



long gone

SEPTEMBER IN SANTA TERESA. I've never known anyone yet who doesn't suffer a certain restlessness when autumn rolls around. It's the season of new school clothes, fresh notebooks, and finely sharpened pencils without any teeth marks in the wood. We're all eight years old again and anything is possible. The new year should never begin on January 1. It begins in the fall and continues as long as our saddle oxfords remain unscuffed and our lunch boxes have no dents.

My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm female, thirty-two, twice divorced, "doing business as" Kinsey Millhone Investigations in a little town ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles. Mine isn't a walk-in trade like a beauty salon. Most of my clients find themselves in a bind and then seek my services, hoping I can offer a solution for a mere thirty bucks an hour, plus expenses. Robert Ackerman's

message was waiting on my answering machine that Monday morning at nine when I got in.

"Hello. My name is Robert Ackerman and I wonder if you could give me a call. My wife is missing and I'm worried sick. I was hoping you could help me out." In the background, I could hear whiny children, my favorite kind. He repeated his name and gave me a telephone number. I made a pot of coffee before I called him back.

A little person answered the phone. There was a murmured child-sized hello and then I heard a lot of heavy breathing close to the mouthpiece.

"Hi," I said. "Can I speak to your daddy?"

"Yes." Long silence.

"Today?" I added.

The receiver was clunked down on a tabletop and I could hear the clatter of footsteps in a room that sounded as if it didn't have any carpeting. In due course, Robert Ackerman picked up the phone.

"Lucy?"

"It's Kinsey Millhone, Mr. Ackerman. I just got your message on my answering machine. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"Oh wow, yeah—"

He was interrupted by a piercing shriek that sounded like one of those policeman's whistles you use to discourage obscene phone callers. I didn't jerk back quite in time. Shit, that hurt.

I listened patiently while he dealt with the errant child.

"Sorry," he said when he came back on the line. "Look, is there any way you could come out to the house? I've got my hands full and I just can't get away."

I took his address and brief directions, then headed out to my car.



ROBERT AND THE MISSING Mrs. Ackerman lived in a housing tract that looked like it was built in the forties, before anyone ever dreamed up the notion of family rooms, country kitchens, and his-'n'-hers solar spas. What we had here was a basic drywall box, cramped living room with a dining L, a kitchen, and one bathroom sandwiched between two nine-by-twelve-foot bedrooms. When Robert answered the door I could just about see the whole place at a glance. The only thing the builders had been lavish with was the hardwood floors, which, in this case, was unfortunate. Little children had banged and scraped these floors and had brought in some kind of foot grit that I sensed before I was even asked to step inside.

Robert, though harried, had a boyish appeal—a man in his early thirties perhaps, lean and handsome, with dark eyes and dark hair that came to a pixie point in the middle of his forehead. He was wearing chinos and a plain white T-shirt. He had a baby, maybe eight months old, propped on his hip like a grocery bag. Another child clung to his right leg, while a third rode his tricycle at various walls and doorways, making quite loud sounds with his mouth.

“Hi, come on in,” Robert said. “We can talk out in the backyard while the kids play.” His smile was sweet.

I followed him through the tiny disorganized house and out to the backyard, where he set the baby down in a sandpile framed with two-by-fours. The second child held on to Robert’s belt loops and

stuck a thumb in its mouth, staring at me while the tricycle child tried to ride off the edge of the porch. I'm not fond of children. I'm really not. Especially the kind who wear hard brown shoes. Like dogs, these infants sensed my distaste and kept their distance, eyeing me with a mixture of rancor and disdain.

The backyard was scruffy, fenced in, and littered with the fifty-pound sacks the sand had come in. Robert gave the children homemade-style cookies out of a cardboard box and shooed them away. In fifteen minutes the sugar would probably turn them into lunatics. I gave my watch a quick glance, hoping to be gone by then.

"You want a lawn chair?"

"No, this is fine," I said and settled on the grass. There wasn't a lawn chair in sight, but the offer was nice anyway.

He perched on the edge of the sandbox and ran a distracted hand across his head. "God, I'm sorry everything is such a mess, but Lucy hasn't been here for two days. She didn't come home from work on Friday and I've been a wreck ever since."

"I take it you notified the police."

"Sure. Friday night. She never showed up at the babysitter's house to pick the kids up. I finally got a call here at seven asking where she was. I figured she'd just stopped off at the grocery store or something, so I went ahead and picked 'em up and brought 'em home. By ten o'clock when I hadn't heard from her, I knew something was wrong. I called her boss at home and he said as far as he knew she'd left work at five as usual, so that's when I called the police."

"You filed a missing persons report?"

"I can do that today. With an adult, you have to wait seventy-two hours, and even then, there's not much they can do."

“What else did they suggest?”

“The usual stuff, I guess. I mean, I called everyone we know. I talked to her mom in Bakersfield and this friend of hers at work. Nobody has any idea where she is. I’m scared something’s happened to her.”

“You’ve checked with hospitals in the area, I take it.”

“Sure. That’s the first thing I did.”

“Did she give you any indication that anything was wrong?”

“Not a word.”

“Was she depressed or behaving oddly?”

“Well, she was kind of restless the past couple of months. She always seemed to get excited around this time of year. She said it reminded her of her old elementary school days.” He shrugged. “I hated mine.”

“But she’s never disappeared like this before.”

“Oh, heck no. I just mentioned her mood because you asked. I don’t think it amounted to anything.”

“Does she have any problems with alcohol or drugs?”

“Lucy isn’t really like that,” he said. “She’s petite and kind of quiet. A homebody, I guess you’d say.”

“What about your relationship? Do the two of you get along okay?”

“As far as I’m concerned, we do. I mean, once in a while we get into it, but never anything serious.”

“What are your disagreements about?”

He smiled ruefully. “Money, mostly. With three kids, we never seem to have enough. I mean, I’m crazy about big families, but it’s tough financially. I always wanted four or five, but she says three is

plenty, especially with the oldest not in school yet. We fight about that some—having more kids.”

“You both work?”

“We have to. Just to make ends meet. She has a job in an escrow company downtown, and I work for the phone company.”

“Doing what?”

“Installer,” he said.

“Has there been any hint of someone else in her life?”

He sighed, plucking at the grass between his feet. “In a way, I wish I could say yes. I’d like to think maybe she just got fed up or something and checked into a motel for the weekend. Something like that.”

“But you don’t think she did.”

“Un-uhn, and I’m going crazy with anxiety. Somebody’s got to find out where she is.”

“Mr. Ackerman—”

“You can call me Rob,” he said.

Clients always say that. I mean, unless their names are something else.

“Rob,” I said, “the police are truly your best bet in a situation like this. I’m just one person. They’ve got a vast machinery they can put to work and it won’t cost you a cent.”

“You charge a lot, huh?”

“Thirty bucks an hour plus expenses.”

He thought about that for a moment, then gave me a searching look. “Could you maybe put in ten hours? I got three hundred bucks we were saving for a trip to the San Diego Zoo.”

I pretended to think about it, but the truth was, I knew I couldn’t

say no to that boyish face. Anyway, the kids were starting to whine and I wanted to get out of there. I waived the retainer and said I'd send him an itemized bill when the ten hours were up. I figured I could put a contract in the mail and reduce my contact with the short persons who were crowding around him now, begging for more sweets. I asked for a recent photograph of Lucy, but all he could come up with was a two-year-old snapshot of her with the two older kids. She looked beleaguered even then, and that was before the third baby came along. I thought about quiet little Lucy Ackerman, whose three strapping sons had legs the size of my arms. If I were she, I know where I'd be. Long gone.



LUCY ACKERMAN WAS employed as an escrow officer for a small company on State Street not far from my office. It was a modest establishment of white walls, rust-and-brown-plaid furniture, with burnt-orange carpets. There were Gauguin reproductions all around, and a live plant on every desk. I introduced myself first to the office manager, a Mrs. Merriman, who was in her sixties, had tall hair, and wore lace-up boots with stiletto heels. She looked like a woman who'd trade all her pension monies for a head-to-toe body tuck.

I said, "Robert Ackerman has asked me to see if I can locate his wife."

"Well, the poor man. I heard about that," she said with her mouth. Her eyes said, "Fat chance!"

"Do you have any idea where she might be?"

"I think you'd better talk to Mr. Sotherland." She had turned all prim and officious, but my guess was she knew something and was just dying to be asked. I intended to accommodate her as soon as I'd talked to him. The protocol in small offices, I've found, is ironclad.

Gavin Sotherland got up from his swivel chair and stretched a big hand across the desk to shake mine. The other member of the office force, Barbara Hemdahl, the bookkeeper, got up from her chair simultaneously and excused herself. Mr. Sotherland watched her depart and then motioned me into the same seat. I sank into leather still hot from Barbara Hemdahl's backside, a curiously intimate effect. I made a mental note to find out what she knew, and then I looked, with interest, at the company vice president. I picked up all these names and job titles because his was cast in stand-up bronze letters on his desk, and the two women both had white plastic name tags affixed to their breasts, like nurses. As nearly as I could tell, there were only four of them in the office, including Lucy Ackerman, and I couldn't understand how they could fail to identify each other on sight. Maybe all the badges were for customers who couldn't be trusted to tell one from the other without the proper IDs.

Gavin Sotherland was large, an ex-jock to all appearances, maybe forty-five years old, with a heavy head of blond hair thinning slightly at the crown. He had a slight paunch, a slight stoop to his shoulders, and a grip that was damp with sweat. He had his coat off, and his once-starched white shirt was limp and wrinkled, his beige gabardine pants heavily creased across the lap. Altogether, he looked like a man who'd just crossed a continent by rail. Still, I was

forced to credit him with good looks, even if he had let himself go to seed.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Millhone. I'm so glad you're here." His voice was deep and rumbling, with confidence-inspiring undertones. On the other hand, I didn't like the look in his eyes. He could have been a con man, for all I knew. "I understand Mrs. Ackerman never got home Friday night," he said.

"That's what I'm told," I replied. "Can you tell me anything about her day here?"

He studied me briefly. "Well, now, I'm going to have to be honest with you. Our bookkeeper has come across some discrepancies in the accounts. It looks like Lucy Ackerman has just walked off with half a million dollars entrusted to us."

"How'd she manage that?"

I was picturing Lucy Ackerman, free of those truck-busting kids, lying on a beach in Rio, slurping some kind of rum drink out of a coconut.

Mr. Sotherland looked pained. "In the most straightforward manner imaginable," he said. "It looks like she opened a new bank account at a branch in Montebello and deposited ten checks that should have gone into other accounts. Last Friday, she withdrew over five hundred thousand dollars in cash, claiming we were closing out a big real estate deal. We found the passbook in her bottom drawer." He tossed the booklet across the desk to me and I picked it up. The word *void* had been punched into the pages in a series of holes. A quick glance showed ten deposits at intervals dating back over the past three months and a zero balance as of last Friday's date.

"Didn't anybody else double-check this stuff?"

"We'd just undergone our annual audit in June. Everything was fine. We trusted this woman implicitly and had every reason to."

"You discovered the loss this morning?"

"Yes, ma'am, but I'll admit I was suspicious Friday night when Robert Ackerman called me at home. It was completely unlike that woman to disappear without a word. She's worked here eight years and she's been punctual and conscientious since the day she walked in."

"Well, punctual at any rate," I said. "Have you notified the police?"

"I was just about to do that. I'll have to alert the Department of Corporations, too. God, I can't believe she did this to us. I'll be fired. They'll probably shut this entire office down."

"Would you mind if I had a quick look around?"

"To what end?"

"There's always a chance we can figure out where she went. If we move fast enough, maybe we can catch her before she gets away with it."

"Well, I doubt that," he said. "The last anybody saw her was Friday afternoon. That's two full days. She could be anywhere by now."

"Mr. Sotherland, her husband has already authorized three hundred dollars' worth of my time. Why not take advantage of it?"

He stared at me. "Won't the police object?"

"Probably. But I don't intend to get in anybody's way, and whatever I find out, I'll turn over to them. They may not be able to get a fraud detective out here until late morning, anyway. If I get a line on her, it'll make you look good to the company *and* to the cops."

He gave a sigh of resignation and waved his hand. "Hell, I don't care. Do what you want."

When I left his office, he was putting the call through to the police department.



I SAT BRIEFLY at Lucy's desk, which was neat and well organized. Her drawers contained the usual office supplies, no personal items at all. There was a calendar on her desktop, one of those loose-leaf affairs with a page for each day. I checked back through the past couple of months. The only personal notation was for an appointment at the Women's Health Center August 2 and a second visit last Friday afternoon. It must have been a busy day for Lucy, what with a doctor's appointment and ripping off her company for half a million bucks. I made a note of the address she'd penciled in at the time of her first visit. The other two women in the office were keeping an eye on me, I noticed, though both pretended to be occupied with paperwork.

When I finished my search, I got up and crossed the room to Mrs. Merriman's desk. "Is there any way I can make a copy of the passbook for that account Mrs. Ackerman opened?"

"Well, yes, if Mr. Sotherland approves," she said.

"I'm also wondering where she kept her coat and purse during the day."

"In the back. We each have a locker in the storage room."

"I'd like to take a look at that, too."

I waited patiently while she cleared both matters with her boss,

and then I accompanied her to the rear. There was a door that opened onto the parking lot. To the left of it was a small restroom and, on the right, there was a storage room that housed four connecting upright metal lockers, the copy machine, and numerous shelves neatly stacked with office supplies. Each shoulder-high locker was marked with a name. Lucy Ackerman's was still securely padlocked. There was something about the blank look of that locker that seemed ominous somehow. I looked at the lock, fairly itching to have a crack at it with my little set of key picks, but I didn't want to push my luck with the cops on the way.

"I'd like for someone to let me know what's in that locker when it's finally opened," I remarked while Mrs. Merriman ran off the copy of the passbook pages for me.

"This, too," I said, handing her a carbon of the withdrawal slip Lucy'd been required to sign in receipt of the cash. It had been folded and tucked into the back of the booklet. "You have any theories about where she went?"

Mrs. Merriman's mouth pursed piously, as though she were debating with herself about how much she might say.

"I wouldn't want to be accused of talking out of school," she ventured.

"Mrs. Merriman, it does look like a crime's been committed," I suggested. "The police are going to ask you the same thing when they get here."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I suppose it's all right. I mean, I don't have the faintest idea where she is, but I do think she's been acting oddly the past few months."

"Like what?"

"She seemed secretive. Smug. Like she knew something the rest of us didn't know about."

"That certainly turned out to be the case," I said.

"Oh, I didn't mean it was related to that," she said hesitantly. "I think she was having an affair."

That got my attention. "An affair? With whom?"

She paused for a moment, touching at one of the hairpins that supported her ornate hairdo. She allowed her gaze to stray back toward Mr. Sotherland's office. I turned and looked in that direction too.

"Really?" I said. No wonder he was in a sweat, I thought.

"I couldn't swear to it," she murmured, "but his marriage has been rocky for years, and I gather she hasn't been that happy herself. She has those beastly little boys, you know, and a husband who seems determined to spawn more. She and Mr. Sotherland—Gavie, she calls him—have . . . well, I'm sure they've been together. Whether it's connected to this matter of the missing money, I wouldn't presume to guess." Having said as much, she was suddenly uneasy. "You won't repeat what I've said to the police, I hope."

"Absolutely not," I said. "Unless they ask, of course."

"Oh. Of course."

"By the way, is there a company travel agent?"

"Right next door," she replied.



I HAD A BRIEF chat with the bookkeeper, who added nothing to the general picture of Lucy Ackerman's last few days at work. I retrieved

my VW from the parking lot and headed over to the health center eight blocks away, wondering what Lucy had been up to. I was guessing birth control and probably the permanent sort. If she was having an affair (and determined not to get pregnant again in any event), it would seem logical, but I hadn't any idea how to verify the fact. Medical personnel are notoriously stingy with information like that.

I parked in front of the clinic and grabbed my clipboard from the backseat. I have a supply of all-purpose forms for occasions like this. They look like a cross between a job application and an insurance claim. I filled one out now in Lucy's name and forged her signature at the bottom where it said "authorization to release information." As a model, I used the Xerox copy of the withdrawal slip she'd tucked in her passbook. I'll admit my methods would be considered unorthodox, nay illegal, in the eyes of law-enforcement officers everywhere, but I reasoned that the information I was seeking would never actually be used in court, and therefore it couldn't matter *that* much how it was obtained.

I went into the clinic, noting gratefully the near-empty waiting room. I approached the counter and took out my wallet with my California Fidelity ID. I do occasional insurance investigations for CF in exchange for office space. They once made the mistake of issuing me a company identification card with my picture right on it that I've been flashing around quite shamelessly ever since.

I had a choice of three female clerks and, after a brief assessment, I made eye contact with the oldest of them. In places like this, the younger employees usually have no authority at all and are, thus, impossible to con. People without authority will often simply

stand there, reciting the rules like mynah birds. Having no power, they also seem to take a vicious satisfaction in forcing others to comply.

The woman approached the counter on her side, looking at me expectantly. I showed her my CF ID and made the form on the clipboard conspicuous, as though I had nothing to hide.

"Hi. My name is Kinsey Millhone," I said. "I wonder if you can give me some help. Your name is what?"

She seemed wary of the request, as though her name had magical powers that might be taken from her by force. "Lillian Vincent," she said reluctantly. "What sort of help did you need?"

"Lucy Ackerman has applied for some insurance benefits and we need verification of the claim. You'll want a copy of the release form for your files, of course."

I passed the forged paper to her and then busied myself with my clipboard as though it were all perfectly matter-of-fact.

She was instantly alert. "What is this?"

I gave her a look. "Oh, sorry. She's applying for maternity leave and we need her due date."

"Maternity leave?"

"Isn't she a patient here?"

Lillian Vincent looked at me. "Just a moment," she said, and moved away from the desk with the form in hand. She went to a file cabinet and extracted a chart, returning to the counter. She pushed it over to me. "The woman has had a tubal ligation," she said, her manner crisp.

I blinked, smiling slightly as though she were making a joke. "There must be some mistake."

"Lucy Ackerman must have made it then if she thinks she can pull this off." She opened the chart and tapped significantly at the August 2 date. "She was just in here Friday for a final checkup and a medical release. She's sterile."

I looked at the chart. Sure enough, that's what it said. I raised my eyebrows and then shook my head slightly. "God. Well. I guess I better have a copy of that."

"I should think so," the woman said and ran one off for me on the desktop dry copier. She placed it on the counter and watched as I tucked it onto my clipboard.

She said, "I don't know how they think they can get away with it."

"People love to cheat," I replied.



IT WAS NEARLY noon by the time I got back to the travel agency next door to the place where Lucy Ackerman had worked. It didn't take any time at all to unearth the reservations she'd made two weeks before. Buenos Aires, first class on Pan Am. For one. She'd picked up the ticket Friday afternoon just before the agency closed for the weekend.

The travel agent rested his elbows on the counter and looked at me with interest, hoping to hear all the gory details, I'm sure. "I heard about that business next door," he said. He was young, maybe twenty-four, with a pug nose, auburn hair, and a gap between his teeth. He'd make the perfect costar on a wholesome family TV show.

"How'd she pay for the ticket?"

"Cash," he said. "I mean, who'd have thunk?"

"Did she say anything in particular at the time?"

"Not really. She seemed jazzed and we joked some about Montezuma's revenge and stuff like that. I knew she was married and I was asking her all about who was keeping the kids and what her old man was going to do while she was gone. God, I never in a million years guessed she was pulling off a scam like that, you know?"

"Did you ask why she was going to Argentina by herself?"

"Well, yeah, and she said it was a surprise." He shrugged. "It didn't really make sense, but she was laughing like a kid, and I thought I just didn't get the joke."

I asked for a copy of the itinerary, such as it was. She had paid for a round-trip ticket, but there were no reservations coming back. Maybe she intended to cash in the return ticket once she got down there. I tucked the travel docs onto my clipboard along with the copy of her medical forms. Something about this whole deal had begun to chafe, but I couldn't figure out quite why.

"Thanks for your help," I said, heading toward the door.

"No problem. I guess the other guy didn't get it either," he remarked.

I paused, mid-stride, turning back. "Get what?"

"The joke. I heard 'em next door and they were fighting like cats and dogs. He was pissed."

"Really," I said. I stared at him. "What time was this?"

"Five-fifteen. Something like that. They were closed and so were we, but Dad wanted me to stick around for a while until the cleaning crew got here. He owns this place, which is how I got in the business myself. These new guys were starting and he wanted me to make sure they understood what to do."

"Are you going to be here for a while?"

"Sure."

"Good. The police may want to hear about this."

I went back into the escrow office with mental alarm bells clang-ing away like crazy. Both Barbara Hemdahl and Mrs. Merriman had opted to eat lunch in. Or maybe the cops had ordered them to stay where they were. The bookkeeper sat at her desk with a sandwich, apple, and a carton of milk neatly arranged in front of her, while Mrs. Merriman picked at something in a plastic container she must have brought in from a fast-food place.

"How's it going?" I asked.

Barbara Hemdahl spoke up from her side of the room. "The detectives went off for a search warrant so they can get in all the lockers back there, collecting evidence."

"Only one of 'em is locked," I pointed out.

She shrugged. "I guess they can't even peek without the paperwork."

Mrs. Merriman spoke up then, her expression tinged with guilt. "Actually, they asked the rest of us if we'd open our lockers voluntarily, so of course we did."

Mrs. Merriman and Barbara Hemdahl exchanged a look.

"And?"

Mrs. Merriman colored slightly. "There was an overnight case in Mr. Sotherland's locker and I guess the things in it were hers."

"Is it still back there?"

"Well, yes, but they left a uniformed officer on guard so nobody'd walk off with it. They've got everything spread out on the copy machine."

I went through the rear of the office, peering into the storage room. I knew the guy on duty and he didn't object to my doing a visual survey of the items, as long as I didn't touch anything. The overnight case had been packed with all the personal belongings women like to keep on hand in case the rest of the luggage gets sent to Mexicali by mistake. I spotted a toothbrush and tooth-paste, slippers, a filmy nightie, prescription drugs, hairbrush, extra eyeglasses in a case. I spotted a round plastic container, slightly convex, about the size of a compact, tucked under a change of underwear.

Gavin Sotherland was still sitting at his desk when I stopped by his office. His skin tone was gray and his shirt was hanging out, a big ring of sweat under each arm. He was smoking a cigarette with the air of a man who's quit the habit and has taken it up again under duress. A second uniformed officer was standing just inside the door to my right.

I leaned against the frame, but Gavin scarcely looked up.

I said, "You knew what she was doing, but you thought she'd take you with her when she left."

His smile was bitter. "Life is full of surprises," he said.



I WAS GOING TO have to tell Robert Ackerman what I'd discovered, and I dreaded it. As a stalling maneuver, just to demonstrate what a good girl I was, I drove over to the police station first and dropped off the data I'd collected, filling them in on the theory I'd come up with. They didn't exactly pin a medal on me, but they weren't as

pissed off as I thought they'd be, given the number of penal codes I'd violated in the process. They were even moderately courteous, which is unusual in their treatment of me. Unfortunately, none of it took that long and before I knew it, I was standing at the Ackermans' front door again.

I rang the bell and waited, bad jokes running through my head. Well, there's good news and bad news, Robert. The good news is we've wrapped it up with hours to spare so you won't have to pay me the full three hundred dollars we agreed to. The bad news is your wife's a thief, she's probably dead, and we're just getting out a warrant now, because we think we know where the body's stashed.

The door opened and Robert was standing there with a finger to his lips. "The kids are down for their naps," he whispered.

I nodded elaborately, pantomiming my understanding, as though the silence he'd imposed required this special behavior on my part.

He motioned me in and together we tiptoed through the house and out to the backyard, where we continued to talk in low tones. I wasn't sure which bedroom the little rug rats slept in, and I didn't want to be responsible for waking them.

Half a day of playing papa to the boys had left Robert looking disheveled and sorely in need of relief.

"I didn't expect you back this soon," he whispered.

I found myself whispering too, feeling anxious at the sense of secrecy. It reminded me of grade school somehow, the smell of autumn hanging in the air, the two of us perched on the edge of the sandbox like little kids, conspiring. I didn't want to break his heart, but what was I to do?

"I think we've got it wrapped up," I said.

He looked at me for a moment, apparently guessing from my expression that the news wasn't good. "Is she okay?"

"We don't think so," I said. And then I told him what I'd learned, starting with the embezzlement and the relationship with Gavin, taking it right through to the quarrel the travel agent had heard. Robert was way ahead of me.

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"We don't know it for a fact, but we suspect as much."

He nodded, tears welling up. He wrapped his arms around his knees and propped his chin on his fists. He looked so young. I wanted to reach out and touch him. "She was really having an affair?" he asked plaintively.

"You must have suspected as much," I said. "You said she was restless and excited for months. Didn't that give you a clue?"

He shrugged one shoulder, using the sleeve of his T-shirt to dash at the tears trickling down his cheeks. "I don't know," he said. "I guess."

"And then you stopped by the office Friday afternoon and found her getting ready to leave the country. That's when you killed her, isn't it?"

He froze, staring at me. At first, I thought he'd deny it, but maybe he realized there wasn't any point. He nodded mutely.

"And then you hired me to make it look good, right?"

He made a kind of squeaking sound in the back of his throat, and sobbed once, his voice reduced to a whisper again. "She shouldn't have done it—betrayed us like that. We loved her so much."

"Have you got the money here?"

He nodded, looking miserable. "I wasn't going to pay your fee out of that," he said incongruously. "We really did have a little fund so we could go to San Diego one day."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out," I said.

"I didn't do so bad, though, did I? I mean, I could have gotten away with it, don't you think?"

I'd been talking about the trip to the zoo. He thought I was referring to his murdering his wife. Talk about poor communication. God.

"Well, you nearly pulled it off," I said. Shit, I was sitting there trying to make the guy feel good.

He looked at me piteously, eyes red and flooded, his mouth trembling. "But where did I slip up? What did I do wrong?"

"You put her diaphragm in the overnight case you packed. You thought you'd shift suspicion onto Gavin Sotherland, but you didn't realize she'd had her tubes tied."

A momentary rage flashed through his eyes and then flickered out. I suspected that her voluntary sterilization was more insulting to him than the affair with her boss.

"Jesus, I don't know what she saw in him," he breathed. "He's such a pig."

"Well," I said, "if it's any comfort to you, she wasn't going to take *him* either. She just wanted freedom, you know?"

He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose, trying to compose himself. He mopped his eyes, shivering with tension. "How can you prove it, though, without a body? Do you know where she is?"

"I think we do," I said softly. "The sandbox, Robert. Right under us."

He seemed to shrink. "Oh, God," he whispered. "Oh, God, don't turn me in. I'll give you the money, I don't give a damn. Just let me stay here with my kids. The little guys need me. I did it for them. I swear I did. You don't have to tell the cops, do you?"

I shook my head and opened my shirt collar, showing him the mike. "I don't have to tell a soul," I said, and then I looked over toward the side yard.

For once, I was glad to see Lieutenant Dolan amble into view.



introduction

DURING THE COURSE of an interview once, I was asked about the influence my father, a mystery writer himself, had on my writing. I talked about what he'd taught me of craft, about surviving rejection, coping with editorial criticism. When I finished, the journalist looked up from her notes and said briskly, "Well now, you've talked about your father, but what did you learn from your mother?" Without even pausing to consider, I said, "Ah, from my mother I learned all the lessons of the human heart."

One of the benefits of growing up as the child of two alcoholics was my lack of supervision. Every morning, my father downed two jiggers of whiskey and went to the office. My mother, similarly fortified, went to sleep on the couch. From the age of five onward, I was left to raise myself, which I did as well as I could, having had no formal training in parenthood. I lived in an atmosphere of apparent permissiveness. I read anything I liked, roamed the city at will,

rode the bus lines from end to end, played out intense melodramas with the other kids in the neighborhood. (I was usually an Indian princess, tied to the stake.) I went to the movies on Friday night, Saturday afternoon, and again on Sunday. There were few, if any, limits placed on me.

My sister, three years older than me, spent a lot of time in her room. She and my mother clashed often. I was Little Mary Sunshine, tap-dancing my way through life just to the left of stage center, where the big battles took place. Discipline, when it came, was arbitrary and capricious. We had no allies, my sister and I. When life seemed unbearable, my father, to comfort me, would sit on the edge of my bed and recount in patient detail the occasion when the family doctor had told him he'd have to choose between her and us and he'd chosen her because she was weak and needed him and we were strong and could survive. In such moments, at the ages of eight and ten and twelve, I would reassure him so he wouldn't feel guilty at having left us to such a fate. My father was perfect. It was only later that I dared experience the rage I felt for *him*. Not surprisingly, I grew up confused, rebellious, fearful, independent, imaginative, curious, free-spirited, and anxious. I wanted to be good. I wanted to do everything right. I wanted to get out of that house.

By the time I was eighteen, I was obsessed with writing. I was also married for the first time—twin paths, leading in opposite directions. The writing was my journey into the self, the marriage a detour into a world I thought I could perfect if I were allowed to make all the choices myself. I was convinced I could construct a “normal” household, unaware that I possessed only the clumsiest of tools. I was determined to have a picture-book life, and was dis-

mayed to discover my efforts were as amateurish as a child's. How could I have known I hadn't yet finished growing up when it *felt* like I'd been running my own life since I was five?

In the years between eighteen and thirty-seven, when I began to fashion the “personhood” of Kinsey Millhone, writing was my salvation—the means by which I learned to support myself, to face the truth, to take responsibility for my future. I have often said that Kinsey Millhone is the person I might have been had I not married young and had children. She is more than that. She is a stripped-down version of my “self”—my shadow, my projection—a celebration of my own freedom, independence, and courage. It is no accident that Kinsey’s parents were killed when she was five. My father went into the army when I was three. He came back when I was five and that’s when the safety of my childhood began to unravel. Through Kinsey, I tell the truth, sometimes bitter, sometimes amusing. Through her, I look at the world with a “mean” eye, exploring the dark side of human nature—my own in particular.

If Kinsey Millhone is my alter ego, Kit Blue is simply a younger version of me. The following thirteen stories were written in the decade following my mother’s death, my way of coming to terms with my grief for her. I realized early in the process of the writing that I could take any moment I remembered and cut straight to the heart of our relationship. It was as if all moments—any moment, every moment—were the same. Every incident I had access to seemed connected at the core; that rage, that pain, all the scalding tears I wept, both during her life and afterward. All of it is part of the riddle I think of now as love.



a woman capable of anything

KIT SAT IN her mother's rocking chair, watching her mother smoke. Her mother lay on the couch with a paperback novel which she'd put facedown on her chest so that she could light her cigarette without losing her place. From where Kit sat, she could see the top of her mother's head, the pale hair disarranged, the length of her mother's body, wasted and thin. Her feet were bare except for the nylon peds she wore and her toes occasionally made a lazy circle, idle movement in that otherwise still frame. The hand which rested on the rim of the coffee table made the journey from the ashtray to her mother's mouth and back, cigarette glowing, ash increasing until Kit strained at the sight, expecting at any moment, cigarette, ash and ember would tumble. There were already ridges burned into the table, black scars on the rug where fallen cigarettes had eaten away the

fibers. Her mother's hands were bony, fingers long and thin, the fingernails as tough as horn. Kit bit her own nails. Her fingernails were soft and ragged and she needed to work them with her teeth, gnawing at the skin at the tips until they were raw. She was fascinated by her mother's nails, gnawed at them sometimes, taking her mother's bony fingers, testing their mettle against that anxious hunger of hers. She had sucked her thumb as a child until her mother painted her thumb with something fiery hot. Her mother had even tried painting her own fingertips to keep Kit from putting them in her mouth but Kit had a taste by then for that acid heat that ate into her tongue like liquid ice.

Her mother's cigarette went out, but the hand remained, resting on the edge of the table, poised while her mother drifted into sleep. Her breathing slowed until Kit, watching, wondered if she were dead. Often she sat and stared at her mother that way, wondering if she would die like that, on the couch in the cool of the day. Maybe alcoholics died from never waking up or died from lying down too long. Kit hated her with a kind of resignation, patience, servitude. Kit sat with her mother, talked to her, fixed toast for her or a cup of tea, and all the while, she felt like some ancient doctor with a dying thing, a zombie lady or a skeleton. How could she love what was not even alive?

Kit had seen other mothers in the world. She had seen women who were sober all day long, bright-eyed and talkative, who dressed up in high-heeled shoes and went to country clubs, who cleaned their houses, cooked meals, drank coffee in the afternoons and laughed, women who joined the PTA and took their daughters to department stores to buy them bras. Kit's mother could hardly

go anywhere. She drove the car from time to time, a black 1940 Oldsmobile with Hydra-Matic drive, perched on a cushion and even so, not tall enough to see with ease. Her mother drove slowly, hugging the right side of the street and sometimes Kit caught her breath at how close her mother came to skinning parked cars. Her mother ordered groceries from the corner store, ordered liquor from the drugstore four blocks down and in that manner managed to live most of her life in the living room, stretched out on the couch. In the kitchen, colored women would iron for hours and in the yard, the grass was mowed by colored men. And all the time, Vanessa lay there, saying nothing, moving not at all except to smoke. What went on inside that head? What could her mother think of hour after hour, day after day? Kit could remember that her mother had once played the piano and when she was angry, she'd sit there pounding the keys, the thunderous chords announcing her displeasure to the rooms upstairs. What was the woman angry about? In those days, they had at least known, that she felt *something*. Now, no one was sure. The anger had been sealed off and burned in silence now: frustration, defeat, whatever it was she felt. Kit had seen that veil come down across her mother's face. When she was angry now, she just withdrew, her facial expression fading, lids coming down to shield those telling eyes. No one would know if there was pain or tears. She was like a secretive child, stealing away to a world she had locked up inside, like an animal nibbling from some secret store. It was hard to love a lady who couldn't cry. It made Kit feel too much power, too little care. Kit wept bitterly, scalded at times by the loathing that welled up like tears. There were times too when she felt a great rush of pity, of shame and love and regret. Whatever else she

was, Vanessa was the only mother Kit had, the only place Kit knew that was really home, however silent, tortured, and chill.

Sometimes Vanessa's condition deteriorated to the level of disease and then an ambulance came, attendants lifting her mother from the couch to the stretcher, wheeling her out to the street, where the neighbors would stand, full of sympathy. They liked her mother, who in her better days had been their friend, who'd listened to their aging ills when she called them up on the phone. Now in silence they watched her ride away and they would question Kit afterward about how Vanessa was getting along. Within a week or ten days she'd be home, that miraculous change having taken place. Vanessa would be back on her feet, exuberant, energetic, and gay, and each time, Kit's heart would fill with hope. Vanessa would plan the meals, would chat in the kitchen with Jessie or Della while they ironed, would supervise the black men in the yard, make cheery phone calls to everyone. Maybe they'd go out to dinner again on Sunday nights, the four of them, Vanessa and Daddy, Kit and her older sister, Del. Maybe they'd go to some basketball games or to *Holiday on Ice* or maybe they'd walk to the drugstore at night to buy comic books. The burden would lift and the world would puff up like a colored balloon and even though it wasn't perfect, it would be all right.

And then she would see it again in her mother's face, the first signs of defeat, the faint slur, exaggerated walk, the little silent trips to the pantry, where the bourbon bottles were. Vanessa would sink back down to her day-long dream and Kit, when the time came, would sit in her mother's chair, keeping that vigil of hate and hope, wishing her mother would die or that she'd go down again far enough so that someone would come and take her away and make her right.

Kit had seen it there, the evidence of the woman who was, the light in the round face, quick bright eyes, something nervous and splendid pouring out of that body from her very bones. This was a woman capable of anything, the woman who had been Kit's perfect mother once but was no more. This was the woman whose life was failing her right before their eyes, whose year was made up of secret cycles which lifted her first and plunged her down again, full circle, beginning, middle, and end. And each time she rose and each time went down again until she could rise no more. And Kit sat in her mother's rocking chair, caught up in a cycle of her own, of love, of pity, of hate. And she knew that her mother was lost and strong and she knew that somewhere the thunder rang from chords still sounding inside. But how would this woman ever be free and how would she let Kit go? How would any of them be whole again when they'd gone down together so often into that little death?