MISSING KITCHENS

with Binnie Klein

and Marilyn K. Silverman

Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles. At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability—a being who does not want to melt away.

BACHELARD *The Poetics of Space*

On a February night, three days before the unveiling of our father's stone in a cemetery on Long Island, we three sisters (Mickey, fifty-eight, a clinical psychologist; Susan, forty-nine, a university teacher and writer; Binnie, forty-five, a clinical social worker) assembled around Mickey's dining table to diagram the apartments we lived in when we were growing up. The chairs we sat upon were familiar, but that night, as we tilted toward each other, excitedly scrutinizing each other's memories, they seemed perches more than seats. Like neighboring monarchs mapping disputed territory, we prepared to do a gentle battle with the truth, that is, each of our "truths."

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We had our assignment: to write something about bodies, place, and space. We shared the excitement of a first-time collaboration. Vying claims for the primacy and veracity of certain memories kept us laughing and crying as our diagrams of scattered blocks of furniture gave personal orientation to a room, an alcove, a hub of remembered activity. Mickey drew a "chair where I sat to do homework," outside her small Oldest Sister's Room. Susan and Binnie remembered a well-made, yellow leather chair with studded buttons, now given away to relatives; Mickey did not. We all recalled the one bedroom we at one time shared, with a crib nearly flush against a double bed. Our diagrams created open spaces with new angles and vectors onto which the sentiments and perversions of memory laid their claims. "Wasn't the bedroom bigger?" "I thought Daddy's chair was over there." "I didn't know you were still living there then."

Our different birth order in the history of our family and of our culture—Mickey was born before the Second World War, Susie during the first year of the postwar baby boom, Binnie at the dawn of the fifties—ensured that our geographical and familial memories would diverge as well as overlap. Mickey was born in Brooklyn and lived there until she was five, in the "old neighborhood" of Brownsville in an apartment with parents, grandparents, and uncles. Susan was born in Newark virtually nine months to the day after our father's return from the South Pacific, and she did all her growing-up in that city, in the two apartments where all of us lived at one point or another; the first apartment was tenementlike but spacious, in what we now would call the "inner city," the second was just behind the high school, in the racially mixed (Jewish/Black/Italian), lower- to middle-class neighborhood immortalized in Philip Roth's early novels. Binnie, who spent the first fifteen years of her life in Newark, was also the only one of us to experience life in the "suburbs" (a too-bourgeois term for the barrackslike complex adjacent to the New Jersey highway into which our family moved after Susan went away to college).

Once, sometime in the mid-fifties, a local radio show called to tell us

that we would win some wonderful prize (probably two tickets to a downtown movie) if only we could identify the "Garden State." None of us could, although we were living in it. Perhaps it was hard for us to imagine New Jersey, which we knew via Newark, in such Eden-like terms. But, more deeply, we lacked the objective markers that give people a sense of place. During our childhood we were the most truly nuclear family we knew. We belonged to no community groups, no synagogue. Our mother, an émigré to this country at age thirteen and now uprooted from her family in Brooklyn, teetered on the edge of agoraphobia, suffering nervousness and various physical symptoms for most of her life. She died at the age of sixty-three from a series of strokes brought on by an intestinal illness that was never diagnosed, after a year of complaints that her doctors largely dismissed. Our father, a traveling salesman, was gone much of the time; when he returned, he seemed restless to "get out of the house" (to a movie, to New York City, even just for a drive on the highway to fill up the tank). They had both experienced the dislocations of the Depression, World War II, and the loss of their original community; first married to other people—a brother and sister—they had fallen in love at a family get-together and left Brooklyn.

Having come together in a passionate affair and then exodus, our parents seemed unable to ever really settle down. They were witty, warm, fearful, easily offended, superstitious, depressed, addicted to crisis. Our father had a fierce intelligence but was prone to brooding, angry moods over a life derailed by the Depression from its rightful course toward college and a career as a writer. Our mother worshipped, protected, and deeply resented him for their growing isolation and for his petty tyrannies. She loved her brothers and sisters and tried to extend our family to include them, but only rarely could she cajole my father into visiting relatives or going to neighborhood parties. Inside the nucleus of our immediate family, however, the intimacy—if not the communication—was intense. And in 1996, as we sisters sketched our maps to fill in the miss-

ing years, the missing rooms, we grew increasingly aware that being together was our real place.

In our talk, rooms and emotions surfaced and entwined. Memories of furniture gave way to discussions of how a particular armchair was transformed by whether daddy or mommy was sitting in it and how their presence and absence transformed the emotional climate of the spaces. We all remembered holding hands for reassurance and comfort at bedtime, Binnie reaching through the bars of her crib. In our train of associations we were now into dangerous and safe places. At this juncture we discovered, with an eerie jolt, that in sketching diagrams of the apartments we grew up in, none of us could place and describe the kitchens. We labeled the dilemma "The Missing Kitchens" and immediately realized that we had begun this process, this exploration of bodies, space, place, without acknowledging what, for want of a better term, might be described as our shared "spatial" difficulties, difficulties to which each of us might give different names and associate with different fears but which run through the family like physical resemblances, no two features exactly the same but unmistakably of our line.

Each of us has suffered, each in her own way, from a certain heightened consciousness of space and place and our body's relation to them: Spells of anxiety that could involve the feeling of losing one's place in space and time, events that profoundly affected how we existed in our respective worlds and how or whether we moved about in them. Bridges. Tunnels. Elevators. Open spaces. Closed spaces. In an effort to think about "places through the body" in an intimate and collaborative way, we decided to bracket theoretical and clinical questions and move in on these disturbances of self and place by following the associative trails we discovered: missing kitchens, disappearing bodies, presence and absence, safe and unsafe places.

Somewhat arbitrarily, but based on the topics we gravitated toward in our first attempts, we assigned each other one theme to explore more deeply. Binnie, the youngest of us, was still living at home as our mother's world

became more and more limited and her body declined; she has written "Disappearing Kitchens and Other Non-Places." Susan, in the middle, had always experienced her life as a battle between the nesting and traveling sides of her self, and she has associated that conflict with the extremes of our parents' very different personalities; her piece is "The Agoraphobic and the Traveling Salesman." Mickey, who grew up before these parental modes had solidified, when our parents were simply trying to find a place to exist, describes the anxieties of space more existentially; the struggle to find location for oneself, to occupy a place, to know where one is and who one is in space: these are the themes of her piece, "Maps and Safe Places."

The missing kitchens, which set us on our exploration, led us to our parents' lives and the intimate imprints their absence and presence left on our psyches and bodies. But the missing kitchens also ultimately led us to consider larger disappearances and dislocations: cultural diaspora, the attenuation and for some—like us—the virtual disappearance of ethnic culture and religious community, postwar dislocations of gender, the fragmentation and increasing isolation of families. We had always thought of our own family as disconnected from the seemingly more communal and integrated lives around us. Writing this piece, we began to see how reflective our family's history was of a certain cultural trajectory of loss and disorientation. Writing this piece has set our little nuclear bubble down in time and place.

BINNIE: DISAPPEARING KITCHENS AND OTHER NON-PLACES

Is Home a Place? Home and place are concepts that are frequently idealized and imagined in terms that do not give credence to real life. Academic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan says that to know the world is to know one's place; he speaks of "visual pleasures; the sensual delight of physical contact; the fondness for place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past, because it provokes pride of ownership or cre-

ation."[1] I smile thinking of the word "place," since the Brooklyn candy factory where my father worked on the days not spent on the road was referred to by him as "the place," never anything else. He never said he was going to the office, or the factory, just "the place." Yet for my father this "place" bore no pleasure, mostly drudgery and defeat, at the hands of the more successful relatives who ran the company. Of course, many people do in fact experience their "place" in life negatively.

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes that "when we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in [an] original warmth, the well-tempered matter of the material paradise."[2] But a house is only truly safe and idealizable when the people who inhabit it live in a context of the outside world. The fire at the ski lodge feels the best after a day on the mountain. Even in paintings in caves (the earliest homes), the walls of the cave are dotted with depictions of what goes on outside, the hunt, interaction with the larger sphere. These symbolic totems refer to the outside as viewed from within the protected lair. For me, with a mother who was disconnected from the outside world, her kitchen was a place like an elevator, where you could get stuck, or like a great oceanic void, where you could get lost.

Yet even if cave/home/kitchen is a site of despair or fear, in the midst of a panic attack the idea "I must get home" becomes the only possibility for escaping the mind-numbing terror and confusion generated by a flood of chemicals in the brain. Then home is imaged as the safe harbor, where one will calm down, reconstitute, regain composure, remember and therefore potentially reexperience oneself as a competent entity traveling through space. Home becomes a floating anchor. Memories can soothe; the infant's thumb recalls the mother's breast. But is home a place? What if the sense of safety does not refer to a place at all but to a collection of objects, feelings, bodies? I stare at a certain clock and the familiar brightness of the hands recalls my mother's face, as if she, like an object seen every day for many years, ticks on through the object. Throughout my

childhood I took daytime naps with my mother on one twin bed in my parents' bedroom. With one small part of my body in contact with one small part of hers, I could rest. My eldest sister recalls best being able to study on the living room couch, her two sisters on either side of her, leaning casually against her, keeping her anchored in place.

Simulations of the peace given by these moments of contact are projected onto the floating anchor of the home, the site of remembered juxtapositions. Yet the same sites of comfort may also recall places of pain where certain negative exchanges, heightened moments, and their emotional residues have resonated in time and space. These images shimmer with dread, the air charged with ions of anxiety. I remember living rooms in various apartments where we sat, my mother's eyes searching my father's face and gestures for evidence of the start of a dark mood. We were warned not to do anything to bother him. "Upsetting daddy" became a place, as agonized silences, meaningful glances, and tensed muscles imprinted themselves onto the scene. In our living room daddy occupied a certain chair when he was not traveling, and when he sat there the air was heavy with both his cigar smoke and the invisible but palpable tension of his unhappiness. If daddy is home, then mommy feels a certain way. Tense, maybe, but less lonely. If daddy is away and mommy is in the daddy chair, her cigarette smoke is less noxious than his cigar's, but her loneliness is a junior version of his despair. Many feeling states in me were encoded during moments like these while people were sitting in their places, doing very little. The atmosphere left a residue, and the imprint of these fossilized moments remains on my body. The pain of this inheritance becomes a place that is a bodily feeling; pain itself is a place.

Time can create a private space that becomes a place. At 4 A.M., in the living room, the chairs are empty of their people; my parents are asleep in their back bedroom. I am lying on the couch trying to reach sleep by watching a series of late movies until the screen goes blank the way it used to. It is 1968 and I have returned from the larger world called Boston,

where I have dropped out of college, and I am home to rest my head upon the shore of my mother's lap. I have created a place for myself defined by time, in which the vectors link, as personal as a signature, the juxtapositions are sad and claustrophobic, but they are my creation and I am attached to them. My solitude is immense, it fills the room, it is a place of secret thoughts. If someone stirs in the back room, threatening to emerge to get a drink of water in the kitchen, I lose my place.

Entering a Missing Kitchen We have mentioned that we couldn't locate the kitchens in our sketched diagrams. In one sense, perhaps, this absence is not surprising. Viewed as the province of our mother, whose powerlessness was often shown through her dependency and passivity, her inability to drive, her not working outside the home, the kitchen did not offer much comfort. Duncan Hines cakes might sit atop the refrigerator, with names like "Cherry Supreme," occasional interesting meals from the good recipes passed down from my orthodox grandmother might delight us, having my mother wash my long hair in the kitchen sink had a reassuring constancy, long talks at kitchen tables surely must have happened, although I cannot remember any. Perhaps the kitchens are lost because, as feminists have pointed out, such rooms have long served as mere background to the more important places men have traditionally occupied. Yet that background space is the place where family life often centers, where preparation and consumption of food and therefore life itself resides.

Through television we have been imprinted with ubiquitous images of the wife and mother of the 1950s, but they are drained of specificity and particularizing texture. The archetypal housewife/mother (pre-*Roseanne*) spins through our psyches with good-natured grace, in a cotton shirtwaist dress, giving lilting instructions to the rest of the family: "Come on now, dinner's ready!" "Sally, would you pass your brother some potatoes, please?"

"Not now, Hon, I've got to do the dishes." These images, bleached of ethnicity, do not reflect the reality of most people's lives.

The kitchen is where crucial aspects of culture and ethnicity are maintained, but it may also be the site where assimilation occurs. Among the features of the religious community of observant Jews are the potentially meaningful moments created by holiday gatherings and rituals. But our family was insulated, isolated from that community. My only contact with a kosher kitchen was through the orthodox practices of my one surviving grandparent, my maternal grandmother. In the kitchens of religious Jews the arrangement of dishes inside cabinets choreographs the "koshering" of that space: certain dishes for dairy, others for meat, used and washed separately, even the dishtowels. These practices were viewed as extreme in our family; as nonreligious Jews our kitchens were mostly stripped of ethnic lessons from the past. I would perform ordinary yet sacrilegious tasks (cutting with scissors, using electricity) on the Sabbath while my grandmother glared at me. I glared back, suspicious of her foreign tongue, her strange practices, her rigid notions of right and wrong. I shared a tendency that members of oppressed groups are vulnerable to, a view of our own identifying characteristics as unacceptable, "too much," because they mark us for curiosity, judgment, and exclusion by others.[3]

While the Jewish kitchen was "too much" for me, the missing kitchens of our diagrams, once we had discovered them, felt "not enough," hovering like sad balloons whose structure could not be grasped or appreciated. If mother is of the kitchen, and the kitchens are missing, then mother is missing. But our mother, although limited by her anxiety, was not missing for us. Simple absence causes wounds of neglect, a non-space, but ours are not exactly diagrams of neglect, they are diagrams of the pull toward accomplishment, movement, and embodiment and the simultaneous regressive pull backward to stasis, ill-health, fear, disorientation and isolation. On my first day of school I clutched my mother, the teacher pulling my arm while I screamed, "No, I don't want to!" In my mental picture both teacher and

mother want a part of me. I didn't consciously know then that teacher represented the active, external world and mother a homebound passivity. I only knew that in the middle I was in agony, in no place at all.

The missing kitchens, as the rooms of confusion and loss, reflect such tension in spatial terms. When we sisters gazed at our diagrams, the kitchens were difficult to place. They were not completely gone, after all, but they were clouded by a mind-stopping rush of contrary images and emotions: too much, too little, oppressively there and not really anywhere. A space is not filled, something is missing. Is something wrong then? Perhaps what is wrong is that ambivalence makes it difficult to reconcile loss. Anger is a clarifying emotion, one that helps us differentiate and separate. If only the kitchens were . . . angry!! Instead they appear to be lost. "I don't know where I am," we say when we are lost. "I don't know if I am," I say in the boundaryless expanse of nature. I can't feel my borders—the rooms have all merged, there are no maps that apply.

And if the kitchen is the body/belly of the mother, I approach my relationship to my mother's body through the squinty protected vision of my fingers, as if I am watching a slow, plodding foreign film with disturbing images that occasionally poke through. I cannot take it all in at once. My mother's physical presence is a chunky, impenetrable block of tension. Standing, she looked like she was sitting. Sitting, she could be standing; you couldn't bend her. I have no image or memory of my mother assertively angry, and that leaves a hole inside me. The special block my mother's body inhabits in my psyche is how my head feels when I experience a preverbal sensation of my head being too heavy, too thick to bear, or perhaps simply to lift, as if I am an infant negotiating a new stage of physical mastery.

My mother's cooking was lazy. She opened cans, mostly peas, carrots. I didn't eat a mushroom until I was over twenty, and I didn't know what artichokes or avocados were until then either. I felt like I had spent my life eating in a fallout shelter. What was my mother's cooking about? It

was partially about her mother, who was orthodox Jewish, born in Poland, and had lost her husband to a vague tale of the times; a solider, he had gone to America before her, to pave the way, but he was unfaithful and didn't send for her at first. When she did arrive in America, it was with her five children: Regina, Esther, Leon, Arthur, and Bobby. Many years later, widowed, depressed, pining, my grandmother was finally installed in the Brooklyn ghetto in her small apartment. She had never learned English out of that crazy defiance and passion for Yiddish, as if to say, "I refuse to engage with you, although I am here in my body in this country I am not really with you." Grandfather, dead the day after I was born, sat in a framed photograph atop a doily on her television console. In my grandmother's kitchen, meat purchased from the neighborhood kosher butcher and fashioned into elaborate recipes simmered on the stove for hours, fatty, impenetrable, inscrutable.

Tales are told by my sisters of special cooking done by my mother, but by my time she was getting tired and the simmering meat was just too much of an investment in an increasingly irrelevant process unnecessary to modern life. In general, my mother's kitchen efforts were seen as mundane daily events, neither special nor deficient, her cleaning of ashtrays an expected duty. I don't recall any words of thanks from my father. My father's relation to the values of the kitchen was both paradoxical and typical. Although he had been a chief baker aboard ship in the navy during World War II, he never made one meal, prepared one hot drink that I can remember, but always alluded proudly to the apple pie he had baked for 1,200 men. When he suffered in certain years from the discomfort of new teeth made to replace long-neglected ones, he would sullenly push away the plate of food my mother had prepared, muttering, "I can't eat this . . . it's too tough." "What can I make you instead?" she would plead, but by then he was in the rapturous arms of bitterness and martyrdom. Nothing would do now.

My mother's deep and growing fatigue was clearest to me after her

death. We had gone to my parents' last apartment in New Jersey to go through her things and select those items we each wanted. When we examined mother's cabinets, the most heart-wrenching vision for me was of her inexpensive casserole dishes, which on inspection were dirty and stained with marks that suggested her distraction or preoccupations. I took some of the dishes, imagining her in her later years (she lived to be sixty-three) vaguely nauseated, headachy, and bloated. She was a hypochondriac for years, but like the boy who cried wolf, her last complaints were real—and not taken very seriously. She died of a mysterious illness whose only clues, found during exploratory surgery, were a foot's length of gangrenous intestine and a sigmoid adhered to a colon; my father forbade an autopsy. I am now left with the imprecise image of her body as a congested house.

In that last apartment in New Jersey the kitchen had just about disappeared. The last kitchen was a kitchenette without room for a table, without a door, spilling into a small dining "area" without a door, which spilled into a small living "area" without a door. So now from every direction my father could be seen, pushing his meat away at the dining area table or putting his head into his hands after work, while from every direction I could see my mother, seated temporarily in his club chair (she was in the living "area" while he ate because we hardly ever ate together as a family anymore), tensed, inhaling a shallow breath, watching him.

Now I find disquieting the realization that the small carriage house in which I have lived for many years has no distinct rooms on the first level; the open floor plan is like a loft: kitchen, dining, and living areas merge. If there are no accidents in life, as interpreters of behavior would say, then I have architected a repetition of the last setting in which I observed my parents together. I think there is another, more compelling source: I do not have to deal with a separate kitchen. I do not have to deal visually with the loss of my mother or the isolation of her life. And I do not cook, the man in my life does.

Panic "Agoraphobia," I wrote in 1987, "which often develops shortly after marriage, clearly functions in many cases as a way to cement dependency and attachment in the face of unacceptable stirrings of dissatisfaction and restlessness."[4] What I did not write was that my own agoraphobia had developed shortly after my own marriage, into which I had drifted—at age twenty-one and a college dropout—like a sleepwalker, giving up bits and pieces of myself in such small increments (an ambition here, a fantasy there) that I was startled awake one day to discover that I was almost entirely gone. What woke me was my body, whose very being in the world suddenly shifted and changed everything. It was as though I had been in a fog, bobbing in a familiar sea between icebergs unknown to me, and then all at once I was stranded on an enormous one, rising high out of the sea, perched, precarious, desperate for walls to plant my hands against. The physical sensations of panic were so new and frightening—and so seemingly arbitrary—that my only anchoring thought was to get myself someplace where they would stop, where I would be safe. That place seemed to be the dreary, gray Hyde Park apartment in which I lived, without much pleasure, with my husband.

It happened on the Illinois Central, which had been taking me and my younger sister Binnie into the Loop. She was visiting me and we were planning to see a movie. I became faint, but instead of putting my head between my knees as a normal person would do, seeking to restore equilibrium through the trusted processes of one's own body, I responded like a drowning person, my only thought to find air. *I must get off this train. Get me off this train!* In the logic of the panic attack, it makes absolute, unanswerable sense, as places and bodies collude, become one: "If I don't get off this train, I'll faint." "This tunnel is suffocating me." "If I can only make it home, I won't die."

But what gives certain places the power to make panic? Freud theo-

rized that his own train phobia was the result of having seen his mother naked during a train trip from the family village in Moravia to Vienna. But Freud was only one of many late Victorians who suffered from "train neurosis," a condition most physicians of the era attributed to traumas suffered in accidents, abrupt stops, loud noises. In the late sixties the psychiatrists and therapists that I went to, desperate for understanding and help for the baffling and seemingly inexorable thing that was happening to me, were uninterested in the places of my panic; true to their time, they were more interested in the "home" front, arguing that my agoraphobia was the result of my failure to accept my femininity and accommodate myself to marriage.

Only when I began to savor train trips—traveling to colleges later in my life, as a visiting speaker—did I understand the fine line that separates panic and excitement. The charge of leaving home, knowing that your body has been cut loose from the cycling habits of the domestic domain and is now moving unrooted across time and space, always to something new, alert to the defining gaze of strangers . . . What made this terrifying to me at one point in my life and invigorating at another? Victorians, utterly unused to the massive, indifferent, steel power that could bear them from the rural village of home to the noisy chaos of the city,[5] suffered from railroad anxieties and phobias virtually unheard of today. (Do we really need a naked mother to account for Freud's panic?) They had to learn to tolerate the stimulation, the "nervousness," as Freud put it, of modern life. Could it be that my numbed and muffled self, on that train in Chicago, had become a Victorian, allergic to excitement, experiencing any opening of limits, any fluttering of heart, any intimation that the world was far, far bigger than my home, as panic?

The Road The father that Binnie and I knew was a traveling salesman. Everything changed when he came home. Fog would lift, the air became oxygenated as doors opened and the brisk outside rushed in, waking us

up. We would have waited all day, wondering what our presents would be. There would be tiny hotel soaps, plastic dolls dressed in buckskin, pecan pralines, restaurant matchbooks to add to my collection. The thrill of suitcases opening. Whisking away for Chinese food, to an air-conditioned movie. The tenuous delight of the huge, good mood that he would be in for at least an evening as he recounted stories of the brokers who would deal only with him, the fabulous hotels and restaurants they ate in as they did their business, assorted oddballs he had run across. The drama was always high, no matter what the story. We often got giddy. And, as if to verify my parents' favorite superstitious warning—"If you laugh too hard, you're going to cry"—a crash was inevitable. Usually it began with a petty squabble between the kids. Always it escalated to something global, between our parents, and then metaphysical, between my father and God. "Why can't you ever . . . ?" "Why do I have to put up with . . . ?" "What did I do to deserve . . . ?" The downward spiral almost always happened on the way home.

Ever since I can remember, my father's comings and goings structured and colored my sense of time and place, masculinity and femininity, dream and reality. Other kids' fathers were always dependably but boringly around. To me, used to a father who descended only periodically, like Santa, they seemed almost extensions of the other kids' mothers, vaguely and unheroically domestic. They could stop faucets from dripping (which our father definitely could not), but only our father could do the *New York Times* Sunday Crossword—in ink—in a morning. I was proud that my father condescended to join the mundane world as a visitor rather than a regular inhabitant. He loved telling the story of how I, at some impossibly young age, still an infant, amazed everyone at Camp Whitelake by uttering a complete, perfectly grammatical sentence: "My daddy is coming home Saturday!" He would break up in laughter as he underscored what a "midget" I was and how agog the other bungalow dwellers were to see words coming out of my midget's mouth. (There was always a whiff of

the freakshow even in my father's highest praise of us, as though our best talents were signs that we had dropped from another planet.)

What I cannot remember, however, is just how much time he spent "on the road." If I had to do it arithmetically, I'd say he was home one week out of every four. But then when did I get to see all those Broadway shows? Learn to play cutthroat scrabble? Memorize the meaning and portent of his every gesture? Perhaps he was home more than I remember. Or maybe real time only started when he walked through the door. My mother seemed always to be waiting, smoking or dozing in my father's armchair, putting canned goods away, feeding the cat, until called upon to spring into action on his return. She rarely left the house alone, except to buy groceries or occasionally to visit a nearby girlfriend; I have barely a memory of going anyplace with her without my father. School was real enough in its way, but anticipatory, preparatory—for summer, for the next term, for the transformation that would allow my life to really begin. But my father was undeniably present. And he made the external world present for me; he offered it as a bracing tonic against some domestic stupor into which I was continually being lured, a preventive measure against my own disappearance. The Midwest brokers, the hotels, the highway that led from Newark to Manhattan, trains and cars that took you from one state to another; it was as though they had a sign on them: "This way lies life."

And the other door? It's not that easy to say where that door leads. Unlike my sister Binnie, I love cooking, and my images of my mother's kitchen, snapped at an earlier, more communal time in her life, are warmer. In *Unbearable Weight* I wrote of

> the pride and pleasure that radiated from my mother when her famous stuffed cabbage was devoured enthusiastically and in huge quantities by all her family—husband, children, brothers, sister, and their children. As a little girl, I loved watching her roll each piece, enclosing just the right amount of filling, skillfully avoiding tearing the tender cabbage leaves as

she folded them around the meat. She was visibly pleased when I asked her to teach me exactly how to make the dish and thrilled when I even went so far as to write the quantities and instructions down as she tried to formulate them into a recipe (it had been passed through demonstration until then, and my mother considered that in writing it down I was conferring high status on it). Those periods in my life when I have found myself too busy writing, teaching, and traveling to find the time and energy to prepare special meals for people that I love have been periods when a deep aspect of my self has felt deprived, depressed.[6]

Yet for many years, in recovery from the debilitating agoraphobia that kept me housebound for the first part of my twenties, I had to go out for a while every morning before I could settle in to do my studying or writing. I needed that inoculation, that first contact with the outside world before I could feel safe at home. Before I could feel safe, that is, from the lure and illusion of safety, from my inclination to get stuck inside, habituated to a contracted world. Being outside, which when I was agoraphobic had left me feeling substanceless, a medium through which body, breath, and world would rush, squeezing my heart and dotting my vision, now gave me definition, body, focused my gaze. Armored, assured that I was vigorous, of the world, I could return home without fear of dissolving. For a while, my safest places were trains and hotel rooms; I love being en route, and its being someone else's professional business to care for me, bring me my coffee.

But for most of my life, whenever I strayed too far from that domestic world in which I like my mother was the professional caretaker, I would reel myself in, calling on my phobias to help. (Before my Ph.D. orals my panic disorder revisited me, and then again after a year unsuccessfully trying to become pregnant.) At those times it seemed that the most delicious thing in the world would be to be sitting again next to my mother, watch-

ing daytime soaps with her. But she was gone, and I had to console myself by reproducing her world, by bringing her body back through a more recessive invocation of my own. During one of those retreats, I wrote in my journal (only realizing later that I was writing about my mother as much as myself): "There is something touching to me about my diminished state. Puttering around, cooking soup, putting together packages for people I love, my mind gentle and nondemanding, the strict compulsive self gone, I feel a compassion and care for myself as I would for another person but never have before for myself. Who is this person? As I feel myself conquered, accepting my own diminished state and its requirements, the sweetness and dignity of the little tasks I do, desiring nothing more than simple renewal of contact with the world, are like those of a baby."

These cycling patterns led me to believe that I had learned how to move around in the big world from my father, while my mother taught me empathy and intimacy but left me prone to panic. Today I'm not so sure. When I was growing up, it was presented to me as the essence of their personalities that our father traveled and our mother stayed home, that he was bold where she was fearful, that he was autonomous while she was dependent. It was virtually impossible for me to put the indisputable accuracy of these definitions together with the much dimmer, historical facts that my mother had supposedly had a "wild" girlhood and also had worked in the office of a factory during the war—and apparently, had loved it. Vaguely I remember arguments about going back to work, which my father always won. "No wife of mine . . . Never!" (even though he had no life insurance and they couldn't save a penny from his salary toward a house of their own or funds for our education). But I cannot remember who was doing the arguing on the other side. Could it have been my older sister? It's hard for me to imagine it was ever my mother herself. But surely it must have been.

My mother, even when she was most anxious and depressed, would smile at strangers, strike up conversations, flirt with shopkeepers. Once, in a

crowded supermarket, I felt a panic coming on and tried a technique my therapist had taught me. I imagined that everything that was frightening to me—the noise, the crying children, the pushing and shoving—was a warm, colorful blanket like the one my therapist had me imagine in his office, a kind of visual mantra of comfort. The blanket I had imagined was all green and gold and burnt sienna, colors that I recognized as those of a throw that my mother had knit me, rustic colors that still bring my mother to me unexpectedly as I pass by sunlit trees in autumn. In the supermarket I put that blanket around me with a great effort of imagination—and I amazed myself. I really did feel enveloped and calmed by the chattering people in the store who had seemed so alien to me just a moment ago. At the same moment I felt my mother's presence strongly, and I recognized that there was a terrible flaw in my picture of her. Her capacity for human connection, her warmth, was not some compensating factor, developed only to make a small and limited world bearable and less frightening. It was big, it was strong, it was powerful, and it was highly unusual, a remarkable gift. She wasn't afraid of people! She was an adventuress!

Today, looking through a folder of old letters, I found two postcards. Of all the cards and letters I received from my parents, somehow just these two survived. One, sent to me by my father while I was a freshman living in a dorm in Chicago, was from the "Fabulous White Way" of the "World Famous Las Vegas Strip." Inside, via a foldout display of casinos, hotels, and showgirls, it told the "story" of the Strip. My father had written, beside the photo of the Dunes, that he was staying there, and he sent "greetings from the land of lost wages, daughter!" Over the years I had received scores of cards like this from him, exuberant with the romance of travel. But the other postcard startled me. It was from my mother, written to me while I was living in Canada, struggling out of my agoraphobia and splitting up with my husband. It was from Florida, where she had apparently gone—on a plane!—with her best girlfriend at the time. My mother had not been afraid of planes, I now remembered, that was me

and my sisters. But a vacation? Without my father? I couldn't remember it, couldn't imagine it, yet the evidence was in my hand.

The cartoon on the front showed a shapely, tanned woman on the beach, beside which my mother had written "Me," and, separated by a line, a little girl bundled up beside a snowman, beside which my mother had written "You." "I'll shovel sand for you in Florida . . . If you'll shovel snow for me up north," it read, with a space for the temperature, which my mother had filled in at 86 degrees. On the back was her more personal message to me: "Hiya Darling: The flight was smooth as silk. Got a little high and didn't feel anything but happy. Wish you were here. Love from Florence. Say hello to your roommates. Love you, Mom. P.S. Later Dad will come."

MICKEY: MAPS AND SAFE PLACES

Waking Up In the middle of an obscure and heavy dialogue on "geography" as reflected in places, bodies, and madness, one of my sisters tactfully inserted a simplifying question: If they asked you where you were from, what would you say?

I would say: I am from the land of the three sisters—from Never-Never Land—from the near/far planet that sent out small bands of thin-skinned envoys to test their survival skills in the ghetto neighborhood of Newark. I was never, in fact, from anywhere that I actually lived.

I lived inside my family and even then in a private place far from its borders. I have since learned that family is often the conduit of the culture of a place, the specifier of the boundaries of its geography. When family *is* your place—encapsulated in its own climate—you gain a measure of independence from the arbitrariness of local places in exchange for the claustrophobic logic of a tenement apartment suspended above the stores and the street.

I had my maps:

- the map of lost treasures, like the house in Brooklyn that burned down with the Persian rugs, piano, and an immigrant family's newly acquired wealth . . .
- the map of the town and house we would have had if the depression hadn't come and my father's father hadn't been deceived by his nephew, and the war hadn't come . . .
- the map of the lost village in the Old Country where my mother was born, that no one could ever find or pronounce . . .
- the map of the peopled/storied neighborhood in Brooklyn from which my parents fled in exile to live out their "illicit" romance in New Jersey.

No wonder then that they never showed me the way to school, never warned me that Clinton Avenue was a dangerous place, never told me that New Jersey was the Garden State. The most important parts of my mother and father never existed in the places we were living.

I lived inside my mother's body, inside my father's dreams and nightmares. Lived on the shelf next to my books, lived in my books, and it never mattered that we had the best car on the block to take us to the Jersey shore. When I began the project of leaving, I took a bus to the downtown terminal, the Hudson Tubes to Port Authority. I walked across 42nd Street and took the Fifth Avenue bus to Washington Square. I did this five days a week for three years. I never knew that this was hard or unusual or impractical or risky. I calculated the trip as the distance between the bookshelves in my room and the bookshelves in the college library, the distance further foreshortened by the books I carried with me.

When I was attacked and tied to a tree, walking along Riverside Drive at midnight, the police told me I should have known that this was a dangerous place. I knew—frozen by sudden moments of discontinuity and

wordless dread—that I sometimes didn't know who I was. I never realized that I didn't know where I was and that this was something I should have—could have—known: the cradled anchoring in the reality of place, the grounding in the present, the topography of daily living in real/time and real/space.

My books had come with their own maps of safe and dangerous places. My parents, in an effort to protect me which proved to be both misguided and inspired, had left me to my books, believing as I did that my immersion in my books gave me a special status, like a time-traveler in a forties version of virtual reality. Unaware of real dangers but constantly on the alert for the romantic and tragic possibilities of life as described in my books, I navigated the blocks near our apartment with an odd combination of courage and fear and trembling. What were the dangers of an occasional mugging compared to the prospect of being snatched from the London streets by Fagin? Why should I be afraid of the American Indian on the street who was tormenting cats when I was dreaming of sharing a tent with the last of the Mohicans? When I panicked at the sound of air-raid sirens, I was thinking of tidal waves in Japan I had read about in a novel that morning or a piercing call to arms against an alien invasion as recounted in an H. G. Wells story. I traveled with "Lad, a dog" to protect me and a book-inspired notion that if I meant no harm to anyone I would not be harmed, and in fact I never was harmed during my childhood.

As part of the same effort to protect (and prevent me from ever leaving them?), my parents rarely explained or put into context or helped me to anticipate anything contemporaneous with my own time and existence. Mostly I was given, as a very special confidence and charge, the stories of their past life, which I carried inside me like a great weighty epic novel of the Brooklyn streets which had yet to be written. It was a novel about exodus, success, catastrophic financial reversals, passion, scandal. The British may have needed two hundred camels and as many servants to transport the accoutrements of their culture and comfort to the colonies. My father's

family arrived from England with a suitcase and their wits, my mother's father, preceding his wife and children, with a knapsack and a sewing machine. I thought of them all as carrying within them invisible treasures, like a caravan of Russian nesting boxes filled with stories, Jewish lullabies, mandates for humanistic living that were thousands of years old.

I was proud to have European roots. This was a romantic image that tied me to cherished intellectual and cultural values and linked me to the authors of my books. I never really knew until I saw faces like my mother's in a pictorial history of Eastern Europe that in fact my mother had come from another place. She hadn't brought her memories with her or chose not to share them and I had never questioned her silence. When my grandmother tried to tell me about village life in a language I had forgotten, my mother did not translate. When uncles referred in passing to Grandpa's army service she never elaborated. It was in our kitchens that these aborted dialogues took place. It was the kitchen in which I felt my mother's silences most palpably. When I first began to lose the Yiddish in which the earliest experiences of my life were encoded, she never helped me to retrieve it, just as she had never spoken of the first twelve years of her own history in the Old Country. She stopped dressing me in lace blouses and flowered skirts. She stopped wrapping my braids around my head. She stopped baking apple cakes. She never laid claim to the mementos and photographs of her parents' early life. I wonder now if she thought that she had little of real value to contribute to the lives of her American daughters.

When I stepped out of my books and daydreams into real time, I understood finally the nature and scope of the real dangers and losses my parents and extended family had faced. I understood that the air-raid sirens had signaled a real war. I understood that my father, in his romantic naval uniform, had fought that real war in a very remote, very dangerous place in the world. I understood that my mother and other women left at home like a colony of the disenfranchised, negotiating dramas of reappearance and disappearance, were in fact dealing with real danger and real absence,

listening to Gabriel Heater,[7] rationing food, diverting each other with stories of childbirth in their kitchens. When over the subsequent years my mother became increasingly withdrawn and her life constricted, I knew that part of what she had struggled with were actual losses, deaths, separations from family, and I wondered whether any of the psychiatrists whom she consulted had ever dealt with where she had come from, where she was going, and why she got stuck.

I have been tempted at times to see my parents' lives as a contemporary political parable: woman unfulfilled, housebound, man bitter and neglectful, daughters emancipated through education, psychotherapy, and the cultural endorsement of women's work. I had been tempted to think of my mother as a prisoner of her house, with my father, braver and more vital, able to escape into the wider world. Our mandate then seemed to be to get women out of their houses, out of their kitchens, winning for them the mobility that men enjoy. In my childhood I had been exempted from kitchen duties, given the status of a scholar who shouldn't have to be concerned about such things. In this view kitchens are demeaned the way some musicians relegate lyrics to a lesser place than melody and chords. I shared both biases. I saw home and hearth as a bird's nest with its fragments of stuff, used to support life but subordinated to the more important job of flying off and getting on with the real business of living. Now I understand that kitchens matter as the lyrics of melodies matter.

I realize now that both my parents were traumatized and diminished by the dislocations of their lives: immigration, the Depression, war and wartime, personal upheavals of the diaspora, uprootings from their families. My father, although working with persistence and success in the "outside world," traveled with his sample case of stories that were to him possessions salvaged from the destruction of a richer life. Our mother's tragedy was not confinement to her kitchen and women's work but her growing incapacity to occupy her house, to claim it as her own, to inhabit it fully. Her early years in Brooklyn—and mine—had been rooted in family and in neighborhoods.

Friendships were always a part of her life even in the worst period of depression and anxiety; the therapeutic group she joined became her friends. She had deep capacities for sympathetic, loving, nonjudgmental human attachment. But she could not hold onto her entitlement to her own history or the mandates of her own self-development in the face of cultural and emotional dislocations, a possessive husband, and, finally, the threats to the vitality and continuity of memory posed by aging. Our mother didn't disappear into her house, she disappeared within it.

Connections and Dislocations Dramas of spatial meaning and safety from the perspective of self and identity are continuously played out around us. Like a play within a play, people move from point to point following the patterns and routines of apparently practical lives. But they carry with them maps of safe places and safe distances, maps of their internal landscapes, its topography built up of the history of past and present human relationships. These maps designate the way stations where one can be refueled, loved, reminded of one's identity.

Places have always been inseparable from people for me. Syracuse exists on my internal landscape because my sister Susie lived there and when she left, its continuing existence was guaranteed by my purchase of two paintings I loved from people I knew there. New Haven emerges in bold type on my map (Yale University noted in the legend) because my sister Binnie lives there now. Poland will always exist for me no matter who appropriates it because my mother was born there in a town I am still determined to locate on a pre–World War II map. England first came into being as the birthplace of Virginia Woolf, whom I admired. Though my childhood relationship to places was through my books and remote from the real places I lived in, it was still always personal. As a student I found only geography impossible to learn. I could not keep straight places that were not linked in some way to people with whom I had a connection.

Like the famous Steinberg cartoon of the New Yorker's view of the world, with New York City presiding huge and detailed over three-quarters of the map, the rest of the world misplaced and reduced, we all draw the places on our meaning-maps, large or small, depending on our emotional investments and worldview. But for me places hardly existed at all unless animated by memories of people. More intimate spaces take on the same dynamic. I am most aware of the different architectural features of the house my husband and I built as reflections of the preferences and biases of each person who contributed to the design. Objects in my house are links to specific relationships and are therefore always difficult to discard. In stark contrast, on a bureau inherited from my mother-in-law, arranged ever so artfully, visually compelling, sits a collection of shells from oceans all over the world which I discovered at a consignment shop. They seem to belong to no one and their anonymity never fails to be intrusive and disquieting.

I picture each individual's history of human connections as a flow of conscious, unconscious, and embodied memories that are the substrate of the continuity of mental life and the basis of the most fundamental sense of identity. Throughout life, concepts of home base and the safety of other places remain intimately linked to this sense of identity. Knowing where one is, knowing one's place, understanding the nature of real places in themselves requires first a centered self, grounded, embodied in deeply imprinted maps that record the memories of our history of human connections. Like tethers to a dock or a lifeline to shore, this living, internal history protects us from forgetting who we are, helps us to reconstitute when lost. Without that secure housing for self, places can be seen only as a threat to the stability and cohesiveness of the person. Places become metaphors for states of mind.

Spatial metaphors are well suited to capture the phenomenology of the particular form of panic that occurs when the most fundamental sense of existence and connection is at stake. You are on a well-lit stage. The scenery

stands as background and support. You know your lines. Suddenly the stage disappears. The floor drops out. The players and set vanish or persist as unfamiliar figures in another script in which you have no part. You are in a stalled elevator, a traffic jam, on a becalmed sailboat, in confined or open spaces. Suddenly something inside stops. Is it that flow of images of past and present human connections that has been temporarily disrupted, eclipsed, leaving you in a freeze-frame moment of heightened awareness of discontinuity of self and the dread that there doesn't seem to be any way to get back to those way stations that remind you of who you are? Places, to the diminished, ahistorical self, may hardly seem to exist at all.

I try to imagine what my mother's map might have been like in the last decade of her life: a large, featureless area marked with an "x" and a "no reentry" zone and a faceless population, the Old Country; a small place in New Jersey disconnected from the rest of the states; an endless road needing repair leading to a handful of residents on a few named or numbered streets in Brooklyn. The most prominent feature would be the bridges to a few friends and friendly shopkeepers, bridges depicted as spanning hundreds of miles across uninhabited stretches. I can imagine arrows marking the directions her daughters would take in moving away and her husband would follow in his travels. During my visits to my mother that last decade, I always felt anxiety and tremendous sadness at her increasingly constricted life. The road there felt like limbo, an out-of-time and -place stretch of highway, forever foggy. But I never left without feeling oddly revived, reminded of who I was, what I wanted to do with my life, who and what I valued and loved.

Home, as a truly safe place, the container and springboard for integrated living, is the foundation of an ontologically secure existence. While my parents had not been able to provide that, they did give me some very special provisions for establishing roots in my own life in another place. Despite the dislocations, eclipse of tradition, loss of wealth in the Depression, upheavals of wartime, disillusionments of daily living, my parents'

humanity, humor, intelligence, and idealism are after all what I invariably draw on to "place" myself in the universe and what fuels my capacity to survive and prevail, wherever I am. Where am I from? Through the process of writing this piece, I realized that I am from England, Poland, New York, Connecticut; I am from all the places I have lived in and that my relatives have lived in because I bring myself, my family, and my history with me. Periods of crisis in my life, spells of anxiety, have almost invariably been associated with a temporary eclipse of that connection.

Now we three are sitting in Binnie's real kitchen, surrounded by her totems and linking objects, grounded in the real work of our present, real lives. In tracking the missing kitchens together, we have also retrieved something vital that was passed down to us by our parents. Our father's continuing passion for words and stories, his mythic castings of everyday occurrences; our mother's deep perceptions into other people's feelings; fierce family arguments about the interpretation of past events—what really happened, who was to blame—imprinted on all of us a powerful desire to understand things, to give shape to them, to communicate them. Working together, we actualized these values once again as a family and so reconstructed another part of the missing kitchens. Momentary loss of boundaries, intensities of emotion, anxieties of "influence," all those dissolving and resolving challenges and redefining confrontations have not compromised the safety of the place we are for each other. We are holding hands again through the bars of cribs, leaning against each other on flowered couches, this time not to assure our existence but to celebrate it.