

## **Time Flies**

*Her mother was sitting in the living room when Ellie came into the apartment. Her chair faced the glass doors and windows that overlooked the ocean. There was a balcony out there, not twenty feet away, and if she had wanted to, her mother could have sat out on the balcony. She could have felt the warm sunshine on her arms and face and the cool ocean breeze that blew by now and then. She could have tasted the salt in the air. She could have looked out over the ocean and seen the light sparkling on the crests of the waves. But Ellie's mother was not sitting outside on the balcony. She was sitting inside, in a dark living room with no lights on and with the curtains drawn over the glass doors and windows.*

*"Why don't we go outside?" Ellie asked.*

*Her mother did not answer.*

*"It's so nice out," Ellie walked around the armchair and stood in front of her mother. "Come on Mom. Let's go outside."*

*Her mother, who had been staring ahead blankly, now moved her head very slightly in Ellie's direction.*

*"Look at me, Mom," Ellie said. "It's me, Ellie. Look at me."*

*Her mother looked at her.*

*"Mommy," Ellie sank down on her knees in front of her mother, "Come outside with me, Mommy."*

*Her mother smiled a strange, twisted little half-smile and shook her head slightly.*

*"Come outside with me," Ellie repeated.*

*"Don' wanna," her mother said. Her voice was so strange these days. A tight little voice filled with anger and fear and panic. She rarely spoke, but whenever she did, she sounded so ... so panicky.*

*"It'll be all right," Ellie said. "I'll come with you. Just right outside here."*

*"Don' wanna," her mother said again.*

*"Why not?" Ellie asked her.*

*Her mother shook her head.*

*"Tell me why not?" Ellie said with a slightly more demanding tone.*

*But she knew she was wasting her time. Her mother's eyes had drifted away from her, and Ellie could see that she was gone again. Gone far away from Ellie and this living room and this day. Gone someplace else where no one bothered her and she was never called upon to do anything. Gone to the Land of Don' Wanna.*

When she was a little girl, Ellie thought her mommy was the best mommy in the whole world. It wasn't just that Mommy was pretty and sweet and nice to everyone, although all of that was true. It was that Mommy had a way of making Ellie feel as if she also was pretty and sweet and special. "You're Mommy's little precious," Mommy would say to her and Ellie knew she was.

In those days, it seemed to Ellie that Mommy had infinite patience and understanding. When something was broken, Mommy fixed it. When something was wrong, Mommy made it right. It was Mommy who comforted you when your tummy hurt or your head ached. It was Mommy who hugged you goodbye every morning when you went off to school and who hugged you hello again when you came home.

Mommy was, Ellie believed, just about perfect in every way.

When was it that all of that changed?

Years later, Ellie tried to remember, to pinpoint the exact moment when Mommy lost her perfection. It was hard to figure out because it wasn't like Mommy went to bed one night all warm and loving and wonderful and woke up the next day a fire-breathing gorgon. That was not how things changed, Ellie knew. That would be too easy. No, change was a gradual thing that you didn't even notice at first. Then, maybe, you did start to notice something, but it was always a small thing. One small thing and then another and then one day, you woke up and realized that everything had changed forever.

It was hard to say when that had begun to happen with Mommy because, Ellie knew, that Mommy was not the only one who changed. Ellie changed also. So, maybe it wasn't so much that Mommy lost her glow of perfection, but that as Ellie grew older, the things that defined perfection in mothers changed for her. As Ellie grew older, it wasn't enough that Mommy was pretty or sweet (because that never changed). It was that Ellie wanted Mommy to be other things. Later, years

later, Ellie decided that although she was not sure when she began to change, it seemed to her that Mommy began to change the summer after her mommy died.

Mommy had been Grandma's favorite. Everyone knew that. Grandma had three children. First came Uncle Fred. Then came Mommy. Aunt Ginny was the baby. But it was neither the oldest nor the youngest who was Grandma's favorite. That spot was reserved for Mommy.

Ellie knew the story well.

Mommy had been born a tiny, premature baby in an era when there were no incubators or other machines to keep tiny, premature babies alive. They said that Mommy had weighed less than two pounds. She was so tiny, they said, that Grandma fed her with an eyedropper, and she actually fit into a shoebox.

"You know, they told Grandma that Mommy couldn't possibly survive," Ellie's father had told her more than once. "But she did. She was Grandma's little miracle baby."

Grandma died in April. After the funeral, the family came to Ellie's house. They sat on couches and chairs in the living room, eating sandwiches and cake and talking in hushed tones about Grandma. It seemed as if the grown-ups didn't want the children to know the circumstances of her death. Ellie, of course, was dying to hear every word so she planted herself in a corner of the room, halfway in the doorway, hoping no one would notice her.

"It's just like my mother, isn't it?" Aunt Ginny said. "She never wanted to be a bother to anyone."

It seemed that Grandma had woken up in the middle of the night, cold and clammy and with the feeling that an enormous weight was pressing on her chest. It was a heart attack, and she knew it, but she didn't want to bother anyone. So, instead of calling one of her children or her doctor or even a taxi, she got up and got dressed and walked down three flights of stairs to the street and then, alone, in the middle of the night, she walked to the hospital.

"They're all like that in that family," Ellie heard her father comment to one of his brothers. "They never want to bother anyone. Their biggest dream in life is to be completely invisible."

*Is that what she thinks? Ellie considered her mother sitting in her chair in her dark living room, staring blankly into space. Does she think if she sits there long enough and she's quiet enough, she will become invisible?*

Two months after Grandma died, Daddy announced one night at dinner that the family would be spending the summer in Oregon. They would drive cross-country and live in a rented house in Portland for two months while Daddy taught at the University. David, who was in high school, would stay behind at his friend Mark's house so he could take the state Regents exams. Then he and Mark would fly out to Portland and spend the rest of the summer with them. In August, they would all drive home together.

In normal circumstances, all of this would have sounded great to Ellie. A trip out West, a summer adventure, even having an extra brother for a few months.

But these were not normal times, because Ellie had just found out that Cathy Fitzgerald, her best friend forever, was moving away in August.

Now, Ellie was thrown into a major quandary. She wanted to go on the trip to Oregon, but she couldn't bear the thought of missing her last summer with Cathy. Finally, Ellie decided she, too, should stay home, like David, and maybe fly out later. If she and Cathy couldn't have the whole summer together, they could at least have a few weeks. But when Ellie told her parents about her plan, they didn't even consider it for a minute.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mommy said.

"Really ridiculous," her father agreed.

Maybe that was the first time Ellie noticed that Mommy had changed. This mommy wasn't understanding or sympathetic or anything. She wasn't even nice. She didn't even pretend to think about Ellie's suggestion. And she didn't even just say no. She had to call Ellie ridiculous on top of everything else.

The stage was set. The scenery was in place. The costumes were ready.

Ellie and Mommy, Act II.

"I don' wanna go to Oregon," Ellie whined night after night at the dinner table.

(Yes, it was true. Mommy was not the first or only member of the family to linger in the land of Don' Wanna.)

"Well, I guess that's just too bad," Mommy replied.

Daddy never even bothered to respond.

Ellie couldn't believe how stupid and cruel her parents had become. Was it possible that they didn't realize what they were doing? That June, Ellie had graduated from the fifth grade. It astonished her that her parents did not seem to recognize this as the biggest thing that had ever happened to her. It was, she and Cathy told each other again and again, the end of an era. But even if it wasn't all that, it was the end of elementary school. For six years, Ellie had gone to the same school with, for the most part, the same kids. Main Street Elementary had seemed so enormous when she began. It was funny how the old school building got smaller and smaller every year. By the end of fifth grade, Ellie and her friends really felt like they ruled the school. Maybe it was not such a big deal to rule a school in which no one was over the age of eleven, but it was a big deal to them. Now they would have to start all over. Once again, they would be the youngest and the smallest and the dorkiest. And this time, Ellie would have to do it without Cathy. The very thought filled her with... well, maybe not dread exactly, but queasiness, anyway. And why not? Ellie was about to face junior high without a best friend.

It just wasn't fair.

Everyone had a best friend. Even Tommy Reilly who laughed like a hyena and had a haircut like a prison inmate and had never once given a correct answer in class had a best friend.

All right.

Granted.

Tommy Reilly's best friend was Artie Schiff, who looked like a spider and had one eyebrow and was even dumber than Tommy. Still. He was a best friend.

Sometimes, when she thought about it, Ellie would close her eyes and picture the children entering Stafford Junior High School that first day in September. The sun would be shining; the sky would be blue and perfect. The children would enter the school, walking up the broad stairway to the front door, two by two by two by two....until it was her turn. Two by two by two by two by two by ....one.

Everyone holding hands with their best friend.

Even Tommy Reilly and Artie Schiff.

Now, Ellie knew that was ridiculous. Tommy Reilly would no more hold hands with Artie Schiff than he would answer a question correctly in class. So, Ellie knew that what she saw in her mind was not going to happen. Not literally, anyway. But symbolically..... well, that was another story.

Losing Cathy was a shocking blow, but Ellie had figured that at least the two of them would have the whole long summer to hang out and swap secrets and make plans for the future when they would run away from their boring suburban families and live in Greenwich Village and be beatniks. Both Ellie and Cathy were completely fascinated by beatniks although neither one of them actually knew anyone who would qualify as a beatnik. Well, not unless you counted Maynard G. Krebs, and Ellie wasn't sure you could count him since he was a TV character and not a real person.

"We'll live in a garret and wear black clothes and drink cognac," Cathy said, only she pronounced it cog – nack.

"What's a garret?" Ellie asked her.

"I don't know," Cathy admitted. "I think it's a basement or maybe an attic. But beatniks live in them."

"What's cog-nack?" Ellie asked.

"It's French beer, I think," Cathy said.

"Oh, okay," Ellie nodded in agreement. She was so embarrassed. Cathy knew so much more than she did. It was a wonder they were best friends. Cathy was the only fifth grader Ellie knew who actually read the **New York Times**. That was why she knew about stuff like cog-nack and other things, too. Ellie was kind of ashamed to admit that most of her knowledge of the world came from TV shows. Cathy, on the other hand, knew almost nothing about that world. Her family didn't even own a TV. Now, that was really shocking to Ellie. Everyone she knew had a TV, even her grandmother, who only watched horrible stuff like Art Linkletter. But then again, Cathy's parents were kind of strange. Her mother made all of Cathy's clothes and baked bread and even made ceramic bowls in a kiln in her basement.

"Cathy's mom has a kiln," Ellie told Mommy one afternoon.

Mommy was sitting at the kitchen table reading the New York Times.

"Oh my," she said without looking up.

What is the matter with Mommy, anyway? Ellie wondered. All she does is sit around reading the newspaper or watching television. Why doesn't she bake cookies or make bowls or sew dresses or do... well ... anything?

Why isn't Mommy like she used to be? She doesn't hug me anymore in the morning. She doesn't even get up in the morning before I leave anymore. And when I come home, sometimes she's not here. And sometimes when she is here, she's lying down upstairs in her room with the door closed.

Ellie just couldn't understand it. Each day Mommy seemed less and less like herself. She didn't yell or scream or throw things or anything like that. It wasn't that she had become someone else. It was that the person she was seemed to be fading away.

In Ellie's memory, always, that trip to Oregon was a total nightmare. Daddy assumed the persona of Professor Know It All while Mommy morphed into the endlessly complaining Mrs. Fuss Budget. As for Ellie, well, most of the time she felt like her parents didn't even know she was there.

Ellie had decided that if she was going to have to go to Oregon with them, she was going to travel light and fast. She had a fascination with speed and lightness then. She longed to move swiftly and mysteriously through life, provoking wonder and amazement from all who crossed her path. She would be like Natty Bumppo in *the Last of the Mohicans* or one of those brave and plucky immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. All of her worldly goods would be wrapped up in one small bundle. She would be light and free, like the very air of summer.

Her parents had no such ambitions. They hung a clothing rack across the backseat of the car and on it they hung enough jackets and dresses and pants, it seemed to Ellie, to open their own decent-sized boutique. Then they filled the trunk of the car with suitcases, but there were so many of them that several didn't fit, so these also were piled into the backseat. By the time they were finished, there was barely enough room for Ellie to squeeze in, and she had to share the tiny space with her dog, Mimi.

"Why can't Mimi ride in front with you?" Ellie demanded. "You have more room than I do."

"Mimi is your dog," her mother said, as if that explained it all.

But Ellie knew that wasn't the reason why. The reason was that Mimi had bad breath and got twigs and dirt caught in her fur when Ellie took her out of the car for a walk and there was no way Mrs. Fuss Budget was going to drive 3,000 miles with a dirty dog breathing fire in her face.

*Ellie had come to Florida two days after her father called. "I'm worried about your mother," he told Ellie on the phone. "She's not acting right."*

*Ellie hardly knew what to think about that statement. It had been a long time since Mommy had "acted right" in her opinion, but Dad was not one to dwell on unpleasantness. Every time Ellie called, he told her that Mommy was doing better, walking around more, talking more, getting a little better each day. Ellie could see now that none of that was true. Mommy walked from her bedroom to the chair in the living room and back again. In the two days since Ellie had*

*arrived, Mommy's only words had been "Don' wanna," a phrase issued in response to pretty much every request made of her. If this was getting better, Ellie hated to imagine what Mommy was like when she was worse. But of course, Ellie didn't have to imagine it. Mommy was not acting right. That was why Ellie was there.*

*"I bought her a little stuffed dog," Dad told Ellie. "I thought it would remind her of Mimi, maybe cheer her up a little."*

*Mommy had always liked stuffed animals. Far more than real ones. Stuffed animals did not track dirt on the carpet or throw up on the kitchen floor or pant their bad breath all over you.*

*"She woke me up in the middle of the night," Dad told Ellie. "She told me to get rid of the dog. She said he was staring at her and growling at her."*

*Oh God.....*

*"I saw she had moved it all the way to the far corner of the bedroom and turned its face to the wall, but she was really afraid of it," Dad said.*

*Oh God...*

*"What did you do?" Ellie asked.*

*"I threw it down the garbage chute," Dad said. "I made her come to the kitchen with me so she could see me get rid of it. She felt better after that. At least I think she did. She went to sleep, anyway."*

So Ellie rode in the back with Mimi, who sometimes curled up on the floor, but far more often preferred to sit on Ellie's lap, making Ellie even more hot and

sweaty than she was. The car was not air-conditioned, and even with all the windows open and zipping along at a good speed on the highways, it was hot and sticky and uncomfortable. And anyway, where did Mommy get off with that stuff about Mimi being Ellie's dog?

For years, Ellie had begged her mother for a dog. Ellie was madly in love with dogs. All dogs. But very specifically, she was in love with Lassie. Later on, it occurred to her that maybe it was Tommy Rettig, who played Jeff on the original Lassie show that she was actually in love with, because when Tommy Rettig left and Lassie became the property of a younger, blonder kid called Timmy, Ellie's interest in the show waned quickly. Possibly, she had simply outgrown dog shows by then, but it didn't matter because the point was, when she had begged Mommy for a dog all those years, the dog she had in mind was Lassie. But Lassie was a collie and collies had long hair that had to be brushed and they shed all over the furniture and their big, wagging tails were sure to knock over and break things. So, instead of Lassie, the noble collie who foiled bank robbers and saved children when they fell into wells and got lost in abandoned gold mines, Ellie, on her tenth birthday, was presented with Mimi, a little black poodle who, Ellie knew at once, would never foil a bank robber or save her if she fell into a well or got lost in an abandoned gold mine.

"Why did you get me a poodle?" Ellie whined. She couldn't believe it. After all those years of begging for a dog, this was what they got her.

"What's wrong with a poodle?" Mommy asked. "You know, poodles are very stylish. Besides, she was on sale."

It was 1960, the end of the fifties. Poodle chic was at its height. And besides, Mimi had been on sale.

Still, a dog was a dog. Man's best friend and all that. In fact, once Cathy was gone, Mimi might, indeed, be Ellie's best friend.

The problem was that Mimi was not much of a friend. Oh, she liked to sit on Ellie's lap in the car and sometimes she even slept in Ellie's bed at home, but Mimi wasn't fun. She wasn't the kind of dog you went off in the woods with for the day and had adventures. When you took Mimi out of the house, you had to take her on a leash or she would just run away for hours. And Mimi hated being on a leash so when Ellie did take her out, she spent most of the walk pulling and being pulled and getting tangled up in the leash and ... well, it was just no fun. After a while, Ellie didn't take Mimi out for walks at all. That was why it was funny that Mommy said Mimi was Ellie's dog. Because in reality, she was Mommy's dog. Mommy was the one who fed her and took her out for walks. And somehow or other, when Mimi went out with Mommy she didn't get all crazy and she actually walked along pretty well.

They had a special relationship, Mommy and Mimi. Mommy liked to go for walks, but in the suburbs in the 1960s, mommies didn't go walking around aimlessly. Mommies drove everywhere they went, and they always had a destination. Mimi was Mommy's beard. As long as Mommy had Mimi with her, she could go out on long, aimless, mind-numbing walks in the afternoon.

*Mimi was her Valium before there was Valium, Ellie thought.*

*Of course, later on there was Valium. And after that, when Ellie was a grown up, Mommy really snapped. Daddy was convinced that Mommy was just feeling sad and that a visit to one of her children would cheer her up, so he somehow got her packed and ready and into the car and then he drove five hundred miles to Ellie's brother David's house in Virginia. David was the one who called Ellie.*

*"You better come down here," he said on the phone. "Something is really wrong."*

*And Ellie flew down to Virginia the next day and there was Mommy, sitting at David's kitchen table, staring blankly ahead of her.*

*"Mommy?" Ellie had said and knelt down in front of her.*

*And Mommy looked right through Ellie, as if she wasn't even there.*

*Daddy and David and Ellie drove Mommy back to Florida together (another endless, nightmarish road trip) and then Daddy took Mommy to the hospital and they kept her there for three weeks. She was so embarrassed when she finally came home again.*

*"You must think I'm crazy," she kept saying and she wouldn't look any of them in the eye.*

*They gave her Prozac then, and later on other things. Pills to go to sleep and pills to cheer her up and pills to calm her anxiety and fears. Daddy measured them out for her every day in a rectangular shaped plastic box.*

In the car, on the way to Oregon, Professor Know It All pointed out points of interest (at least to him) as they drove along. This was the town in Pennsylvania where his eccentric cousin Barney got lost one summer in 1936 (what he was doing in Pennsylvania in the first place was lost in the mists of time and never clearly explained to Ellie). But anyway, Barney took a train out to Pennsylvania and then somehow got completely turned around in the station a few days later and when he should have boarded the train back to New York, he instead boarded a train heading for Chicago and once he realized his error he just decided to keep going and the first any of them back in Brooklyn knew of it was when a week later they received a post card from Los Angeles signed "Wrong Way Barney."

"Like Wrong Way Corrigan," Professor Know It All said and, in the back seat, Ellie sighed, because now she knew she was going to hear the history of Wrong Way Corrigan, some retard who back in the 30s had flown an airplane in the wrong direction and ended up in England instead of California or California instead of England or whatever it was.

Then, of course, there was the town in Iowa where Professor Know It All had gone to college for a year and the town in some other state where someone he knew a million years ago came from and the town in yet another state where something totally stupid like the staple gun was invented.

Professor Know It All drove and told his stories and Mrs. Fuss Budget complained about each and every motel room they stayed in (too small, too shabby, too noisy) and the trip in general (I'm so tired of sitting, my back is killing me, it's so hot in here, will we ever get there, this was a bad idea...).

I told you so, Ellie wanted to yell out. I told you I didn't want to come on this stupid trip.

But there she was, stuffed into her small space in the back with a hot, panting dog on her lap or on her feet or in her face.

*It was funny how years later things looked so different. She had thought Mimi was the dopest dog ever, but then years later, when her pocketbook was stolen, the only thing she felt bad about was that her wallet was taken and in the last page of the photo compartment she had carried around a picture of Mimi.*

*"Now I have no pictures of Mimi," she had cried to her husband Vin.*

*"I thought you hated that dog," Vin said, clearly more concerned about the \$200 that also had been in her wallet.*

*"You don't understand anything," Ellie wailed.*

*Maybe Vin was right. Maybe she should have been more concerned about the loss of her money, about the annoyance of having to cancel and reapply for all of her credit cards, about the total pain in the butt it would be to get a new driver's license. And Ellie was bothered by all of those things, but when she woke up in the middle of the night and went into the bathroom so she could give in to the urge to cry that had been gnawing at her all day, she knew she was not crying about her money or driver's license or American Express card.*

*"Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone...."*

In Oregon they lived in a small rented house in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Portland. Mrs. Fuss Budget thought the house was too small, lacked proper ventilation and was on an ugly street. Somehow Ellie was not surprised. Professor Know It All listened to Mrs. Fuss Budget's complaints, assured her that they were only going to be there for six weeks anyway, and then took off for his new office.

"Well, that's just like Dad, isn't it?" Ellie's mother said to her. "He never cares where we live as long as it's near a library."

"Well," Ellie said slowly, "it is only for a few weeks."

"It's funny how that argument didn't apply to you when you were whining about coming on this trip," her mother said.

"Well, I ..." Ellie tried to think of a snappy retort, but it didn't matter anyway. Mom was off on something else now...

"I hope no one thinks I'm going to clean up this pig pen," she said, surveying the living room, which looked perfectly all right to Ellie.

"You don't have to clean this house," Ellie said. "No one cares about that."

But Mommy, of course, was already pouring Spic 'n' Span into a bucket.

*Mommy cried when Ellie went away to college. The way Daddy told the story, that was the whole point, not that Ellie had gone to college, but that Mommy had cried the whole 400 miles home.*

*"She started crying the minute we left Boston and she didn't stop until we pulled into our driveway," Daddy would say as he told the story again and again through the years.*

*Ellie was always confused by this anecdote. Was she supposed to feel guilty for going away to college? Was she supposed to admire her mother for crying for 400 miles? Just what was it that she was supposed to feel?*

Ellie got sick in Oregon. They went out for dinner one night to a Mexican restaurant. Ellie had never had Mexican food before. She had the enchiladas and she thought they were pretty good, but then later, in the middle of the night, her stomach began to throb and ache and the next thing she knew, she was in the bathroom giving it all up again and again and again.

And Mommy was there, right there with her, holding her hair back out of the way and making her lie on the cold tile floor between bouts and wiping her hot, fevered face with a cool, damp cloth.

"I'm sorry," Ellie kept saying. "I made a mess ... I'm sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mommy told her. "That doesn't matter."

And she sat up with Ellie all through the night and when morning came, she put Ellie back in her bed, between cool, clean sheets with a compress on her forehead and she sat in a chair beside her bed for hours -- it must have been hours because every time Ellie woke up, Mommy was still there.

"I'm sorry about Cathy," Mommy told her later when she was feeling better and sitting up and sipping some ginger ale.

Ellie shrugged her shoulders.

"I know it's hard, but you'll make new friends in junior high," Mommy said.

Ellie shrugged again.

"I'm sorry about this trip, too," Mommy said. "I know you didn't want to come, and to tell you the truth, neither did I, but Daddy needs to be here so we just have to make the best of things."

Why did she do things like that? Ellie wondered. Just when she made up her mind that Mommy was horrible and terrible and completely selfish and that she didn't love Ellie at all, Mommy would turn around and suddenly be all understanding and caring and loving and Ellie would feel like she was six years old again and her mommy was the best mommy in the world.

*It's funny, Ellie thought, the things you retain from your childhood. You swear you won't be like your mother, but then, when you're not looking, it happens, and you wake up one day and you've turned into some strange creature, half yourself and half her. It was easy for Ellie to count all the ways she was not like her mother. Ellie drove a car. She went to college. She had a career. But it was also a little too easy for her to recognize the ways in which she had become her mother.*

*"How come you never buy the box of cereal that's at the front of the shelf?" Ellie's younger daughter Joanna asked her one day in the supermarket. And Ellie just froze because she knew why...it was the shadow of Mrs. Fuss Budget. And the weird part was that until that moment, Ellie had never realized that she never*

*bought the first box of cereal on the shelf or the newspaper at the top of the pile at the newsstand or the tee shirt on the top of the other tee shirts in the Gap.*

*She also examined every garment she bought, checking the hems and seams, even though in all the years she had mindlessly been doing this, she had never found any flaws, and she emptied wastebaskets compulsively and, while we're on the subject, she replaced toothbrushes far too often.*

*Is this my mother's legacy? Ellie often wondered. Somewhere there are girls who learned how to be liberated women from their mothers. Of course, Ellie thought, I've never met any of them, but there have to be some somewhere. And Ellie did know for sure that there were girls in the world whose mothers taught them to knit or sew or garden or even bake cookies. But this is my legacy, Ellie thought, and I learned my lessons well. I don't paint or sculpt, I don't sew or knit, I can't even bake cookies except from one of those rolls where you cut up the dough and even a chimp can make those. But I am a world-class, certifiable loon.*

Mommy died on a Friday morning. Daddy flew up to New York from Florida with the body. It was Mommy's first airplane trip. Flying was one of those things along with driving a car, having kids sleep over and allowing Ellie to go on overnight trips that Mommy had always been too nervous to do.

Going to funerals was yet another activity that made Mommy unbearably nervous.

"You know," Daddy used to say to her, "if you don't go to other peoples' funerals, they won't go to yours."

Now this was Mommy's funeral, and they were all there -- the aunts and uncles and cousins and friends of Daddy and David and Ellie. Because Mommy hated funerals so much, there was no chapel service, only a short graveyard ceremony. Just before they were all to go to the gravesite, the funeral director asked who would identify the body. Of course, Daddy said he would at once, but Ellie didn't think he should do it alone so she volunteered to go with him.

The casket was still in the back of the hearse. The funeral director opened the top part. Ellie could hear Daddy sigh behind her but she didn't turn around to comfort him. She just stared at Mommy as hard as she could.

*In her head, Ellie could hear their voices, hers and Mommy's.*

*"Why can't I ... something or other" Ellie's voice seemed to be saying.*

*"You'll get too tired, you'll get sick, it isn't nice, what will the neighbors think, it makes me too nervous"...*

*For so many years, Mommy had been the voice of no.*

*And then, in the last year or two, it seemed to Ellie that Mommy seemed to be beyond caring what Ellie did anymore. Ellie told herself that this was because she was, after all, a grown woman, married for many years and with half-grown children, herself. But she knew in her heart that Mommy's growing indifference to her had nothing to do with age or the passing of time. It was one more retreat for*

*Mommy. One more phase of fading away. One step closer to the land of Don' Wanna.*

*It was 40 years since Grandma had died. Forty years of waiting to be her Mommy's little precious again.*

*Ellie stared down at her mother. She closed her eyes and tried to stare even harder behind her eyelids, waiting for the years to drop away, for her to see the Mommy she had lost so long ago, the Mommy who was perfect in every way.*

*When she was little, she never imagined that her sweet little Mommy would change in any way, and then years later, it became almost impossible for her even to remember that Mommy. Now she closed her eyes and forced herself to concentrate all of her energy and feeling on one day, any day, before Grandma died and Mommy began to fade and Ellie stopped being Mommy's little precious.*

"We were married for 57 years," Daddy said to the funeral director. "But it doesn't seem like that. It seems like it was just yesterday..."

"Time flies," the funeral director replied.

*It does fly, Ellie. It flies on wings that beat so hard and so fast - like a hummingbird or one of those bright, beautiful flying insects that only live for an hour or a day. Their wings go so hard and so fast that we can't even see them for what they are. Instead of wings, we just see a blur. You called me Mrs. Fuss Budget behind my back. I know you did. I even knew it then. But tell the truth, Ellie. Later on, you missed Mrs. Fuss Budget, didn't you? Oh I know, she was a*

*real pain, always complaining, always finding fault, always a force of negativity. You wanted a mommy who was fun, who was color and fireworks and music and dancing on the beach at sunset. You wanted a mommy who was the first one on the roller coaster and the last one to go to bed at night. You wanted a mommy who was independent and free and open to every new idea. Do I overstate the case? Maybe. Maybe, my sweet little precious, you only wanted a mommy who let you have sleep over parties every weekend and baked cookies and sewed dresses and knew what to do with a kiln. Am I exaggerating? Maybe. Maybe you just wanted a mommy who lived in the land of yes.*

*But tell the truth Ellie. Later on, you missed Mrs. Fuss Budget, didn't you? Because you didn't know. How could you know? How could any of us know? I was a traveler on a journey without a timetable, without a ticket, without any landmarks along the way to mark the distances I covered in the long, long trip from the land of yes to the land of fog and mist and shadow, the land of invisible magnetic force, the land of Don' Wanna.*

*I want my mommy back, Ellie thought.*

*Yes, I know, because yes, it is true, my sweet Ellie, my good little girl, my very own precious, time flies and none of us ever know what we've got 'til it's gone.*