

THE SPACE BETWEEN BEFORE AND AFTER

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Sue Stauffacher



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To those with a beloved family member who suffers from depression,
may you find comfort in knowing you are not alone



THE SPACE BETWEEN BEFORE AND AFTER

Chapter 1

It was early December when Thomas came downstairs to get his breakfast and found his mother sitting at the kitchen table.

“I had the strangest dream last night,” she said, looking up from her teacup, the one with the bluebells on it. She had a whole collection of flowered teacups.

Thomas froze. Not only was his mother awake, she was starting a conversation.

“What was strange about it?” he asked, wondering if he should continue to get a cereal bowl out of the cupboard or if he should stay where he was.

“I was in the airport. I must have been going on a trip.” Helen stirred her tea with her spoon. The murmury sound of her voice made Thomas wonder if she was still there—in her dream.

Should I ask where she was going? Or wait for her to say more?

“I stood in the middle of the terminal, looking down the hall at all the gates.”

Another long silence followed.

Should I get the bowl?

Thomas decided it wasn't time to move yet.

"Where were you going?" he finally asked, unable to hold on to the question any longer. This was, by far, the most interesting and longest conversation he and his mother had had in weeks.

Helen put her spoon down and said, "There was a ticket in my purse—but it didn't have a destination on it."

She flicked a toast crumb from her blouse and Thomas noticed something else. His mother had never worn that blouse before. It was a birthday present from her sister, his aunt Sadie; Helen's birthday was so long ago, it was almost time for it to come again. And the toast crumb had to be added to the list of astonishments. She'd seen it was there and brushed it away.

"Though I did have a seat assignment."

The new blouse and the amount of words gave Thomas hope that maybe they were coming to the end of this particular blue mood of Helen's. Glancing at the clock, he willed the second hand into reverse. If his father came up from his basement office to check on Thomas's progress, she might stop talking.

Nice and slow, Thomas pulled out the kitchen chair and sat down.

Helen looked into Thomas's eyes and said, "If I did go on a trip . . . I would write to you."

“Promise?” was the word that came out of Thomas’s mouth. He didn’t know why. His mother never went on trips. It was all very strange.

She pressed on his knee so hard he could feel the pad of his foot against the linoleum. “Promise.” Helen let go and, after a moment, Thomas got up from the table and opened the cupboard that contained the cereal bowls.

“It would be good for you to take a trip,” he said. “You should get out more.”

That was Aunt Sadie’s line. What his aunt had said when she’d stopped over for a visit recently—Thomas had an impressive memory for past conversations—was: “I’d be tired, too, if I were you, Helen. You really should get out more. At least get some exercise. All you do is sit here in the kitchen and look out the window at the birdbath.”

Aunt Sadie had then gone to stand by the window and stare out at the backyard to confirm that was all there was to see. “Which could use a good cleaning, by the way. I can’t imagine birds like to drink from their own toilet.”

“I sit on the front porch, sometimes, when the weather’s nice.”

“What? And keep tabs on the old lady across the street? I’m sure that’s entertaining.” Taking hold of Thomas’s arm, Aunt Sadie pulled him to her side. “Is that Giselle from next door? What is she doing with a shovel in November?”

Thomas looked over the side fence. “It looks like she’s about to dig a hole.”

“Why would she want to do that?”

Thomas could see this interested his aunt. He shrugged. Giselle often got home from school before Thomas and ran out to get her mail just as he was coming up his driveway from the bus stop. She asked all sorts of questions that made Thomas uncomfortable, though he tried to answer her. He did not want to be rude.

Because of their conversations by the mailbox, Thomas knew that Giselle was concocting a plan to cheer his mother up; but he didn't want to mention this in front of her, so he didn't answer out loud. Instead he looked into Aunt Sadie's eyes and told her that way.

There was a whole language of looks that his father and Aunt Sadie and he had developed over the past couple of years.

Thomas didn't know if other families also had things they didn't say out loud and so had to replace words with stares or blinking or pressing their lips together. But with his gaze, and maybe a little bit of his eyebrows, he conveyed to Aunt Sadie that it was something to do with Helen, with her . . . mood. And though he could see that Aunt Sadie was having trouble making the connection, wondering why Giselle would even know about her sister's moods, she let it drop.

“She doesn't go to my school,” Thomas had said to fill the space. “We talk sometimes at the mailbox about . . . things. She goes to the Montessori school. She and her mom moved in at the end of the summer.”

“That’s right,” Aunt Sadie said. “Her mother told me it was something to do with being bullied. They moved so Giselle could be closer to her new school.”

Thomas and Aunt Sadie had then sat down at the kitchen table on either side of Helen. As if they’d planned this ahead of time—like a play.

“All I know about Montessori schools is drawing letters in sand and pouring beans into a cup,” Aunt Sadie said. “Learning through the senses, right? Isn’t that what Montessori is all about? I can’t imagine how they teach children her age. History, for example. How do you teach history to a twelve-year-old in Montessori?”

“Maybe they do reenactments, like on the History channel,” Thomas said. “I saw a show once where they did a reenactment of the Civil War. There was so much smoke, the soldiers couldn’t see who they were shooting.”

And that’s how it was—Thomas and Aunt Sadie, or Thomas and his father talking up a blue streak, talking around his mother, making conversation for three.

But this morning, it was just Thomas and Helen in the kitchen, and the conversation they’d started turned into a thread like the silvery-spun web string you see at the end of a piece of blown glass, which Thomas also knew about courtesy of the History channel.

That’s when his mother said the most startling thing of all: “Maybe I should go on a trip.”

At the same time, his father called up from his office to say that he hoped Thomas had eaten his cereal because the school bus would be arriving any minute.

And the thread connecting Thomas to his mother disappeared completely.

Thomas tried to think of something to revive it, but all he could see were the dust motes that settled on the edge of the bread board that sat on top of the microwave. He imagined they were flour or powdered sugar, which they might have been.

A long time ago.

Chapter 2

BEFORE

After Aunt Sadie left on that day she'd spotted Giselle with the shovel, Thomas went outside to get a closer look.

He wished he'd put on his coat. It was always cold in mid-November in Michigan, but the wind that day had made it feel Christmas-cold. Hugging himself, Thomas thought of the warm kitchen and his mother, then decided he'd rather be out here. For a few minutes anyway.

Giselle had on a purple puffy jacket and hat and a pair of snow pants under her skirt. Thomas thought she looked like a purple-quilted marshmallow trying to dig a hole.

"I told you the other day..." Thomas raised his voice to get Giselle to stop digging and look up at him. "My mom doesn't like dogs." Thomas didn't believe this. He'd only said it to make Giselle give up the idea.

"Thomas," Giselle said in an exasperated parent-teachery way. "Your mom will love Frenchy. *Quel chien adorable!* What an

adorable dog! Everyone says so. I'm telling you, my plan is perfect."

"You can't make a dog run away," he told her, watching the steam from their breath twist together.

"Yes, you can." Giselle's pale cheeks were flushed red. "Well, I can," she corrected herself. "Using various behavioral techniques."

According to their mailbox conversations, Giselle planned to be a psychologist when she grew up. Her mother was a very good one with her own practice. Giselle was going to follow in her mother's footsteps.

"Don't look so worried, Thomas! It's only for a little while. And you have a fenced yard. Tomorrow, before school, I'll put Frenchy's favorite treats on your side of the fence and he will crawl into your yard using this tunnel I'm making—I'll block him from returning with our trash can lid. Your dad will be at work, you and I will go to school, and your mom will be the only one to see him running around, and then . . ."

Gazing up at the gray sky, Giselle continued to imagine how it would all go.

Even with the fence between them, Thomas could see quite clearly the long fringe that framed her brown eyes. No, they had green, too, Thomas noticed. Like a cat's eyes.

But a cat's face was serious; Giselle had a round face, and her mouth was never still. If she wasn't talking, which was rare, she was laughing or smiling or humming a tune or biting her lip. Taking her whole face into consideration, Thomas

thought it safe to say that Giselle considered the world to be—more than 50 percent of the time at least—a laughing matter.

“Frenchy will cover her with kisses and she will carry him inside and give him something to eat and they’ll snuggle.” Giselle stuck her arm through the fence to grab Thomas’s arm, but she couldn’t catch hold with her mittens. “Did you know that just petting an animal releases oxytocin into your bloodstream? Those are the same feel-good hormones you get from hugging your friends or when a mother nurses her baby . . .”

Giselle’s voice had trailed off. It seemed to Thomas that she’d released some feel-good hormones just thinking about her wonderful plan, but he hoped she wouldn’t mention anything about babies to his mother.

Then Giselle said, “*Voilà! Raison d’être.* That means, ‘reason to be.’ She will have rescued poor lost little Frenchy and will feel better. Now, no more talking. I need to dig.”

The problem with Giselle, his father would say, was that she *believed* in the outcomes she imagined when, in truth, she had no idea what would happen. It was very foolish to believe in things that did not exist, according to Thomas’s father. Stick to what is known and observable. Always have proof.

Somehow Thomas knew that if he said this to Giselle, she would laugh.

Chapter 3

BEFORE

The next day, the day of Giselle’s plan, Thomas saw her throw dog biscuits into his yard and Frenchy squeeze under the fence to get them. Thomas was on the way to the bus stop and his father had already left for work. It made him nervous—so much so it felt like he had butterflies in his stomach.

After lunch his teacher, Mrs. Evans, sat at her desk and said, “It’s that time of day when you digest your lunches while I help you increase your knowledge of the world.”

Stocking School had an open technology policy, so fifth graders were allowed to use electronic devices in pursuit of knowledge. But Mrs. Evans was “up to here” with students consulting sites on the computer instead of her, so she had started the Ask Mrs. Evans box.

This segment of the class was growing right along with Mrs. Evans, who was pregnant with her third child. Thomas suspected she was spending more time on “Ask Mrs. Evans”

because she relished every opportunity to sit down and “take a load off,” as she liked to say. He had checked his theory with his best friend, Martin Templeton, who consulted his daily diary and confirmed that in September the segments averaged seven minutes, but since Halloween they had exceeded fifteen.

Martin was fond of soccer and reading and board games, but he especially liked counting. Anything and everything.

Mrs. Evans always read the questions silently first to make sure they were appropriate for impressionable young minds. After squinting at the first question, she let it flutter into the wastebasket. “This question about the steps preceding fertilization of the human egg will have to wait for my long-term sub. We don’t cover human reproduction until the end of the year.”

She took her feet off her footstool and pushed her rolling chair to where she could see George Panagopoulos.

“What?” George looked around at his classmates.

“It would behoove students to remember that their handwriting is as distinctive as a fingerprint.”

“But I wrote it with my left hand!”

“And I have a master’s degree in education. Let’s try again, shall we? All right, then,” she said, holding up another slip of paper. “Why do people call that sensation you get in your stomach ‘butterflies?’”

Thomas often asked questions about butterflies, and this one felt appropriate for today.

“Now, that’s a good question.” Mrs. Evans repositioned her feet on the stool and, clasping her hands, settled them

over her belly. “Did you know that there are more nerve endings sending signals to your brain from your digestive organs than from your spinal column?”

“Is that why it hurts so much when you get punched in the gut?” George wondered aloud.

“What is the Ask Mrs. Evans rule, George?”

“Save the questions until the end of the lecture?”

“The lesson. Until the end of the lesson.”

“Right.” George put his head on his desk and closed his eyes. The whole class, including Mrs. Evans, waited to see if George would decide to snore, thus choosing to wait out the lesson at the student desk in the hallway outside the classroom. But apparently even George had some interest in this question, because he remained quiet.

“As I was saying, with so many nerve endings in the stomach, scientists have called it the second brain. Scientists used to think the brain was directing digestion, but in the last ten years they’ve discovered that ninety percent of the impulses are being sent to the brain. This perhaps explains why we say we have a ‘gut feeling,’ because the brain in our stomach is communicating with us. Up here.” Mrs. Evans tapped her temple to avoid any confusion. “That fluttery sensation can feel like butterflies are flying around in our stomach, so we call it ‘butterflies.’ But actually, it’s our second brain’s response to the stress we feel when we’re around someone we want to impress or have a crush on and we don’t know what to say or . . . when we’re nervous before a big test. And I suspect,

George, that the unpleasantness of being punched in the gut has as much to do with the stomach's proximity to the diaphragm as it has to do with nerve endings."

Mrs. Evans patted her belly, signaling that she was through with butterflies and moving on. "'What makes bread rise?'" she read aloud from the next slip of paper. Settling both feet on the ground, she leaned forward, putting her elbows on her desk. "It's a good thing I majored in science, isn't it?"

Chapter 4

When Thomas got home from school the day his mother had told him about her strange dream, he started his chores.

“There’s a reason for the saying ‘First things first,’ Thomas,” his father always said.

First Thomas brought in the mail. Then he removed any papers from his backpack that his parents needed to see. This wasn’t for his father, who followed the school e-news bulletins carefully, but for Helen, who didn’t like computers and rarely turned hers on.

Using a thumbtack, he pinned up an announcement for the revised date of the French Club popcorn sale and the winter drop-off directions to accommodate the loss of parking spaces to mounds of snow. Next, Thomas took an erasable marker and crossed off the date on the laminated calendar on the fridge.

It was Monday, December 2.

That's when he first began to wonder where his mother was.

But it wasn't his job to wonder where Helen was. It was his job to now complete his homework.

Helen's computer was an old desktop model and took forever to boot up, so while he waited Thomas thought he'd eat the bowl of cereal he didn't have time for that morning. He got out a bowl and opened the cupboard that held the cereal and crackers.

Where could she be?

Helen was usually in the kitchen. Though she might be in her bedroom sleeping. Should he go look for her? Before Thomas could decide to go upstairs, he heard the handle turn on the side door. It was his father coming home from his teaching job at the community college.

"Where's your mom?" he asked.

Thomas shrugged and turned to the keyboard, brushing q-w-e-r-t-y with the pad of his index finger.

"That's odd," continued his father. "She said she was going to try to run a few errands but would be back by the time you got home. Thomas, verbalize that shrug, please."

"I don't know. I . . . just got here."

Thomas's father picked up his mug and reached for the coffeepot.

That's when the second mystery presented itself.

"Who drank all the coffee?" he asked, holding up the pot, which was as clean as if it hadn't been used that day. Helen

didn't drink coffee. She drank tea. Thomas looked for her teacup and saucer. They were washed and set on the drain board.

Thomas felt a prickling on the back of his neck. Usually there was a salad plate with toast crumbs on the table. And the mug was next to the tea bag that Helen set carefully on its foil wrapper after she'd steeped her tea. Rinsing her cup was his chore. It was his job to keep track of how much tea had been drunk and how much toast eaten. They had to keep watch because Helen was growing thin again.

All the same things were occurring to Thomas's father. He went over to the cupboard under the sink where they kept the garbage. Yanking it open, his father tilted the can so they could both see in. There it was—Dr. Chen's Fog Mountain tea. Aunt Sadie had bought the tea from an old high school boyfriend, Frank Navone, who believed that everything could be fixed by the right combination of tea leaves.

The tea contained an herb called hare's ear root that was supposed to help with Helen's mood. To Thomas, it smelled like dirty socks. He never mentioned this because his mother had to drink it and his father didn't like flights of fancy, as he called them. In addition to teaching freshman composition at the community college, Mr. Moran was a freelance copy editor. It was his job to correct the mistakes of authors who took matters of fact into their own hands and made assumptions about them, as well as to fix their bad grammar.

The pristine coffeepot and the cleared-away dishes heightened the sense that something about today was different. His

mother's dream, the new blouse, her sudden interest in running errands and tidying up . . .

Thomas felt a grabbing sensation in his stomach. It was different from the one he'd asked Mrs. Evans about and that his mother called "butterflies." It also didn't feel like what Helen called butterfly kisses—when she'd tickle his cheeks with her eyelashes. This sensation was more like . . . George grabbing Thomas's shirt and pulling on it. Or the way his stomach felt when his father told his mother they had to go back to the doctor because "This medicine's not working, Helen. We need to try something else so you will feel better."

Maybe they were caterpillars—more than one, by the feel of it—crawling along the lining of his stomach.

"I'm going to try your mom," Thomas's father said, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. "If I don't reach her, I'll call your aunt."

Chapter 5

BEFORE

The day Giselle had let Frenchy escape into their yard and Mrs. Evans had informed his class about the stomach having a “second brain,” Thomas came home to find the small rug they used to wipe their feet thrown outside on the driveway. He stood there a moment, looking at it curled over on itself, registering that his second brain did not like what he saw.

Thomas always entered his house through the side door. Just inside, on the landing, his father had installed hooks for their coats and Thomas’s backpack, and placed a plastic tray for boots underneath. From the landing you could go either up to the kitchen or down to his father’s office.

Once Thomas had opened the door and stepped inside, he was attacked by the living floor mop known as Frenchy. Moaning, the dog threw himself at Thomas’s legs. Was he happy or miserable, Thomas wondered, leaning over and trying to find some eyes in all that fur. What he discovered

was a piece of twine attached to the dog's collar and the banister leading downstairs. Thomas undid the twine from the banister and he and Frenchy went upstairs into the kitchen.

There was Helen with her back to him, standing at the sink.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

She turned at the sound of his voice. "The Dovers' dog got into our backyard." Helen's eyes followed Frenchy as he scooted over the floor like he was on the trail of the biggest varmint ever.

"You have to take him back, Thomas, as soon as they come home. Your father left a message on their machine."

"You don't like having him here?"

"Oh, it was fine until he started lifting his leg . . . well . . ." Helen shut the door that led from the kitchen to the hall, closing Frenchy in. "He can't settle. It must be all the new smells."

Thomas sat on the floor and crossed his legs. "Here, Frenchy. Here, boy." Thomas called to the dog, but he was headed for the pantry. "What kind of dog is he?"

"A mutt, surely." Helen sat sideways on a kitchen chair, her chin perched on the chair back, watching the dog's progress. "I would say Frenchy is . . . a cross between a Pekingese and, maybe with his tracking obsession, a schnauzer?"

Just then Frenchy burrowed into Thomas's lap and lay there panting. Helen got down on the floor next to Thomas, adjusting her skirt and letting her long legs stretch out under

the table. Sensing double the attention, Frenchy rearranged himself to sprawl over both their laps, his head in Helen's and his hindquarters with Thomas.

"Do you think he's hungry?" Helen asked Thomas.

As if in response, Frenchy began to lick her fingers. "He's really quite sweet," she said, rubbing the top of his head. They sat there in silence for some time, petting Frenchy top and bottom. Thomas remembered Giselle's comment about petting dogs and nursing babies, and he didn't know if he imagined it, but it seemed like something inside his mother relaxed. She was looking at the cupboard opposite almost as if it were a window, one with a view that pleased her.

And she was talking—quite a bit . . . for Helen.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she might like a dog when he heard his father's step on the stairs and the words "Helen, are they home yet?" And Giselle was opening the side door without knocking—all at the very same time.

She must have run straight into Mr. Moran, because the words that came out of her mouth were, "*Je suis vraiment désolée, Monsieur Moran. I'm so sorry to bother you—*"

At the sound of her voice, Frenchy did a squirmy roll off their laps and Thomas scrambled to his feet.

But Helen stayed where she was—her skirt hiked over one knee.

Giselle rushed up the steps, swooping Frenchy into her arms and bringing energy into the house.

And light.

That's how it felt to Thomas.

Sliding onto the floor beside Helen, Giselle put her flushed face up next to his mother's and exclaimed: "Merci, *Madame Moran!* Thank you! What might have happened to poor Frenchy had you not intervened?"

"Helen, get up," said Mr. Moran. "Let me help you." But when he held out his hand, it was like Helen didn't even see it; he had to bend down and take hers from her lap.

Giselle pretended to be busy with Frenchy, but Thomas saw her watching them—saw her making up her own mind about things.

"I would stay and chat, but...oh!" Suddenly Giselle's mouth was full of fur.

"Thomas." Mr. Moran touched the sleeve of his son's shirt, directing him to Giselle's side. "Help Giselle home. And next time, Giselle, I'd appreciate it if you used the front door."

More than anything, Mr. Moran wanted to restore order: to push Giselle out, make Helen a cup of tea, and sit her down at the kitchen table.

Thomas studied his mother's face; she now looked the way she did most days, like clouds were passing over the surface of her eyes, like clouds reflected in water. So he walked out after Giselle, choosing to remember his mother's expression only a few minutes before, when she'd sat petting the dog on her lap.

"This dog is too much!" Giselle said, handing over Frenchy and linking arms with Thomas.

Thomas had to concentrate to hold tight to Frenchy and

the twine. As they walked up to Giselle's house, she produced a key from her pocket.

"Don't let go," she warned Thomas. "I'll never catch him. Il n'a pas de discipline—he has no discipline. Come in!"

Thomas had never been inside the Dovers' house, had only glimpsed it when he and Martin trick-or-treated with Aunt Sadie through the neighborhood. Now, even on this gray day, Thomas walked into a room filled with sunshine—walls the color of butter, and red and pink pillows lined up on the bench where Giselle sat to take off her jacket and boots. He put Frenchy down.

"Good boy, Frenchy, *mission accomplie*," Giselle said. "Do you think he made your mother feel better, Thomas?"

Thomas shrugged and asked, "Why do you talk in French so much?"

Giselle tilted her head to look at him, then patted the bench beside her. Thomas didn't sit down; he wasn't planning to stay.

"Because it sounds beautiful to me," she said. "Don't you agree?"

He did. "It reminds me of a chef on a cooking DVD that my mother and I used to watch together. He speaks French."

Technically, Philippe Duprée spoke in English, but he had a French accent. Just watching the DVD, Thomas had felt transported on a river of words. Closing his eyes and listening to Philippe gave Thomas a shivery feeling on the back of his neck.

“Why don’t you take off your coat,” Giselle suggested.

“I better go home.” Looking around, Thomas realized that he did not want to. The color was seeping into his skin here. It felt . . . cinnamon. No, it smelled cinnamon. Or maybe it made him feel the same way cinnamon did, which was to remind him of baking and other nice things.

“Why? Your dad knows where you are.” Giselle took out her cell phone and called her mom to tell her she was home. Even though he hadn’t taken off his coat or boots, Thomas followed her into the kitchen with Frenchy at his heels, the twine trailing behind him.

“You can free Frenchy while I make us some hot chocolate. Not the powdered kind. That is a crime. My recipe is from Café Angelina on the rue de Rivoli in Paris.”

Thomas barely heard what Giselle said, he was so struck by the Dovers’ kitchen, with its walls the rosy color of the sky when the sun was rising.

“Is this glass?” he asked Giselle, running his finger over the surface of the pale green counter.

“Yes, it’s made from recycled glass.”

“Won’t it . . . break?”

“Thomas, you look so worried. Of course it won’t break. Watch.” Giselle smacked her pot onto the counter. “See?”

He did see that and a watery reflection of himself. For a moment, he thought he’d like to press his forehead against its coolness. The counter reminded him of the little bits of glass

he collected on a vacation to the beach, the kind that had been polished by waves and sand.

Giselle picked up Frenchy and placed him on the countertop. “Time to free this dog.”

It seemed wrong to Thomas to put the dog on the counter, but he located the twine and began to untie it.

“Your mom should drink this,” Giselle said, getting a pan out of the cupboard. “It’s comfort food. The secret ingredients are patience and time. Patience—as my mother would say—is in short supply around here.” Giselle poured milk into the pan, unwrapped a bar of chocolate, broke pieces of it into the milk, put it on a burner, and turned on the flame. “But your mom has all the time in the world, doesn’t she?”

Thomas ran his finger along the lip of green glass. Even his father would have to agree with that statement.

“Now. While we wait, I’m going to assess you.”

“Assess me? Why?”

“Because children who live in households with parents who are depressed have three times the risk of becoming depressed themselves. Don’t worry. It’s easy. Sit down and I’ll be right back.”

Thomas didn’t want to sit on the stool beneath the counter, the one Giselle patted, and be assessed. He thought he should go home and do his chores, but where had she gone? Could he just leave? With a dog on the counter and something on the stove?

Giselle returned with an oversize book before he could escape. She put Frenchy on the floor and perched on the stool

next to Thomas. Opening the book titled *The BIG Book of Funny Things*, she said: “I’m warning you, they’re not that funny; that’s part of the test. Okay, here’s one. ‘Why did half a chicken cross the road?’ ”

Glancing at Giselle, Thomas could see that the dimples at the sides of her mouth had deepened, but she kept her lips pressed together to keep any sound from escaping.

“‘To get to its other side,’ ” Giselle read. She looked at him expectantly. “Well?”

Thomas smiled at her. “It’s kind of funny,” he said.

Giselle flipped a page. “Okay, here’s a better one. ‘What did zero say to eight?’ ” When Thomas didn’t answer, Giselle said, “‘Nice belt,’ ” and looked up quickly to get his first reaction.

Thomas smiled for her again.

She tilted her head. “Maybe a knock-knock joke. Knock, Knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Little old lady.”

“Little old lady who?” Thomas asked obediently.

Giselle was staring at Thomas. He knew looking away wasn’t good. People looked away when they weren’t telling the truth. He concentrated instead on the fringe of her eyelashes.

Reaching over, Giselle grabbed Thomas’s knee. “I didn’t know you could yodel.” She tried to hold it in, but the laughter spilled out of her mouth. Shoulders shaking, Giselle said: “Come on, Thomas! Little-o-lady-who,” she sang. “It’s silly but silly-funny, don’t you think?”

Thomas didn't know if the jokes were funny, because he wasn't thinking about them. He was thinking about what Giselle said earlier. As casually as someone would talk about the weather, the word "depressed" just rolled out of her mouth. They never said that word at Thomas's house. There were a thousand names for it: "sad," "tired," "low," "head-ache," "blue," "down," "moody," "sleepy," "exhausted," "not well." But never "depressed."

"Oh, Thomas." Giselle let her book drop and rested her hand, once again, on his knee. "It's worse than I thought."

But before Thomas could answer she pushed the book away on the counter and scrambled to her feet. "*Mon dieu!* Our hot chocolate!"