still felt as though I were being eaten alive from the inside by thousands of tiny bugs, and now she was punishing me for it.

Shortly after my return to my seat the receptionist called me over and informed me that my health insurance had expired. This seemed to make her happy, and it in turn made me happy to know that her happiness was destined to be brief, because I knew with wonderful certainty that my insurance was still active, having just received a notice of re-certification in the mail that morning. It felt so good, being without doubt, for a change. I dialed the tiny numbers printed on the back of my insurance card and after explaining the situation to the woman on the other end, I handed the receptionist my cell phone. I could tell from her smug expression that she was giving the insurance person a hard time and that felt good, too, knowing that I wasn’t the only person in the world she treated with contempt.

After a few minutes she beckoned me over to her with one of her over-manicured claws, and I waited on the phone with the insurance lady—who turned out to be a great person—until the fax confirming that my insurance was up to date came through. We found a common bond in our mutual dislike of the receptionist.

“You could tell, just from that brief conversation with her?” I asked.

“You get to be very quick at picking up signals like that in my business.”

“Well it’s a tribute to you that you’ve managed to stay so nice.”

“I try my best,” she told me. “We’re all in this together. That’s what I tell myself every day.”

“Me too!” I said. What a nice woman, I thought to myself as I planted myself back down on my chair and looked around the waiting room. There were respectable-looking elderly women in pearls and men in business suits and people reading books. Everyone was white and there was not a drug addict in the bunch. Then I remembered. This wasn’t the poor people insurance day. Monday had been a holiday, and since they were rationing out the painkillers to me one week at a time, I couldn’t be scheduled to come in on my regular day, so the clinic had had no choice but to put me in with the private health insurance crowd.

I sat in my chair re-reading my letter and in the middle of the third reading I decided to take matters into my own hands. I went through the door to the back, where I planted myself outside the office of Susan, the nurse who had been so nice to me during my previous visit. I had been sitting in Dr. Sackheim’s office in tears, terrified at the thought of my symptoms being left untreated because I was now a person under suspicion and had demanded that another doctor be present, when Susan appeared. She wasn’t a doctor, but she was the head nurse and such a comfort to me that I was happy Dr. Sackheim hadn’t been able to find a doctor to sit in with us. She had held my hand and looked into my eyes and told me that they were going to help me.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she had reassured me. “We’re going to find something that will work for you.” What a nice woman, I thought to myself. So unlike everyone else who works here. But now she was saying, “Who does she think she is? Barging in here like she owns the place!”

“What did you expect me to do? Wait all day?” I called out to her. “I have an autistic son and I have to be home for him when he gets back from school!” Lately I had gotten into the habit of using Jake as an excuse for everything. I think it was my way of trying to confront the unfathomable grief, because the fact was I had never quite been able to bring myself to believe that Jake was autistic.

I have an autistic son, I would write as my excuse when I was called for jury duty; there was a crisis with my autistic son, I would tell my

editor when I missed a deadline; and I used Jake as an excuse whenever I went to argue a parking ticket as well.

I had always made it a policy to fight my parking tickets, regardless of whether or not I was in the right. It was a game I liked to play with the hearing officers, who never believed my stories about missing street signs or the car not starting or being stuck in the elevator on my way out of my apartment building to move my car. Most of my excuses were fabrications I would make up on the spot, and I would usually take my losses in stride. But since Jake's diagnosis each ticket had taken on the weight of my mythic grief. Why do they insist on hurting me? I would ask myself. Haven't I been hurt enough already?

There was only one judge, the last one, who ruled in my favor. One of the reasons I prevailed, I think, was because the story I told happened to be true. I told him how I had been rushing down the street with my son to get to my car in time to move it, but then he stopped to pick up a cigarette butt he saw lying on the pavement, and when I took it away from him and threw it across the street, he ran after it, darting into the middle of traffic. I ran after him and yanked him back onto the sidewalk and grabbed the cigarette butt out of his hand again.

"My son—my son—my son... He wouldn't leave the sidewalk," I told the judge. Jake had refused to move until I gave him back his beloved cigarette butt. It was always a battle of wills with us and by the time I got back to my car there was the dreaded flash of orange flapping arrogantly in the breeze.

I could barely talk, my throat ached so much. "That's why I was late. I couldn't budge him off the sidewalk. He's getting so big—"

The words stuck in my throat. I could tell by the look on the judge's face that I had won him over: The moment of revelation I had been waiting for had finally arrived. Here, at last, was a person who understood. I could see my heartbreak reflected in his kind eyes and this made me very uncomfortable. It had been wise of me to hold a little bit of the truth at bay.

Holding up his hand, the judge told me to forget about the stupid ticket. I had more important things to worry about. I suppose I must

have looked confused, because I was confused. He looked me in the eye and told me that mothers like me were heroines, as far as he was concerned. "It's important for you to take care of yourself. Think of your son. You have to stay healthy for him."

I had decided right then and there that that would be the last time I would use Jake as an excuse for anything and I was sorry now that my resolve had weakened, because Nurse Susan, who had shown me such kindness last week, was stomping out of her office now and commanding me to go into the waiting room and sit there, like everyone else. There was such a mean look on her face that I wondered if it had it all been just an act? How frightening, I thought to myself; cruelty masked as kindness is cruelty in its most lethal form.

I went back to the waiting room and waited for the time to pass. Finally an hour later Nurse Susan came out and beckoned me over with a steely nod of her head, her lips pressed together so tightly that all the blood had drained out of them. She handed me a prescription for a week's supply of the new drug, at the same dose.

"Didn't you read my letter?" I asked her.

"It's eight pages long. I don't have time to read an eight-page letter."

"This new drug isn't helping me at all!" I told her, brandishing the prescription form she had just handed me.

"Don't get hysterical. If you get hysterical I'll call the guards. You'll have to wait until a doctor is available to see you to have the medication adjusted. That's the policy. You can't expect the policy to be changed just to suit you."

The next appointment, it turned out, wasn't for another month and I ran out of the clinic, but not until I told the receptionist what I thought of her.

"The people who come here are in pain and you sit there with that sneer on your face and you're rude. You have a real attitude problem. You should be a token booth clerk or a prison guard, instead of a receptionist at a doctor's office."

"Thank you," she said, looking at me with those standard-issue eyes of hers.

"Don't thank me," I told her. "I'm telling you that there's something

wrong with the way you treat people. That you're a morally deficient human being. You shouldn't thank me."

"Thank you."

"Fuck you, bitch," I told her as I strode out the door and down the brightly lit corridors of glass-enclosed rooms containing continents of human suffering and human need.

I regretted uttering the words as soon as they left my mouth, for I had been trying to train myself not to overreact to situations like that for quite some time now. Luke and I both had problems dealing with the rudeness of strangers. One day we had sat at Starbucks developing a list of rejoinders. For example, in response to the person who angrily sneers, "You're welcome!" if another person, a person with troubles, perhaps, some of them possibly so serious—a child with a brain tumor, a mother who has just been killed in a car crash, a wife who just left him for another man—that he never thought of thanking a stranger for holding a door open, we decided we would simply say, "You're welcome, too." For the person who commands another person to cover his mouth when he coughs, I wanted to say, "I'm sorry, but I'm dying of lung cancer, which isn't contagious," but Luke said a flat "I'm sorry" would suffice. We were still working on an effective response for people who don't realize it's impudent to order other people to lower their voices in public places (this was a case that really just applied to me, because I was the one with the big loud voice). I agreed with Luke when he told me that "Fuck you" was not the devastating rhetorical tactic we thought it was when we were teenagers, but the fact of the matter was it was still my favorite phrase in the English language.

My plan now was to walk to Jack's and I was wheeling my one-wheeled cart up Sixth Avenue, thinking about man's inhumanity to man when a wall-eyed woman, black with a big belly and a big smile approached me. She was wearing a tight red dress that exposed a deflated, stretch-marked cleavage, and had a friendliness about her that alternately repelled and attracted me. I took her to be the sort of person who has everything figured out because of God or some

other spiritual or material dimension. Still, my experience at the pain clinic had left me feeling hungry for human kindness, so I decided to accept her friendliness at face value.

“I like your cart,” she told me. “I’ve been looking all over for a red cart. I hate the color black. It’s so sad and my cart makes me feel sad,” she said, pointing to the perfectly lovely, able-bodied black cart she was wheeling. “Red is a happy color and I am a happy person. Do you mind telling me where you got your cart?” she asked, and I told her the story of my cart—how it was supposedly covered by a warranty, but that the company charged ten dollars and ninety-five cents for shipping a new set of wheels to me, and that when the wheels arrived I discovered that an entire factory would be required to attach them to my cart, and that I had been holding on to the wheels and the broken cart for five years now—because I had trouble dealing with injustice and defeat. This was one of my issues, I told her. I used the word *issue* because I was sticking with my earlier impression that she was a person with a philosophy, and I know that people with personal philosophies are always in the process of dealing with their issues.

“So what I’m trying to tell you is that I don’t think this is such a great cart. I wouldn’t recommend it,” I concluded.

“It would do just fine for me,” she told me. “Yours broke because you carry around too much heavy stuff. You shouldn’t do that to yourself. You are one of God’s precious children,” she added.

“Thank you,” I told her, sincerely, because at the moment the idea of having some benevolent omnipotent being watching over me appealed to me very much.

“All I care about is the color,” she told me. “I don’t carry around heavy stuff. I just need it for my business,” which she informed me was selling scarves on the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. She was from Rego Park, Queens, a good solid white middle-class part of the borough where the median income was \$60,000 per year—that’s where her fiancé, a retired lawyer, was from, but Harlem was still in her blood, and she liked doing business there.

“They’re still my people. They’ll always be my people,” she said, concluding her digression. Then she went back to asking me about my cart.

“Okay,” I told her, “maybe it will work for you. Anyway, I got it at Jack’s. Do you know Jack’s?”

“I heard of it, but I’ve never been there.”

“Well you’re in for a real treat. It’s the most wonderful store in the world. I’m going there now and I’ll show you where I got my defective cart.”

“Great. And then I’ll give you mine. You shouldn’t be wheeling around a cart with only one wheel.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” I told her. “But you don’t have to do that,” I added, hoping with all my heart that she would give me her cart.

“I want to,” she said.

Then we proceeded to introduce ourselves to each other and to tell each other our life stories, starting with our ages and our weights.

I told Renee I was fifty and she told me she thought I looked like I was thirty, and she asked me how much I thought she weighed, and I told her about one twenty-nine, thinking she was at least one fifty, and then she told me about her two sons and their two fathers.

The oldest was nineteen and lived with his father, an African-American who never gave her any money. The kid was a mess, and every now and then she would try to set him straight about life, but besides that, she didn’t have much to do with him anymore. Her other son was only five, and was living with her fiancé the lawyer, a white man who had already set up a college fund for the kid. Her older son’s father, “the black man,” she said, hadn’t put aside a cent for her nineteen-year-old, but her five-year-old already had fifteen thousand dollars in his name. And then she tried to engage me in a conversation about the superiority of the white race, a line of conversation I had no interest in pursuing.

I didn’t tell her about Jake, but I told her that my husband hated me and I told her all about the pain clinic and about my bladder, and she told me that she had never found a man who was good for anything, except this last one, but that was only because he had money, and that she had bladder problems too, that sometimes she peed as often as once every half hour, and I told her that sometimes I peed as often as

every five minutes, and that that was why my experience at the pain clinic had left me feeling so devastated.

“It must have been something in your past life,” Renee told me, and I told her that this was one thing I hadn’t looked into yet.

When we got to Jack’s they were all out of the carts, but then I remembered that the discount luggage store down the street carried the same cart.

“I think they’re selling them for five dollars more, even though they’re supposedly a discount store,” I told her.

“That’s nothing,” she said. “My man takes good care of me.”

I told her I would bring her to the luggage store. I was in one of those moods that my feelings of desperation can lead me to sometimes, where life can seem so meaningless that there doesn’t seem much point in forcing myself to spend every minute of every day doing something productive. Renee told me again that she would give me her cart if she found a red cart to replace hers and I told her again that she didn’t have to do that, but the fact is I was obsessed with getting that cart, for reasons I will now explain. For one thing, I thought that having a functioning cart would release me from the tyranny of the useless set of wheels that had been lying on the bookshelf next to the computer for the past three years as a reminder that the world is full of broken promises and deceit. For another thing, it would have the advantage of eliminating a source of irritation to Luke, who had always accused me of being a hoarder and recently had been getting very aggressive about making me throw out things I treasured (the brass coffee table missing its glass top that used to stand beneath the piano, a wicker chair that used to sit in the hallway, blocking the coat closet, my collection of twenty-year-old spices, my collection of Tupperware with mismatched tops, et cetera). Also, I wouldn’t have to walk the streets of the city wheeling around a handicapped cart that required great skill and dexterity to maneuver. But best of all I loved the idea of some random stranger giving me her cart, just like that. It had a value to me far greater than the \$19.99 cost of the cart itself, for not only would it put the story of my broken cart and all that it represented behind me, but I would also have an object that I knew I would treasure for

the rest of my life. The cart would be much more than a cart to me; it would be a symbol of generosity and community and the potential for kindness and goodwill that exists in every human heart, and when the time came for its wheels to break too, as I knew they must, I only hoped that I would have the fortitude to simply bid it a fond farewell and go out and buy another cart to replace it.

And so, it was with all this in mind that I took Renee down the street to the discount luggage store on 32nd Street. My heart sank when I saw that there was no red cart in sight, although the store manager said that he would look for one in the back. It was at this point that I decided to take stock of myself. How likely was it that the merchant would find a red cart? I asked myself. And how likely was it that this stranger who believed in the afterlife ever really had any intention of giving me a free cart? And how much more time should I invest in this venture? And wouldn't it be a sign of mental health—not to mention self-respect—for me to cut my losses and simply give up? And so I wished Renee the best of luck and told her that it was very nice meeting her, and she told me we should get together some time, and that she would give me her number and I should give her mine, and that's what we did.

After an awkward embrace, during which our two carts collided, I headed back to Jack's, where the entire time I was filling my shopping cart with bags of dried chestnuts for Jake and bottles of pickles for Luke and three packages of Jack's ninety-nine-cent bread, which was still a bargain at a dollar twenty-nine, and a package of bobby pins to supplement my lifetime supply of bobby pins, a gigantic laundry bag to add to my impressive collection of laundry bags, and sundry cheeses that were due to expire in less than a week, I harbored the secret hope that Renee would find the red cart she had been looking for at the luggage store and that she would surprise me by leaving hers in front of the store for me. Sure enough, as I walked down 32nd Street with my superfluity of purchases in tow, I could see standing there off in the distance like a figment of my imagination Renee's practically brand new black cart waiting for me. As I got closer I noticed that there was a little piece of paper attached to it—a note for me—I was certain

it was a note for me. Scolding myself for having judged Renee so harshly, I felt a rush of love for her, and it was with a light, repentant heart that I bent down to tear the note, which had been impaled on the buckle of one of the pockets of the cart (a lovely feature I hadn't noticed before), and there in the handwriting of a child was written: "This is for you, you cheap white bitch."

The juxtaposition of Renee's note and the gift of her cart made me happy. They seemed to imbue my day with such thematic resonance, such irresistible roundedness that I decided to leave the coveted cart right there on the curb, with the note attached to it, for curious passersby to look at and wonder about. I couldn't wait to get home to tell Luke all about my day. I would let it unfold exactly as it had, and save the story of the cart for last.

That was the best part of it—the whole experience was so exhilarating that I completely forgot that I hated Luke, and that he hated me, and even when I remembered the long big hate, I didn't feel it anymore, and I knew that when I came home to Luke with love in my heart, he would forget that he hated me, too, because that was the way it always was with us—it only took one to make the first move and the other would follow.

And so as I worked back through the rush-hour crowds at Penn Station, to the A train, I felt happy—happy that Luke was my husband and that together we had created a strange and wonderful creature like Jake; happy that it was summer because now we could take Jake to the beach and make him into an octopus again. I could smell the seaweed and the saltwater and the sun. But then I felt the familiar flood of sadness that would always overtake me whenever Jake emerged out of the sand, his octopus arms disintegrating around him, reminding me that this was ultimately all we were: just sand. But now I told myself: Wake up, Mimi! Is this how you want to be? Seeing misery in every grain of sand? And furthermore, I told myself that it was dishonest and unfair of me to blame Jake's illness for everything, because the darkness that was in me had been there long before he was born.

And then I remembered a time, when Luke and I were first going out, and we were walking down Broadway and I was complaining

about something. In response, Luke, out of the blue, turned himself upside down and started walking down the street on his hands. The change flew out of his pockets all over the sidewalk and onto the street below, and his T-shirt fell over his face as he exclaimed: “This is what life should be like, Mimi! This is how we should live our lives!” I had known long before this moment that Luke, and only Luke, could give me the peace of mind that had always eluded me, and it made me feel so grateful to hear him put the words *our* and *lives* together in one sentence that I felt I could do anything he told me to do, even be happy.

I was thinking about this and realizing that there existed an eternity in the love that was in my heart for my husband and my son when a man with a briefcase called me a clumsy bitch for accidentally rolling my wheelie bag over his foot. My first instinct was to call him a fucking asshole in return, but I wanted to rise above all that now, and so I simply told him, “I’m sorry, sir, but you see my bag has only one wheel.”

