

SUMMERLAND

An Excerpt from the Novel

by Nuala Lincke-Ivic

"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realised. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." Nelson Mandela, defense statement during the Rivonia Trial, 1964. Repeated 27 years later, on his release from prison on 11 February 1990.

Chapter One: Maeve/Molly/Ethna

Maeve, 2047: 85 Years Old

Journal

We were five wild, crazy, nervous white girls, growing up in an all-Mexican neighborhood in L.A. in the '70s. And we were held responsible for everything that had happened to them by white people. And a lot had happened to them. So we were wild and crazy. And nervous, of course. Because we were held responsible. And we were outnumbered. They were finding their voice, you see. Finally. Shouting from the rooftops. But there was nobody to shout at but us. All the rich white people lived somewhere else.

But there was more to it than that, wasn't there? There were other white people living there. In our neighborhood. Other white families. Like grains of salt in a sea of cinnamon. And they weren't attacked. Or not as badly. It's that we were easy. In our thrift shop clothes and with our crazy immigrant parents. We made an easy target. An easier target than other white people. Who laughed at us, too. We would have been terrorized in a white neighborhood, too. Because we were different. Different. Like the kid hanging upside down on the monkey bars at

school. But no. What we had to contend with there—in that neighborhood—was bad. Racism. Even in a white neighborhood we wouldn't have had to go through the same thing. We wouldn't have!

But we were all friends. When we were little. Us and all the kids in the neighborhood. Children don't think in color; they have to be taught, of course. But later we all realized that we were different colors, in junior high and high school. And in class discussions about racism we didn't dare make a peep. Because we were white people. And white people were responsible for everything bad.

We felt mutely that they were racists, I know. The people who treated us that way: who held us responsible. Who glared at us if we so much as opened our mouths during class discussions. But we didn't know how to say that then, didn't have the education to say that then: that that's how all racists feel—justified, sanctified, as if they have a right to be angry with some people. To treat them badly. Slap my face in the hallway at school, and they didn't even know me. Their minority status like a halo they wore on their heads. Giving them the right to be mean to us. Their darker skin. Ironically.

And because I was one of the kooky white girls, they could get away with it. Couldn't they? They could get away with slapping me. Even the white people laughed at us. They would have been afraid to do that to one of the other white kids. With their parents in their nice, middle class clothes from Sears. With a mortgage. Not living in a rundown rental. The cheap plastic glass, interlocking blue, yellow and red circle designs, it reminded me of a window in a pizza place, that daddy put in the front window when it broke. So anybody walking by on the street outside our house could see it right away. And sealing up the sides with clear plastic packing tape. What did he know? He was a crazy man from a crazy country where everybody did nothing but read all day. He didn't have any money for real glass. So we couldn't tell him. But everybody from school saw it when they walked down the street.

The house where the five kooky white sisters lived. They could slap us and get away with it.

Later, when I was older, I used to wonder idly, as I was soaking in the tub or doing some other thing, maybe brushing my teeth—when I had calmed down enough, when enough years had gone by me to allow me to think and not just be angry—

what the white people who were racist used to think. That they were superior of course, because of their skin color. Like everybody wanted to be like them because they were white. And I hated them.

Because they had made us into five wild, crazy, nervous white girls. They were responsible. And our childhood could have been different without them. Better. If they hadn't done what they did. Done what they did and got away with it, too.

Journal

Our feet were destroyed by summer. The beach and the sun and the cold salt water. I remember being little and looking down at my cracked heels. Like something old already. But it was okay. That's how I remember feeling when I was little: okay, just okay all the time. Glad without thinking about it. I had my four sisters all around me. Like dry land. Harbor. Shelter. Safety. But I never understood that then. That I was happy. Putting my head against my mother's chest when I was tired, and she would hold me, pat my face with her pale, freckled hand, sing Irish lullabies to me in her English accent. And it was enough. What were diamonds in comparison? But I didn't know that then. At the end of the day my sisters lying beside me in the back of my dad's truck on an old mattress, in the open truck bed, under that one big gray blanket with the yellow stripe. All the long way back from the beach to our house. Their sleeping breath, fanning my face and soothing me. Above us the black night sky split wide open by stars.

In the one dream that I always have of my four sisters, in the one dream that I have of the five of us girls, over and over again now—really a memory, I know—we are walking along the beach in Laguna, at Diver's Cove, where I learned to swim. Southern California. Summerland. And we are holding hands, a long daisy chain of little girls, five born in five years. And the yellow sun blazes down upon us, and the waves, made silver in the sunlight, pour back and forth over our legs. And we are laughing! And it is a golden and silver world. And I am at its very center. On each side of me, fanning out from me, like wings, are two of my sisters. And their long brown hair streams out from their heads like powerful, dark banners in the wind.

I don't know how I got from that place to here. This life. This big, dusty bedroom filled with antiques. This big antique bed. I am an old lady with hands curled and twisted like pieces of delicate, spotted, pale wood. And I am confined here now, to this bed, an antique fountain pen pushed into the permanently clenched fist of my

right hand, trying to write a letter on an antique mahogany writing desk my nurse has placed across my knees. Old age. This life. It all seems like a mistake, like one of those long, exhausting dreams we have sometimes, not exactly a nightmare, but one of those dreams in which everything seems turned upside down, and nothing makes sense. And I feel as if I just need to open my eyes to wake from it, to escape, and all will be well again. I will be there once again, walking along the beach with my sisters, and laughing. I will be back there, with them. In Summerland. Under the yellow sun of California. Of my childhood.

I think that was when I first began to change: when I got a little older, and I realized that daddy's truck was dangerous. Because we didn't have seatbelts in the back, rolling around with the movements of the truck. The wind on the long freeway journey back home from the beach rushing over us, like something with teeth. Daddy looking behind him, through the cab window, and seeing I was awake, taking one hand off the steering wheel and motioning me to keep down so we wouldn't attract the police, get a ticket if they found all five of us girls lying in the back. Mommy putting a finger across her lips through the glass, winking at me. Like we were getting away with something. It was a game. Mouthing "be a good girl" and "almost there." Home.

Home.

She would have corrected me. My sister Ethna. This journal entry. She would say, "Summer destroyed our feet," not "our feet were destroyed by summer." Active voice, not passive voice. But she's not here anymore. She hasn't been here for a long time. A long, long time. Forever.

Ethna, 1976: 17 Years Old

Letter to Dr. Hauser, her psychiatrist

Miss McGovern is one of our high school's three English teachers, and I am a helper in her freshman English class, because I am a high school senior, and I make good grades. I also know how to punctuate well—not "good," but "well." It's an adverb.

My little sisters Molly and Maeve are in Miss McGovern's class—they're identical twins—and that makes it fun. Yesterday, on Monday, I saw Molly roll her eyes when I wrote the journal prompt on the board, which Miss McGovern gave me on a tiny slip of paper, almost like she was passing me a note, and when I

turned around from the board after writing the prompt, dusting the chalk off my hands—Miss McGovern dislikes the feel of chalk on her hands; that’s why I write on the board for her—Molly rolled her eyes quickly at me, but so Miss McGovern didn’t see, and Maeve rolled her eyes almost at the same exact second. They do almost everything at the same time. Here’s what Monday’s journal prompt was:

Journal Prompt: Write about something that happened to you recently that stuck in your mind.

I read the journals during my free period, and write notes for the students to read—“interesting” when something is interesting, and smiley faces—the stuff Miss McGovern told me to write—although I don’t tell her I secretly correct the students’ grammar, punctuation and spelling, too (spelling and punctuation are “mechanics” in an English class), and as usual, I wrote big red “A” grades on Molly’s and Maeve’s journals, even though Molly wrote a lot and Maeve wrote only two sentences. Because they are my sisters, and I love them, and I want them to get scholarships to a good college, even though it’s unethical to inflate grades. (That last sentence was an intentional fragment—although it’s not really a sentence, a complete thought, is it—because it’s a fragment, a piece of a sentence?) I smiled when I read what Molly wrote, which was more a compliment to me than an insult to Miss McGovern: “Do you even read these fucking journals, you stupid bitch, Miss McGovern, or does my beautiful sister Ethna grade these journals and do all your work for you?” I crossed out the words “fucking” and “stupid bitch,” and suggested these adjectives for her, which I instructed her to look up in the dictionary: “scintillating” or “insipid” instead of “fucking” and “puerile incompetent” or “supercilious sophist” instead of “stupid bitch.” Here’s what Molly wrote; I’m paper-clipping it into this letter—I made a copy of it for you. It’s the sheet of notebook paper folded three times, in a little square at the bottom of this page. Read it, Dr. Hauser, please. (I made various word usage suggestions and corrections in the margins.) It will tell you what our life is like, which you said you wanted to know.

Molly's Journal:

Zelly burned the chicken last night, and we all hated her for it. She’s incompetent, and she thought it was funny: She laughed. But me, I wanted to punch her, and I did—who was there to stop me? We all hate her anyway. She’s weak, even though she’s the oldest of us five girls. And we had nothing to eat last night, and my mom didn’t come home from her nursing

classes at night school with my dad until late, almost eleven, and we were all still awake, lying in our bunk beds. Our stomachs were growling. And Zelly cried to her that I had punched her, just like she was a baby, but she's 19 and in college! But when our mom heard why, she just said "Goodness gracious!" in that English accent of hers, like we live in one of those big mansions you see on TV, the kind with a long driveway with a big fence in front of it, and she went into her bedroom with our dad—he always just ignores us, or sometimes he says, "Siobian, all these little bitches are driving me crazy!" and he beats on his bedroom door if she doesn't come to bed fast enough at night—just wham, wham, wham! like a maniac—and so anyway when she came home, my mom just went into her bedroom with our dad and got ready for bed, and the whole house was black dark in five minutes, but I was starving, but there was nothing to feed us, so we all had to go to sleep. But in the morning as I got ready for school, pulling my jeans on from the rail at the end of my bunk bed, which is on the bottom—and shaking them because the legs had trailed on the floor, and they were dusty—I didn't notice that I was hungry, or I did notice, but I just ignored it. But when I saw Zelly's face looking over from her single bed—a single bed, like a princess, against the sidewall, at the end of our two bunk beds, because she's the oldest of us girls—I wanted to punch her again. I hate her. But Roisin, my third-oldest sister, smacked her, and that meant I didn't have to do it myself, even though Ethna—she's our second-oldest sister, the one we all listen to—pulled her hair for doing it. We all hate Zelly. We had nothing for breakfast because my dad doesn't get paid until Friday, and my mom told me to just wait for the school lunch, I could hold out, and she gave me a dollar in pennies and nickels and dimes, and one quarter, counting out the change to all five of us from the bottom of her big black handbag, and there were grains of something, like sand, in the bottom of her bag, and it was all over the coins, and I had to dust the money off, and I could barely think in class because I was so hungry, I was shaking, and Maeve was, too, and it's a wonder I'm even writing this journal, because I'm so hungry I bet I could eat this paper and this pencil besides, even though it's lead and it's probably got poison in it. At least I'd be full.

When they got their papers back at the next class, and did a peer evaluation, Maeve wrote this note on Molly's paper: "You're a fucking idiot! Why do you write crap like this? Everybody will think we are poor! Everybody will LAUGH at us!" Molly wrote this note back on the top of Maeve's paper, after she read

Maeve's note on her paper: "Don't be retarded. No-one's gonna see this crap except for us and Ethna. Ethna grades our papers."

I think you can learn a lot about my family from reading just this one journal, Dr. Hauser.

Molly and Maeve cuss at each other, but they don't really mean it. They do everything together. At the end of Miss McGovern's class, they always walk out the door together, and they are always walking so close together that their shoulders and hips are constantly touching—Molly's right shoulder and hip are touching Maeve's left shoulder and hip. They even walk in the same positions—Molly on the left and Maeve on the right. But they don't even realize it. They're still narrow enough at 14 to do that—they're actually very skinny—but Maeve weighs 85 pounds, five more than Molly, even though technically Maeve's the youngest of us five girls, as she was born ten minutes after Molly. At the King of the Hill supermarket, where they like to go with our mom when she goes grocery shopping, because maybe she will buy them a five cent ice cream cone—and she almost always does, and herself, too, and I, too, when I am with them—they weigh themselves religiously on the big scale in one of the alcoves at the side of the store, and they keep careful track of their weight. In the bath at night—they always bathe together because they're twins and never apart, not even for one single breath, our mother says—they feel the hard little lumps beneath the nipples on their flat chests—they call them "rocks"—and try to figure out when the rocks will spread and grow, become soft, and they will sprout boobs. I told them that's how my boobs grew, because I have big boobs—they just grew like crazy the summer I was 15, and now at 17 I'm a D cup—but they started out just as little rocks. And the twins think they will have big boobs like me, but I've been looking at them, and I think they'll be flat—an A or small B cup at most. Maeve really wants big boobs, but Molly, who's more of a tomboy, doesn't really care, I think; she just cares because Maeve cares. They take after my mom's side of the family. Me, I take after my dad's side—not the Irish side.

My dad's mom had humongous boobs, and I do, too, but like me, she was narrow-waisted, tiny all over the rest of her. That sentence doesn't sound right—sorry. But she was tiny all over except for her boobs—which were humongous. I remember my grandma. She used to look after us when we were little, before she died, when my mom was sick in the hospital. She didn't like my mom, and she thought she was low-class, despite her English accent, and she used to tell everybody after mass on Sunday, when we were having coffee and donuts in the rec hall, "She's Irish, not English; she was just born in London," and my mom used to puff out her chest and say, "I'm Irish Catholic and proud of it!" That was what her parents taught her to say, and she taught me to say that, too, when I was

little. The priests used to give my grandmother looks, and pat me on the head when I said, “I’m Irish Catholic and proud of it, too!” because they were all Irish, of course, and they used to laugh jovially (I like that word: jovially) and say to everybody, “Just because you’re born in a stable doesn’t mean you’re a horse.” You know what they meant, Dr. Hauser: “stable” equals “London.” My grandmother didn’t like her, my mom, the moment she saw her at my parents’ wedding in London in 1957, after my dad’s time in the military and medical school over there, and she hated her after my dad brought her back here to the U.S. as his wife, and she wanted him to divorce my mother and marry a lady who was half-Mexican and half-Dutch who wore orange lipstick and had dyed black hair. I know why, but the explanation is long and complicated, and so I will tell you at some later date, because just thinking about all that—that kind of thing, racism and etc.—makes me nauseous. I always have to protect my younger sisters at school.

By the way, Dr. Hauser, I would NOT be writing about this kind of thing if you were a man—about boobs. It wouldn’t be appropriate. However, you’re a woman, and I am assuming that you will understand. Anyway...I am “off topic,” as one of my English teachers—Mrs. Johnson, the one I really, really liked, the one I told you about, would say (she was a much, much better teacher than Miss McGovern will ever be, and she didn’t always return papers promptly, but she read everything we wrote, and she used to write very detailed notes on our papers—very careful and intelligent). Anyway (I am sorry I am using “anyway” again as a transition, and it is a bad transition), I am sorry I am off-topic. You told me to write about cutting, why I cut myself sometimes. What happened to me when I was 16. About him. Ajax. What happened to me last year. But I just can’t. I just can’t seem to right now. I pick up my pen in my hand, and it feels so heavy, and I move it to the top of a new sheet of blank, white notebook paper, and I am intending to write, to write to you about what happened, and I can’t. I just can’t! I am sorry.

P.S. My older sister Zelly’s name is unusual, and you may be wondering about that, Dr. Hauser. Her real name is Kelly. We all changed her name—my three younger sisters (Roisin, 16, and Maeve and Molly, 14) and I (yes, I am part of it, the principal architect of Kelly’s name change, actually, although I must admit, I am ashamed of what I did, or maybe I just think I should feel ashamed?)—well, anyway...we changed Kelly’s name to Zelly several years ago, and not for affectionate reasons. Kelly just turned 19, she is the oldest of us five girls (five born in five years), but she is not respected. The letter “Z” is the last letter in the alphabet, and Kelly is (I’m sorry, but this is true) lazy, selfish and slovenly—and she does not study or read, even though she is at Rio Gato Community College,

majoring in Theatre Arts and English. She is not a leader, the leader; I have to be—and I am only the second-oldest, 17. So we changed her name to Zelly. It is a big insult (the last letter of the alphabet). But (wonder of wonders) she likes her name, and thinks it's unique, will help her to be a famous singer someday. It's one word: Zelly (like Cher). She tells strangers and new acquaintances, "Call me Zelly!" Chirping brightly, like an animated chipmunk. (The last sentence was a fragment; I know that. But it was an intentional fragment. And I know I am still using "anyway" as a transition. Sorry. In that fragment, however, I am doing something college-level: I am making an allusion—"animated chipmunk"—to a cartoon about chipmunks, but it is not a "literary allusion," just an "allusion," I guess, since I have never seen the chipmunk cartoon in a book. Also—additionally?—I learned that earlier phrase I used—"principal architect"—in the library, in a history book. I am always learning things in the library. My dad has been taking us ever since I was little. I started to go to the school library on my own, though, when I was a freshman, when I was 14, for safety during lunch break, but now I like it. No, I love it: reading! I taught my sisters to hide there, too, in the library, during lunch. No-one can hit you there.)

P.P.S. Even my parents call my sister Kelly by that name, Zelly, and I don't know if they know why. I have never asked them. We just say things like "Pass the salt" or "Pass the butter" when we are sitting with them at the dinner table (which is, actually, not a special "dinner" table, but just the same table in our kitchen, where we always eat when we are home—breakfast, lunch and dinner—but if we all sit down together—that is, if our parents eat with us five girls—my mother is always at night school to be a nurse, and my dad goes with her—it is dinnertime.) (Did you know "dinnertime" could be one word? It can; I looked it up in the dictionary.)

P.P.P.S. (Is that the way to abbreviate a third P.S.?) It's easier for me to write to you than talk to you. I have nothing to say when I sit in your office, and look into your eyes. My head is just a blank. Nothing comes to me there. When you ask me questions and I don't answer, I am not being uncooperative. I want to cooperate. Maybe you will talk to me about this letter, and I will be able to respond. I like to write. I keep a journal. I will write you a letter before each visit, okay? (I like that echo question, attaching one word to the end of a sentence that is a statement, and changing it into a question.) The two weeks I spent in that hospital were a waste of time. I couldn't do my homework at first when I was there, they wouldn't give it to me, and I felt anxious. I had to beg and beg. I want to go to college after I graduate in June. I don't want to go back to the hospital. And I didn't like having to stay home for a month after I got out, either. I felt

anxious about my homework, if I was doing it correctly, and my mother would take it away from me if she thought I was becoming upset. That was the worst part: my mother. I had to smile at her continually, and not too hard and not too soft, normal, a normal smile. I thought parts of my face would crack and break off when I looked at her, it ached so much from smiling. Did you know that, Dr. Hauser? Did you know that smiling a lot can be so painful, cause actual, physical pain? Especially when you don't mean it. (I'm sorry; that last sentence was a fragment. I will try not to do that again.)

I cannot write about him now. I cannot write about Ajax.

Maeve, 2047: 85 Years Old

Journal

Nineteen hundred and eighty-four. 1984. There's a famous novel with that name. I remember seeing it when I was little, my dad reading it. And I remember reading it myself in high school, and not thinking much about it. Not knowing how crucial it would be for me. Not the novel. The year. 1984. Nineteen hundred and eighty-four. That was the year everything changed for me. Became cemented in place. My life.

My twin Molly had graduated from a Cal State in Los Angeles and gotten a job as a nurse. An R.N. For almost fifty thousand a year. And everything would be okay now. She told me everything would be okay; to come home to Los Angeles and I would live at home until I got a job with my art degree, because I couldn't get a job in New York City where I went to school and I was starving. Everything would be okay, she told me on the phone, and I said I would come home. But I married him anyway. I married him anyway. He was rich, he spent five hundred thousand dollars, 10 times fifty thousand dollars, when he bought me my necklace and earrings for the opera, the ballet. Before we were married. When we were just dating. When he was married to somebody else. "Night jewelry," he called it. When I closed my eyes and reached up my hands and touched the stones, they were cold, hard. They didn't feel good. But when I opened my eyes. The sparkling. The look on people's faces when they saw them. I had never had that before. And then fifty thousand dollars didn't seem like enough. But I know it was. It was. We could have made it, all of us living together and being happy. All five of us girls.

But Roisin went to Israel, didn't she? Left the convent. So it wouldn't have been like that. We wouldn't have all been together, all five of us sisters. Everything changes after childhood; your family blows all apart like a pile of leaves in the wind. And of course Ethna was already gone. She was already gone. So maybe that was it. Ethna was already gone.

And I went for the money. Big money.

Journal

She wrote me a letter. Emily. My granddaughter. After eight years of not seeing her, not hearing from her. But birthday cards. She wrote me a letter—and old-fashioned letter, with a pen and paper. She wants me to write her a letter back. Tell her all about myself. My life.

I have been trying to do that, tell her about me, write drafts of the letter here in my journal. But I don't like how I sound. Everything I write seems so awful. What I tell her in my letters. Maybe it is awful. The truth. But I have tried to write her more—more “conventional” letters, too.

It's just that I hate how I sound in the letters. I seem so—! Like a grandmother. Platitudes. I am her grandmother. But I wanted to be me. A person for her. One person talking truthfully to another. About life. My life. Maybe I should just talk to her. But if I did, what would I say? The truth is—the truth is not pretty maybe.

Maybe I should just send her a long scream. She would open the letter, and there inside it would be a long scream. She would slit open the envelope with her index finger or a letter opener, expecting to hear something nice—platitudes—and inside it would be the scream. And it would just rip itself out of the envelope, hurl itself into the air, and shimmer there before her. The scream. Pounding in her ears, making her long brown hair static with its energy, so her hair would float in the air all around her, like a beautiful, dark halo. Like she was in the water, swimming on her back, and it was spreading out all around her, like a black, lacy fan.

She has long brown hair, too. Like we did. My sisters and me. I. All of us.

I did not know what to say to her. In the letter. I wrote it, read it, and threw it away, again and again, until the bones in my hand ached, and my heartbeat

pounded in my ears. And six days had run by me. And I am still trying to write the letter. But each time it's so—not me! NOT...I. Maeve. It's not I, Maeve.

Ethna would have corrected my grammar, told me, “It's not ME.” I have to write back. Say something...anything. Something nice. “To My Very Dearest Granddaughter Emily...!”

Letter to Emily

To My Very Dearest Granddaughter Emily—!

What a wonderful surprise to hear from you—and on your wedding day! I was very moved by your letter. What you wrote. The mere fact that you sent it! That you awoke early, before anybody else, while it was still dark, so you could breastfeed your baby daughter and write me the letter. I pictured you as you describe yourself in your letter: “a thin, pale, plain-faced woman of 27 with long, dark hair streaming down her back, sitting at a rough wooden table in a big, old-fashioned kitchen, her baby daughter sleeping in a big basket beside her, writing in the dim light of one antique kerosene lantern.” But I do not like the word “plain” in your description; I do not think you are plain; I never thought you were plain. I always thought you were—no, I will not say “beautiful,” as most grandmothers would! I will say something better...something that you will believe, that you must know is true. “Interesting-looking.” Are you frowning as you read my words? Should I have written “beautiful” instead? But I don't think you are that way. That you would like that. And I think pulchritude is overrated. In your letter, you tell me how beautiful I look in my wedding photo in 1984, when I was 22. Your mother gave it to you, in a silver frame. As a wedding gift. And you stopped writing to me for a few minutes, to hold it in your hands, and look down into that girl's face. And you think that I was “so beautiful.” And that you are a “plain bride.” But you know, I never liked beautiful people myself! Preferred them to others. One does nothing to deserve, to merit, physical beauty—and one never sees it, only reflections! And yet people react so...so vehemently to faces, don't they? They love you or they hate you because of your face. And it all has nothing to do with YOU, who you are. No, physical beauty is overrated. You never think people truly “see” you. But I saw you—and I see you now in your letter. So much better than I was, I used to think. —And I still think! So many thoughts running through your eyes when you were a little girl, a young woman—intelligent eyes, a reader's eyes, I used to think. I used to look forward to your visits so much. I was so proud of you—that you had a mind. I loved it that you

liked to read. Like all my sisters and I did. And you are a writer now. You write. You are trying to write a novel about your family. And now you have written me a letter on your wedding day—and the old-fashioned kind: with a pen and paper...! I was moved.

Today—no, not today, the day you got married—it is a week ago now. Everybody you knew was there with you except for me. Your grandmother. Your mother's mother. You were sad. But you know I am too old to travel now. I am—all creaky! Eighty-five. I am—eighty-five years old. So strange to write that...

It is a new day now. It is tomorrow. I had to stop writing yesterday. My hand hurt. No! My head hurt! Pounded. (Eighty-five! I am eighty-five years old!) I have to stop every so often to rest. To stretch my old, bent, crooked fingers. But I will finish this letter to you even if it takes me a million days. Rest and write and rest. If it seems disconnected, in bits and pieces, it is because I must do that. And it is another day already! Time goes by so fast. The days run away from us when we are old.

Ethna, 1975: 16 Years Old

Journal Entry

It was like he was pulling my heart from my mouth. When he kissed me today. Ajax. I wanted to say to him, "You're pulling my heart from my mouth! You're pulling my heart from my mouth!"

Ethna, 1975: 16 Years Old

Journal Entry

I think of the Bible verses when I see him. The Song of Songs. What my mother does NOT like me to read in the Bible. His neck like a column—not of ivory, though. Of...amber. His teeth like—I don't know what: flashing white mirrors? Are there flashing white mirrors in the Song of Songs? I don't know. I see him and my stomach seems to become frozen, turn into a tiny knot. A ball of ice. All the things I read about in this dumb romance story one day when I was waiting for Maeve and Molly in the doctor's office. And this story of a boxer. How his stomach turned to ice before he used to fight, the girls' insides all shrivel up in the romances. Curdle. Become small. When they see the guy. I am ice, all ice, the

Ice Girl when I see him. Contracted. And when he smiles at me, I don't smile back, and I wonder if he thinks it's like looking into a frozen lake. A blank, white canvas. My face. Expressionless. The winter. I am the winter. And he's like a little breeze, the Chinook Laura Ignalls Wilder writes about in one of her books, after the long winter, coming to unfreeze me. And I feel that I will turn into the sun in front of him one day when he doesn't expect it. He'll turn to look at me as he always does when he walks into the classroom with a note to give to the teacher, his head always swiveling on his neck, on its amber column, to look at me at my desk, and I will have turned into the sun. And be blazing at him. I won't be able to hide my feelings. Lock them into ice. Freeze them. Oh, why do I feel this way! Who is he? What has he done to me! What's so special about him, I ask myself. And all I can see is his eyes, his eyes, like shining...they are like shining amber pools in his amber face, and the whites of his eyes and his teeth and his black hair are the only other colors. He is all amber and white and black. Wood and stone. The brown tree trunks and little white stones I saw in the forest path when I was walking with my girl scout troop when I was 11. Brown wood and white stone. We are wood and stone. Brown and white. He is wood, and I am stone. Wood and stone...

Maeve, 2047: 85 Years Old

Letter to Emily

No, we have not seen each other for eight years, Emily. Since you were 19. But it is not your fault. Please do not blame yourself! I am still in my big old apartment here in New York. And you live in Patagonia now. The southernmost part of Argentina. With glaciers. The ends of the earth. In your letter to me, you capitalize the first letter of each of those words, underline them: The Ends Of The Earth. "I live at The Ends Of The Earth." But you enjoy running the guest house that your fiancé—who is your husband now—inherited, don't you? Which is good—I am glad you are happy. And it's so beautiful, you write, and I believe you. Which is why you won't leave. Can't leave. Of course I understand! I do! And now you have a daughter. So your fate is sealed. Your life is very busy. "I have made my bed, and now I will lie happily upon it," you write to me in your letter. I am glad that you are happy. Glad!

Well, maybe it was "meant to be." What you write. In your letter. About meeting your husband. In New York City for only one day, a wild man from Argentina, from Patagonia, from The Ends Of The Earth. A chance encounter at a coffee shop

when you were 19. And it changed your life. You ran away with him; one day you were here, in Manhattan, and the next day your mother told me that you were gone. Had dropped out of college. We looked for you frantically. All over. Hired detectives. The whole nine yards. And then eventually we learned that you were living in Patagonia. The Ends Of The Earth. With him. Your husband now. But you were a legal adult, and there was nothing we could do. And it all worked out for the best, it seems. You are happy—with a baby, and married—and so that is good. And I am so glad to hear from you, Emily! So glad! And yes, I believe you—life is like that. One thing, one chance encounter with another person, and it changes your life. It can change your life forever.

I met your grandfather when I was walking down a long corridor in a big building here, in Mahattan. He was at one end, and I was at the other, and we looked into each other's eyes as we walked toward each other, to the elevator in the middle. Every step. We couldn't help it. There was nowhere else for us to look. Alone in the corridor. And I remember thinking, "Where else is there for me to look?" The sound of our feet, our heels, tapping or clicking on the polished marble floor. Walking. I was uncomfortable. Embarrassed. He was important. Handsome. Older. But you know that. You know all that, don't you? —That he was older? Your husband is 12 years older than you. Your grandfather—he was 25 years older than I was. We met exactly in the middle of the corridor—at the open elevator—where he stopped me. Put out his hand, and introduced himself. Meant to be? The feel of his hand in mine. Warm. Hard. Pressing mine. What would have happened, I wonder now, if I had scooted right past him into the elevator, pushed the button to shut the doors, not taken his hand? I will never know. Oh, that is a terrible thing to tell you—that life is about the choices we make. Meant to be? I should tell you it was meant to be. But it is all about the choices we make, Emily. What we decide to do. And we have to be so careful about those choices. But we never are, are we? We make them quickly. The most important decisions in life. Too quickly.

You know, I have been thinking about what you said in your letter, and that you are probably right. Even though it hurts—I must admit! We do not know each other. Not really. Yes, I am your grandmother, and you are my granddaughter, and we love each other. Of course. But we don't really know each other.

"Who are you, Maeve?" I was...startled. And afraid. Of your question. But yes, excited, too. I was excited. "Now I will really have someone to talk to." That is what I thought. That is what I thought, Emily. Isn't it embarrassing?

Well...!

I was—I am Maeve Mann. I was—I am—one of five sisters. We were—we *are* five sisters. Five sisters born in five years to Irish Catholic and Jewish/East Indian emigrants to the United States. To Siobian Kearney and Leo Mann. The oldest of us five girls was Kelly—whom we called Zelly—and then there was Ethna, of course, my darling sister Ethna! And Roisin, Molly, and of course, me—Maeve. But I wasn't the youngest; Molly and I were both the youngest. Because we were twins. Identical twins. But I came out of our mother last. So maybe I am the youngest. Yes, I guess I am the youngest technically. And the last living. (I will be the last to go.)

My parents. My sisters. My first family. I don't think anybody ever knew me like they did. They could answer that question for you: "Who are you, Maeve?"