

MIDDLEBURY SERIES

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# *New England Review*

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## Severe and Profound

With great difficulty Ellie pulled DJ uphill. At six, her birth-brother, whom she hadn't seen in nearly three years, understood rollerblading to be a matter exclusively of somebody else's exertion. While you labored, he'd stand with his legs a bit too close together, his chest a bit too rigidly upright, and his eyes more than a bit too captivated by whatever birds were darting overhead or leaves were rustling in the wind. Picture a bespectacled two-by-four being wheeled around a park or rink—he was that stiff, that skinny. If the person who was pulling him jerked suddenly or, worse, went down, disaster ensued and DJ would be angry, indeed extraordinarily upset, so the person pulling would have to stand guard as strenuously as he or she would have to skate.

It's not that DJ was lazy or spoiled or even demanding in any conventional sort of way. At this point in his rollerblading career, we had only managed to teach him the basic art of balance. He simply *had* to hold someone's hand if he expected to move. Of course, he seemed to *like* holding someone's hand (especially Emily's or mine or preferably both of ours at the same time), though to use the word "like" is to suggest a more familiar mode of feeling and, in particular, response to the pain of past abuse, neglect, and abandonment. DJ's emotions were all there; they just seemed to be distorted by the autism, like sound, say, by water. Or, to extend the analogy in a manner that doesn't press a normative judgment, DJ was like a dolphin out of water: an exquisite listening device compelled to function in an alien medium.

He loved going fast, which meant the person pulling him would have to work that much harder, but not without compensation. DJ's smile would broaden at the prospect of significant speed, and he'd appear considerably less distracted, as if he, too, understood the greater risk of tangled arms and legs and, thus, the need to concentrate on what he was doing. The true reward, however, was what Emily would call "joint attention." DJ was having fun *with* you. His eye contact would increase, and you'd get a sense of a truly shared activity—albeit a perilous one. It would be an experience of giddy, if wordless, interaction. And yet, exactly as I speak of "joint attention," I must concede that DJ never completely jettisoned his distractedness. Even as he'd be looking at you, you could tell that he was simultaneously lost in the sensation, for instance, of air moving across his cheek.

It was precisely this "here and not here" phenomenon that his birth-sister appreciated in a way that most adults could, and still can, not. At seven, she remembered that to

be with DJ was to be with him on *his* terms without demanding more. You could gently ask for more, as we have made a practice of doing, but he needed—still needs—to feel comfortable. He needed to sense that you were also trying to communicate somehow in his medium. Too much pushing and he'd withdraw.

With amazement, we watched the girl effortlessly reassume the role of facilitator as she directed DJ around the park, like some tiny tugboat on the East River. Already smaller than DJ, she refused to be frustrated by his failure to aid in their ascent up an especially daunting hill. Even more significant, she refused to be saddened by what her brother couldn't give her after their long separation—what he couldn't say or do. But then he *had* given her something. In fact he'd stunned her, stunned all of us, when just before we were to meet on the Upper East Side, he'd spotted his sister a full block away, run up to her, and, like a character in a French movie, placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks. We'd never seen him do this before; we've never seen him do it since. The girl seemed to ride the gesture right into the afternoon, as if it were pulling her.

Yes, there was plenty of sadness, great paved and unpaved mounds of it, but the sadness had nothing to do with DJ. It had to do with the fact that his sister, despite being a very young child herself, had taken care of him when their mother was drunk or high, which was a good deal of the time. Indeed, it was she who'd regularly piloted him through the back alleys of town in search of food, she who'd tucked him into bed at night. But then the process had commenced that had cleaved her from her brother, placing him in the hands of perfect or, rather, quite imperfect strangers.

For months Ellie had sobbed herself to sleep, insisting that her father go rescue DJ. Again and again, the man and his wife had explained to her what foster care was, why DJ was better off with a family that knew how to treat his disability. Though she wasn't aware of the inadequacies of foster care generally or of the beating DJ suffered specifically, she must have sensed, in a way that children always seem to know when grown-ups are lying, that there was something fishy about her parents' explanations.

Now, another bunch of strangers, or at least relative strangers, was taking care of him. The girl feared that we couldn't do it properly, drilling us with questions about his eating habits, his favorite activities, and his peculiar penchant for getting into any make-up that might be lying around. "He especially likes lipstick," she reported, "and he'll draw all over your bathroom mirror. He still does this, right?" She feared that we didn't understand her brother, and yet, in truth, part of what saddened her—the part that also vexingly relieved her—was exactly how much we *did* understand him and how attached to us he seemed. This same girl had sent us a card upon DJ's arrival at our house. "Thank you for letting DJ stay with you. We love him very much," it said in sprawling children's script. *Stay* with us? We should have realized that her parents hadn't told her we'd adopted him.

Can a smile ward off the always approaching, always overtaking, demon Loss? Ellie seemed to think so. She'd figured out a way of keeping her balance while taking longer, more powerful strides, and now she was really moving. Not once had she and DJ fallen or come unhitched. Her look of accomplishment at having reached a downslope

suggested each time, if not the possibility of retrieving those absent years, then that of barreling into the future together—away, far away, from the cruel and unabashedly self-serving decisions of adults.

1

We'd been planning a trip to New York for some time—from the very moment, in fact, that DJ and his two garbage bags full of clothing had appeared on our doorstep. We'd wanted to introduce this curly-haired marvel to our extended families but thought we should wait until the six-month adoption trial period had elapsed and the adoption had become final. It was important to give DJ as much time as possible to adjust to his new home. Though he was presently faring well, we knew just how up and down the process of adjustment could be. No doubt there would be more anxiety, more insecurity—especially in a child who couldn't speak. After all, ours was his fourth home in five years. When, at last, December 23 had arrived and the adoption papers were signed, we decided to celebrate DJ's new status by booking flights to La Guardia in early spring.

At this time, we set out to arrange a visit with his birth-sister as well. We knew that his sister lived a mere two blocks from my aunt's apartment on the Upper East Side, where we would be staying; it would be crazy not to try to arrange a visit. DJ, it was clear, longed to see his sister. Included in the card she sent when he came to live with us at the age of five-and-a-half was her school photograph. We attached this photo to the refrigerator, and DJ would point to it each morning at breakfast, his chair always positioned so that he was facing her, as if they were somehow eating together. "Yes, that's Ellie, your sister. You miss her," we would say, and he would smile to indicate that we knew what he was thinking.

Emily and I wanted to preserve this birth-tie. After all the pain and loss that DJ had experienced, it was important for him to have some connection to his past, especially this connection. Not every twig or leaf should be swept downstream in some muddy, rain-engorged creek. Adoption needn't constitute a second hurricane. We understood that in order to preserve this tie we would have to preserve others, if only to a lesser degree. This fact would create some confusion for DJ's birth-father, who upon agreeing to arrange a meeting for the two siblings, promptly began sending us photographs of himself and his daughter at the beach—as if the point of the visit were for *him* to be reunited with his son.

In choosing to adopt DJ, we had vowed to ourselves that we wouldn't behave like the kind of adoptive parents who sever all birth-ties in an act of compensating for their child's lamentably unnatural arrival. We, especially I, harbored notions of reconfiguring family, of making it less like the genetic version of a gated community than a shelter of shared intimacy and support, open to the needs of the world outside.

Within limits, of course. We had no intention of doing away with traditional family roles altogether or of confusing our son by maintaining a close relationship with his birth-father, but neither did we want to pretend that his birth-parents didn't exist or that they were entirely uninterested in his welfare. We were pretty sure that DJ didn't really remember his birth-father, as the man had left his birth-mother well before DJ

had turned two. In the photographs he sent, not once did DJ point to him—only to his sister, over and over again.

Of course, we recognized that our lofty ideas about adoption would be difficult to achieve in that lower realm people call “real life.” We knew what his birth-mother was like—we’d spent months trying to help her—and we’d already had enough interaction with his birth-father to sense what trouble lay ahead. The point is, we couldn’t imagine decreeing it best for DJ to forget his birth-family. Adoptees often spend a good part of their adulthoods trying to undo what had been thought best for them. Anyway, we knew that in order for DJ to see his sister, we would have to indulge his birth-father’s not uncomplicated desire to see his son, even as we planned subtly to remind the man that the purpose of the visit was for the two kids to see each other.

I set aside a Saturday afternoon in early January to ring the man up. When I got him on the phone, he continued in exactly the same vein as when I had spoken to him a year earlier about terminating his parental rights. He felt a need to confess. He felt a need to convince the person who had come to his rescue, who *wanted* to do what he had failed to—namely, parent his disabled son—that he was a decent person. But I could offer only the thorniest kind of absolution: a wordless resentment that drove him ever forward. He hadn’t known how to care for a child with a severe disability, he explained. Moreover, hard as he had tried, he simply hadn’t been able to persuade his new wife to take his son—he’d begged her, but she’d refused. Finally, how could he not have thought of the welfare of his daughter, who had so much to gain from coming to New York and living, as he put it, a life of opportunity?

Having conceded that he would very much like for his daughter to be able to see her brother, he launched into a description of Ellie’s initial reaction to the estrangement. She couldn’t sleep. The darkness petrified her. In it she imagined DJ banging his head against an unfamiliar wall, crying out for her, wanting her to crawl into his bed as she had on nights he didn’t want to sleep. How could there be no one there for him? How could *she* not be there for him? How, alas, could she be safe, how could she be happy, while he was in some stranger’s home? The man was nearly frantic. He seemed to recount the story of his daughter’s pain to make clear that at least someone in his household had wanted to take DJ or, rather, to ask that his daughter be considered its more honorable representative and that he be allowed to pose, say, for a photograph beneath her banner. He said nothing of the beating in foster care or of the fact that he hadn’t bothered to visit DJ in the hospital—hadn’t bothered to visit him but once in the previous four years.

I found excruciating the contortions of guilt. Time and again, I wanted to puncture the man’s self-serving rationalizations, but I had promised Emily that I would keep quiet in order not to jeopardize DJ’s future contact with his sister. At this point I couldn’t determine if the man was simply demonizing his wealthy wife, seeking refuge in her refusal, or if he was indeed as powerless as he claimed. In a sense it didn’t matter. A decision had been made that had affected DJ terribly, a decision that his wife had certainly not resisted and that neither of them had tried at all to mitigate. However controlling or dictatorial she was, the man’s account had the distinct ring of convenience.

In the weeks leading up to the visit, he took to checking in with us about our travel plans, plans we’d already reviewed with him several times before. And he took to telling us other intimate details about himself—especially about his marriage and his former drug use. The impending visit was dredging up a range of unresolved feelings. The man also kept repeating that he wanted to buy DJ a gift. “What does he need?” he’d ask. “Come on, he must need something.” Each time, we’d discourage him with a lighthearted rejoinder: “That’s very nice of you, but you don’t need to do that.”

Then, three days before we were to leave for New York, he let slip that he hadn’t yet told his wife about the visit. When he’d mentioned the idea of one, she’d opposed it, insisting pointedly that such an occasion would be harmful to *their* daughter. Why make her agitated again? she’d said. Why go through another goodbye? I’m sure the woman envisioned something preposterously self-destructive, like a backhoe operator turning on himself, undermining the ground that his own massive supports rested on. The man said that he would inform his wife of the visit the morning we were to arrive—an uncharacteristically bold gesture on his part and a measure of how much he wanted the visit to occur.

It was during that final, pre-visit phone call that I had heard how eager the woman had been to have Ellie and, as well, the frankly incredible story of how she and her husband had met in the first place. So much of what I heard seemed straight out of some made-for-TV movie that I still don’t believe it, though I have had confirmed the story’s central details. The woman was from a prominent Manhattan family. She lived in a large apartment on Park Avenue that was filled with expensive antiques. She worked on Wall Street and vacationed all over the world. For years she had wanted to be a mother, but having contracted HIV during an unprotected sexual encounter, she’d imagined painfully that marriage and children were unavailable to her. Then, at an HIV support group she’d met an unemployed former drug user (the man’s description of himself), and a wildly improbable marriage had ensued.

The man’s daughter had unexpectedly completed the picture—not in the way that the woman had always imagined, but close enough to pass as something like her fantasy. Her willingness to welcome into her home another woman’s child she’d presented, the man implied, as an act of generosity akin to saving the poor in Calcutta, which must have been how she’d presented welcoming her future husband into her home—indeed, into her bed. Of course, the girl had needed some work; she’d been living with her alcoholic welfare mother and, like her father, knew nothing of upper-middle-class Manhattan life. She had had to be tutored before she could enroll at Dalton; they couldn’t just put her in a uniform, wind her up, and let her go. She had had to learn how to speak properly; she had had to learn how to carry herself. She had had to learn how to ride horses on the weekends and in the summer. She had had to—well, the list was endless. If one wanted to capture the gist of the woman’s development project, it would be this: that the girl had had to forget every last detail of her former life. In a sense, she’d entered a kind of witness protection program, except what was required of her was that she erase what she had seen, that she refuse to testify: things her father had been only too happy to do.

The woman's theory of adoption was diametrically opposed to ours. She'd gotten out her earth-moving equipment and buried the past as quickly as she could, covering it with grassy swales and beautiful flowering gardens—the kind of project where you cart in mature plants and trees to make it look like the whole thing has been there for years. One moment piles of dirt, the next a luxury life ready for immediate occupancy. No doubt the urgency of the project was a reflection of the woman's uncertain prognosis, but knowing this only complicated my feelings toward her.

## II

The flights to New York were even more difficult than we had feared. DJ had never been on a plane before, and he didn't take well to the confinement, nor to the feeling of pressure in his ears, which made him scream. We'd brought with us a collection of new toys and small mechanical gadgets, the kind whose effects could be repeated obsessively, to try to distract him. And we'd brought lots of food as well. But right from the beginning, luck was a no-show, abandoning her seat to some stand-by passenger. On our first flight from Jacksonville to Atlanta, we sat on the runway for nearly an hour, using up our precious allotment of acceptable behavior. We weren't watching an hour glass; we were inside one, falling with the final grains of sand.

When we were barely at our cruising altitude, DJ began kicking the row in front of him and giving us the "all done" sign, one of a handful of signs he'd learned since coming to live with us. It meant that he was through with the particular activity that his parents had imposed on him. He wanted to go; he wanted to go right now. But where? I remember trying to point to the window to make clear that "going" was out of the question, but he simply reiterated himself with his hands, adding a kind of frustrated flourish. There was no telling what he made of the fluffy shapes that were now strangely *below* us. Did he honestly think we could open the door and step outside? Did he think his father could land the plane? Did he understand we were flying?

We tried to walk a bit in the aisle; we tried to go to the bathroom. We resorted shamefacedly to giving him candy, our final weapon in the war of distraction. Whenever he raised his voice excessively—and I mean excessively—we gave him another piece. I guess I should say that I gave him another piece: by this point Emily and I were arguing about everything. I don't think DJ understood that he was holding us hostage; he was simply delighted and somehow frantic to discover the new limit to his requests. In the past, one piece of candy had been the limit.

The truth is, he was anxious about leaving. Although we thought he knew that he was going to visit his sister, we couldn't be sure that he didn't think he was leaving us. In fact, he'd become agitated when I pulled out the suitcases and started to pack. Emily had put together a picture schedule to show DJ the sequence of the trip: a photo of our house, a photo of our car, a photo of a plane, a photo of New York, a photo of my aunt, a photo of Ellie, a photo of Emily's brother and his family, a photo of a plane, and a photo of our house again. The picture schedule seemed to work but it had to compete with the deep associations of loss that the suitcases unearthed.

DJ was also particularly claustrophobic, having been held down and beaten while in his first foster home and kept locked in a small room in his second. By the time

the pilot announced that we were making our initial descent into Atlanta, never mind New York, I was having to keep him in his seat with his seatbelt fastened, using both of my arms and a knee to do so, as he was sobbing, screaming, and fighting me every plummeting step of the way. Much as we wanted to, we couldn't simply assume that because he longed to see his sister, he would behave. It wasn't a question of behavior; it was a question of too much unfamiliarity, too much sensation, too much instinctive panic.

As we headed in a cab for Manhattan, we were all sufficiently stressed. DJ was stimming at passing cars, making a low humming noise and lightly pulling his hair—a clear sign of his anxiety. I was barking something about never doing this again, never getting on a plane with him. (Emily wisely resisted reminding me of our impending flights home.) Part of what had so disturbed me was having DJ confirm people's prejudicial view of mental disability, having him elicit looks of annoyance and, worse, pity. One woman, across the aisle from us, said to her six-year-old, "I'm very proud of the way *you* conducted yourself today." I wanted everyone we came in contact with to see what DJ could do. In the five months he'd been with us, he'd come a great distance: in the first two weeks, he'd learned to use the toilet, thus making it possible to do away with those awful big-kid diapers.

Over the summer, DJ, in fact, had learned how to do all sorts of things the special-ed people thought he would never do, such as ride a bike and swim and sit placidly at a restaurant. In the fall he'd begun attending a regular school, where he made friends, learned how to communicate and, in general, became more engaged with the world around him. Looking back on it, I think we were hilariously ambitious, but it was precisely such ambition that allowed for a whole string of marvels from this boy who would otherwise have languished under the moniker "severe and profound disability." We were committed to DJ being in public, and so it was crushing to see him experience such a meltdown, even as we understood how stressful the trip was for him. I knew that he would eventually master air travel, but in the short term there would be much pain for everyone.

Also contributing to our stress was a medical problem that had developed over the winter, a problem whose complications nearly made us cancel the trip. DJ started having partial-complex seizures, and the medication he was put on began to irritate his liver just two days before we were to leave for New York. A known and very dangerous side-effect of the medication, this complication had our developmental pediatrician leaving us messages all over town—anywhere she thought we might be—saying, "Do not give DJ his next Depakote. Call immediately." We thus had to remove DJ from the Depakote all at once, itself a somewhat dangerous proposition.

We had several lengthy discussions with the pediatrician about whether or not we should postpone the trip, whether or not there would be enough Depakote in his system to prevent a seizure from breaking through. She didn't want to start him on a new anti-convulsant while we were away and thought we could probably make it back to Florida without anything happening—after all, we'd only be gone for four days. She nicely gave us her beeper number and told us to go to the hospital the second

we spotted anything out of the ordinary. A woman with a huge heart, the one medical professional we had met who didn't pathologize disability, she understood the import of the visit. We didn't want to disappoint the two kids unless it was absolutely necessary. The visit already seemed tenuous at best; a postponement might mean they would never be able to see each other.

What we didn't discuss was the role of the visit itself—having to say goodbye again to his sister and having to endure those taxing plane rides—in the production of a seizure. Such stress certainly didn't minimize the chances of producing one. In retrospect, we probably shouldn't have gone to New York, but like everything else in this story, there was no uncomplicated choice. It was like being taught, again and again, the meaning of a dilemma. After the umpteenth example, you feel like shouting from the back of your undeclared classroom, "And the point of recognizing a dilemma is? How about helping us to make a decision?"

### III

Ellie's school let out at 3:15, and her father had hoped to pick her up and take her straight to our meeting point at the corner of Ninety-first and Lexington. We would then walk back down to the park near Gracie Mansion, where the kids could rollerblade. This park was a mere stone's throw from my aunt's apartment. The next day, if the visit was going well, we would spend the afternoon in Central Park, which was closer to where they lived. Though we hadn't exactly negotiated these terms, they seemed the settlement of proven adversaries.

We had no idea if the man's wife would be with him or if she hadn't already managed to cancel the visit. We should have known that, short of nixing the visit, she'd be there to police it. The first thing she did, after introducing herself, was to ask if we had coached DJ to run up and kiss his sister—a question that couldn't conceal its agenda. Almost immediately it became apparent that she and her husband needed to prove something to Ellie, and DJ wouldn't help them. We wouldn't help them. Rather, we would contradict them; in fact we had already contradicted them simply by wanting to parent DJ, by loving him, by admiring his willingness to move out into the world despite all that had happened. To us there was no such thing as sufficiently or catastrophically disabled, no such thing as unbridgeably distant. For the adults this conflict remained largely invisible: it moved like the subway beneath the streets—you could feel it; you could see steam rising from vents; you could see people descending into its labyrinthine stations. Or it was like the George Washington Bridge that I remember crossing as a boy I don't know how many times—a giant sign instructing drivers: LOWER LEVEL HERE.

Ellie was dressed in her school uniform: a plaid skirt with a white blouse and dark knee socks. Her hair was longer than in any of the pictures, neatly pulled back. She had with her an overstuffed backpack and a pair of gym shoes. Her father was carrying her rollerblades and a windbreaker in case it rained. Like his wife, he was dressed to the nines, as if meeting a dignitary. The two of them seemed shocked to discover that Emily and I were in jeans. "We're going to the park!" I wanted to shout, suddenly

defensive about a presumed class distinction. The man had tried to give DJ a hug when we met up, but DJ had pulled away—not meanly, gently, as if to say, "I've seen you in a photograph, but I do not know you." This, I must confess, was a relief. The man kept saying, "He looks so much like my brother. Check out those curls."

The man was tall and, in today's body-loving lingo, buffed—a good six-foot-two and two hundred pounds, apparently all of it muscle. I remember thinking it was hard to believe that he had once progressed to the point of full-blown AIDS. He wore his clothes and his Rolex watch like someone who hadn't yet become them, someone who still took too much pleasure in their transformative powers. What really gave him away, though, were his teeth and the heavily accented words that sometimes leapt from his mouth, like overbearing actors onto a stage. Walking down to the park, I could sense the woman's embarrassment or, rather, the way that she had learned, for the most part, to repress her embarrassment whenever he spoke in this manner. And yet, whenever he did speak like this—to tell us, for example, of his enthusiasm for pumping iron—she clearly registered a faulty impersonation.

The woman was also tall—around five-foot-eight. She was slightly less robust than her husband but in no way sickly. She wore an elegant blue pants suit with a pretty pin. Her hair was cut very short and was fashionably spiked. From the outset, she assumed the role of official spokesperson, beginning each sentence conspicuously in the first-person plural: "We often rent a movie on Friday nights . . . We sometimes go to the ballet . . . We're learning French in school . . . isn't that right, Ellie?" When DJ made the sign for gum and I asked Ellie if she wanted a piece, the woman remarked, "We normally don't allow gum-chewing; it's vulgar. But perhaps just this one time, as it is a special occasion." Her performance of generosity came with its own pre-recorded sitcom applause track.

While her parents were trying to make conversation, Ellie seemed afraid to speak, as if in doing so she might awaken from her dream. Her father had only informed her of the visit some fifteen minutes earlier, fearing, I suppose, that she might say something before he got around to informing his wife. It had never occurred to us that he would be surprising his daughter as well. I tried to imagine bounding out of school and learning that today, an ordinary Thursday in October, I would get to see my brother. Nearly a thousand other days had passed without so much as acknowledging her and now here, without warning, one had stopped to grant her wish.

Slowly but surely, the girl inched forward into speech, like someone familiarizing herself with a high diving board. She couldn't get over how big DJ was. She asked about his glasses, which made him look, she said, "intellectual." "Where did you learn that word?" Emily teased.

"School," Ellie said, for the first time taking in the fact that I was holding DJ's hand. "I've learned all sorts of things—like, did you know that crayfish are related to barnacles and wood lice—both are invertebrates."

"No, I did not," Emily replied. I told her about DJ's eye problem, how it had been difficult at first to get him to wear his glasses, so accustomed was he to relying on his sense of touch and smell.

"He broke the first three pairs we gave him," I reported.



"Really?" she said. I told her that he still prefers to identify people by smelling them. "I remember that. He used to smell my mother's boyfriends whenever they came over," she said, pausing slightly. "But he clearly saw me just a few minutes ago. The glasses must be working."

We were nearly at the entrance of the park—I could see the river in the distance—when she asked, "Where does DJ go to school?"

"A regular school, just like yours," Emily responded. "He has an aide who helps him."

"It's not a school for people with autism?" the girl enquired.

"No," Emily said, aware of the delicate ice we were venturing out on and yet refusing to lie.

"Are the kids nice to him?" Ellie asked.

"Yes, they are," Emily told her. "He has lots of friends. At lunch, if you've studied hard, you're allowed to eat outside with a classmate. The kids in DJ's class all line up to see which one of them he will choose."

"Who's his favorite?" Ellie asked.

"A boy named Austin," I said. "You like Austin, don't you, DJ?" DJ smiled upon hearing Austin's name. "He also likes a girl named Teresa."

"So, he can learn," his sister interjected, apropos of nothing but the spurious information she had been given by her parents and the clanging reverberations of that subway just beneath our tongues. "I want to have lunch with DJ," she said. "I study hard."

At this point, Ellie's stepmother, who had been silent during the exchange, attempted to redirect us. We had reached the basketball court, and she proposed that the kids put on their rollerblades. The man produced a helmet and a pad for what seemed like every one of his daughter's innumerable joints; we watched uncomfortably as it took her nearly fifteen minutes to suit up. The man then tried to help DJ with his rollerblades, but DJ rebuffed him, this time less casually. When the stepmother realized that DJ had neither a helmet nor pads, she proceeded to lecture us on proper parenting. Emily said something about DJ being unwilling to wear a helmet, as he was particularly hyper-sensitive when it came to his head. "Then he shouldn't be allowed to skate," the woman said curtly. I informed her that we usually skate in a rink where no one wears a helmet. "It doesn't matter," she maintained. "Safety first."

Rather than allow myself to be provoked, I decided to show Ellie how she might skate with DJ. I took the two of them out to the center of the court and told her to take hold of her brother's hand. "You're going to have to pull him," I said. "He's only learned how to remain upright."

"I can do that," Ellie replied eagerly.

"And you're going to have to make sure your skates never come in contact. He really doesn't like to fall."

"He won't fall," she boasted. "I'm pretty good at rollerblading." And she was. Soon, she was making turns, picking up speed, and looking back to see if her brother was having fun. At first a little bit wary, DJ quickly grew comfortable with his new

pilot, began to flap his free arm (his signature stereotypy when watching anything in motion), and produced a broad, if somewhat distant, grin. This grin he occasionally punctuated with a gleeful, high-pitched shriek, scaring Ellie the first time he did so. But after this first time, she started to enjoy these shrieks, laughing whenever one escaped from his mouth, even as I was telling DJ not to be so loud.

I wanted the two siblings to have some time alone, so I drifted back to the bench where the adults were sitting. I caught the tail end of a familiar anecdote about one of DJ's classmates. Apparently, the man now wanted to pursue the topic of his birthson's schooling. Emily told him how the classmate had said to her that DJ was just like a boy on his soccer team. "What do you mean?" Emily had asked. "Well," the classmate had replied, "my friend speaks two languages just like DJ." "What languages are those?" Emily had asked. "English and Spanish," the boy had said. "And what are DJ's two languages?" Emily had inquired. The classmate looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Sign language and pictures," he'd said. "Don't you remember coming in to teach us these languages?" Emily was telling the anecdote in order to underscore how naturally children can accommodate disability, in fact not even understanding it as *disability*.

"But what does he *do* at school?" the man wondered. "I mean, he can't possibly do the work the other kids are doing, right?" Something about his tone had changed; he seemed to be going on the offensive. "Does he take their tests? What's the point of this inclusion stuff, to make the parents feel better about having a retard for a son?"

The man actually used the word "retard." I don't know if he had discerned that he was in trouble with his daughter, having exaggerated DJ's disability, or whether he suddenly felt that he was in trouble with himself. I don't know if he had been hurt by DJ's coolness toward him—it did seem to have left him a bit like a child on a bike with a flat tire in the middle of nowhere. I don't know if he was merely like so many other people who know nothing about disability and advance a case of prejudice. It was probably all three. In any event, I thought it contemptible of him to express his frustration and despair, as well as his anger at us for being truthful to Ellie, by demeaning DJ, and I was angry. How could the boy be disabled enough to be demeaned but not disabled enough to have provoked his birth-father's guilt about abandoning him?

Emily tried to explain what an adapted curriculum is and how the aide helps DJ to stay on task. She highlighted a whole host of things that DJ had learned to do—things as simple as walk in line or eat his lunch unsupervised in the cafeteria. It was as if she'd decided to teach right through a tornado, fastening herself to the blackboard and clinging to her lesson plan. "He's just beginning to learn his letters," Emily told the man firmly.

"But does he flap his arms like that in class?" the man asked. (As DJ turned beneath one of several basketball hoops, he flapped his free arm wildly.) "Does he always scream?"

"He's happy," I snipped. By this point the woman had started moving to the other

side of the basketball court, closer to where the kids were skating. I couldn't decide if even she was uncomfortable with the conversation or simply confident that her protégé would strike a decisive blow.

"To be honest with you," the man said, "I'm not sure I'd want some handicapped kid in Ellie's class; he'd be a nuisance. He'd probably hold the other kids back."

Should I have been stunned? An objection I'd heard a thousand times—from school administrators and teachers, from the odd parents of a classmate, from politicians—now managed to wound me, coming as it did from DJ's own birth-father. The entire visit seemed to have been heading fatalistically toward such doomsday irony, as in a novel by Zola. Had this subway conductor fallen asleep? Would his train crash? Should I let mine crash as well or, better yet, burst through the macadam of our conversation like that subway-turned-missile in the movie *Speed*? "This is YOUR fucking child we're talking about," I thought to myself.

Was he aware of what he was doing—arguing against inclusion as a way of justifying splitting up his kids? I tried to pretend that the man was any of a number of familiar opponents. I told him about the research suggesting that classrooms with mentally disabled children actually perform better on standardized tests than classrooms without such children. But the man pressed on, needing to emphasize what DJ couldn't do. "How much help will he have to have when he is older?" he asked.

"It's not clear," Emily replied. "Some, but we don't know where he'll be by then. He's only now really getting a chance to develop." That was a good one, I thought, giving it to him where it hurts.

"Looks to me like he'll need a lot," the man insisted.

"Perhaps, but he keeps surprising us," I said, controlling my annoyance. "When we first took him rollerblading, for example, he couldn't even stand up; he was like some sort of drunk Gumby. And when we first tried to include him in story-time at school, he couldn't sit for five minutes; now he can make it all the way through."

I'd done it. I'd fallen completely into advocacy mode, armed with anecdotes and an obdurate optimism, and using a tone reserved for the instruction of the most incorrigible pupils. I just kept focusing on our long-term goal: the restoration of the sibling relationship. Of course, I was not unaware of the effect that my tone was having on DJ's birth-father, who flailed against my passive aggression.

#### IV

"Can you really blame them for not wanting a boy with autism? Don't they have enough medical problems themselves?" a friend of mine had countered when I told him about DJ's birth-father and his new wife. Standing there in the park, I found myself restaging arguments I'd staged countless times before. How could they parent a child who would need assistance well into adulthood when their own futures were in question? Wasn't this what the man was getting at, at least in part, when he belabored DJ's lack of future self-sufficiency? Moreover, even if they had been willing to take DJ, how could anyone ask of them the day-to-day effort required to raise a child with a neurological disability when all they really wanted was a second, temporary shot at normalcy? Had I no sympathy for their predicament?

And yet, both the man and his wife were still quite healthy, having gone on anti-viral cocktails and having continued to show very low viral loads. They might be alive indefinitely. In any event, why was such uncertainty acceptable for Ellie, who knew nothing of her parents' infections? What if *she* were suddenly left all alone?

The fact is, a boy with a disability didn't fit into the woman's fantasy. He was like a piece from another puzzle, somehow included in her box. I refused to accept this prejudice. And I refused to accept the idea that DJ simply wasn't her kid; *Ellie* wasn't her kid. I'd been fighting precisely this distinction for years: the American shibboleth of blood relations. Nevertheless, had the two of them shown any concern at all for DJ short of agreeing to parent him, I might have been able—might still be able—to understand their decision. At the very least, their money could have made a difference in his life: they could have arranged some sort of placement for him, helped out his foster-mothers financially by providing clothes, toys, even a respite stipend.

But their operating assumption seemed to be: well, he's sort of out of it; he wouldn't really know the difference between one home and another. Neither could appreciate the impact on him of losing his sister, the way it had made him withdraw even more deeply into himself. And neither could—or, rather, wanted to—appreciate the impact on Ellie of losing her brother. They underestimated what a relationship is, conceiving of disability only as deficits.

What had really gotten to me was their inability to recognize in this little boy someone just like themselves: someone to whom the fates had been similarly cruel and who thus also needed a second chance at life. Why should theirs come at the expense of his or, for that matter, Ellie's? What, after all, was the emotional cost of that life of "opportunity"? How could she not experience something like survivor guilt?

I remembered glancing, the morning we left for New York, at one of the photographs DJ's birth-father had sent of himself and Ellie at the beach. Because DJ had grown attached to the photo, we'd put it on the refrigerator along with the original one Ellie had sent. It had occurred to me that the photo must have been taken by the man's wife; suddenly, Ellie's exuberance appeared entirely scripted, compulsory—the firm hand of the motherly photographer exerting a strict compositional influence. **YOU SHALL BE HAPPY! YOU ARE SO LUCKY!** Doubtless, I was reading into the photograph, but Ellie evinced the guilt that her father did not, and she even seemed to acknowledge what was artificial about their neatly appointed life. It was as if she were standing at a blackboard and *writing*, "I SHALL BE HAPPY! I AM SO LUCKY!" Call it joy's detention—a girl kept long after school despite the vacation setting.

While the man and I were doing battle, Ellie had become much more adventurous. She was now helping DJ down a flight of stairs in the hope of reaching some hilly terrain. "What are you doing, Ellie?" her stepmother asked.

"I want to pull DJ up that hill," Ellie answered. "I think I can do it. DJ, do you want to go? Hey, Emily, what's the sign for 'uphill'?" I prayed that DJ wouldn't fall and contribute to the already palpable tension by sobbing and hitting his head—his customary reaction to a negative surprise.



"You're going to hurt him," her stepmother continued. "Stop right now."

"It's all right," I yelled, wanting Ellie to have this experience and secretly reveling in her facilitated disobedience. We walked over, and I remained just far enough away to allow Ellie to accomplish her goal, but close enough to come to the rescue if necessary.

The man appeared increasingly desperate, like someone who'd started digging out from an avalanche but wondered just how much Pollyanna optimism had buried him. Gone was the obvious guilt of those preparatory phone calls. The more we downplayed DJ's disability, the more defensive he became. We simply refused to confirm the hopelessness of his birth-son's condition. More important, DJ himself refused to confirm that hopelessness. But if DJ were not as irrevocably disabled as the man needed to think, then the charge of abandonment would stick—indeed, had already stuck. And the charge of separating the two siblings as well. The perfect clarity of these equations hit him like someone who was at last catching up to the full meaning of his own words and actions. The hostile defensiveness gave way to silence and the silence to what can only be described as a tortured appreciation of the scene: his two kids together again.

For all of the man's dire predictions about DJ's future, he finally couldn't maintain a consistent position; he resembled one of my students in composition class trying to write an argumentative essay, flip-flopping all over the place. I caught him intrigued by a report of DJ's progress at gymnastics camp. I caught him laughing at a story of DJ's first foray into the deep end of the public pool—he'd jumped in with all his clothes on and sat peacefully at the bottom. And I caught him delighting in the image of his daughter straining to pull her brother uphill and then laughing as they began their precipitous descent—the image burned in his memory, I'm sure, as it is in mine. "Look at them go," he said. "They're really moving. DJ's got terrific balance." In the end, the man seemed positively confused about which prognosis, which understanding of disability, he was rooting for.

The sky had grown darker, and a light rain had begun to fall. The woman said that we should think about calling it a day, but Ellie pretended not to hear her stepmother. When DJ made the sign for "drink," she said, "Yes, I'm thirsty too," seizing upon an opportunity to extend the outing. I suggested we grab a drink at a pizza place we'd passed on the way down to the park. It was there that the woman claimed that she had wanted to parent DJ but feared that she couldn't do it adequately. It was also there that she announced, while the kids were playing pinball, that she was relieved to discover that DJ was finally where he needed to be. It had been such a concern of hers, his finding a proper home. The woman was talking just loudly enough for Ellie to hear her, buttressing her case the way a lawyer might in closing arguments when something unexpectedly damaging has been revealed at trial. "DJ really seems to have bonded with you both," she said, "and you, Emily, with your expertise, you can offer him so much." Now, the woman was using DJ's progress as evidence of why he needed to be with us.

The man took his wife's lead. He seemed to be searching for a way to fend off his low estimation of himself—a way to be positive about the decisions he had made. Positive about the long road leading to this spot. Positive about the visit, yes, very positive. Suddenly, he plunged into the well-lit space between us and, twirling repeatedly, landed on a tiny, elevated platform of sentimental gratitude. "You guys are my guardian angels," this edgy acrobat declared. As I had discovered the weapon of passive aggression, so he had discovered the weapon of gratitude. He could be grateful in spades. It wouldn't entirely take away his guilt but, at the very least, it would obviate the need to pick publicly at his sore. (The man's wife appeared to be annoyed by the amount of credit he was giving us; for her, each party had merely acted appropriately and, in doing so, helped to restore order to the world—the brown socks in one drawer, the blue disabled ones in another a thousand miles away.) And so, all of his contradictions the man wrapped up into the platitudinous bow of everything having worked out for the best. With the prospect of future visits—"We can get together again, can't we?" the man said, as much to us as to his wife, who did not respond—he was prepared to double his bet of gratitude.

Ellie didn't want to leave the pizza place. She started to cry and had to be reminded of the visit the following day. DJ had already withdrawn inside himself by the time her first tear fell: he'd long ago perfected this disappearing act, sniffing out any and all imminent farewells. He stood there serenely as his sister sobbed. "Stop right now, Ellie," the woman demanded. "We have to go. You have homework to do. Now, say goodbye to DJ."

Once we had offered the assurances of tomorrow and finally parted, I began to ponder the notion of things having worked out for the best. In a way, Ellie's parents were right. DJ, to put it bluntly, was certainly better off with us than with them, but in order for him to have ended up with us he had had to endure a vicious beating and all of the loneliness of foster care—far from salutary influences on any child, let alone an autistic one. DJ only became that much more fragile, defensive, and untrusting as a result of his experience. In addition, he'd been deprived of the kind of professional attention (speech pathology, occupational therapy) that might have made a difference in his development. To this day, Emily insists that had he received such attention from the age of three, his deficits would not have been as significant as they were when he came to live with us. What is more, DJ's "good fortune" masked the fate of so many other children who never find parents. The chances of adoption for a child over the age of two are astonishingly low; the chances for a disabled six-year-old are virtually non-existent. Finally, how happy could any ending be that separated two young siblings?

v

After a sleepless night, we greeted the morning much as we'd greeted the previous one: by killing time, by waiting for 3:30 to arrive. At 3:00 we left the apartment and wandered up to our meeting point; Emily insisted we were departing too early and, as usual, she was correct. We had to circle Ninety-first Street in order to kill the

remaining few minutes. A light drizzle had begun—some massive low was stuck over the lower Northeast. When he spotted Ellie, DJ again ran up to her, this time simply taking hold of her hand. “DJ!” she exclaimed. “How are you?” We then all proceeded to Central Park, consumed by a strangely expectant silence.

Before the kids went skating, they played for a while on the swings and then on a kind of merry-go-round: a number of tires chained together and suspended from a post. DJ loved this sort of thing, and the two of them rode it together, spinning arm in arm. Very quickly, however, Ellie started turning green. You could see that she was dizzy, but she wouldn’t get off. In fact, the more her stepmother exhorted her to get off, the more she refused, vigilantly upholding a smile and yelling, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” Fearing that Ellie might throw up and sensing trouble with the girl’s mother, Emily intervened: she suggested that the kids go skating before the rain worsened. She suggested this despite the fact that DJ wanted more—indeed, was signing “more.”

And so, the kids resumed their tugboat imitation. Ellie found a hill to climb, and before long they were barreling down it, executing hairpin turns, weaving in and out. While we watched them, the woman asked about DJ’s health, a question I finessed with breathtaking vagueness. I wasn’t about to tell her of his seizures and thereby give her additional ammunition in the fight to prove she couldn’t take care of DJ. She was someone whose judgment you never wanted to confirm.

The kids were now skating near a jungle gym, and DJ was pointing at it. “I think he wants to play on the jungle gym, Ellie,” Emily said.

“Okay, she replied, “but first we have to take off our rollerblades.”

“Yes, you do,” Emily agreed, smiling at Ellie’s adorable earnestness. The kids came to a stop, and before Emily could get over to them, Ellie began to help DJ with his rollerblades. Emily stood back and watched, even as the girl appeared to be having difficulty getting them off DJ’s feet. DJ, of course, wasn’t helping any. In fact, he was still pointing at the jungle gym.

They hadn’t been playing on the jungle gym for five minutes when a boy yelled at DJ, “Hey, out of my way.” He was trying to make it across a long stretch, arm over arm, and DJ was hanging at one end, making it impossible for him to finish. “Out of my way,” the boy repeated. But DJ just hung there, one foot resting on a lower bar to stabilize himself. He was clearly mesmerized by something in the leafless canopy above. The boy then muscled his way past—or, rather, through—DJ, causing him to fall. DJ shrieked and began banging his head against one of the bars. I ran up and said, without thinking, “Come to Daddy, DJ. Come to Daddy.”

Ellie had been observing this interaction from about ten feet away, and when DJ fell, she climbed down and went over to him. But only after I had referred to myself as “Daddy” did she start pummeling the boy who had caused DJ to fall. “Ellie!” the woman cried. The man quickly pulled Ellie off the boy and tried to explain to the boy’s mother, who had been roused from her magazine, that Ellie had misinterpreted her son’s actions. At this point, Ellie started screaming at her father and hitting him: “You lied to me. He’s not just living with them. He’s fine. Look at him. He should be with us!” Over and over, she yelled, “He should be with us!” while sobbing and flailing at her father’s midsection and legs.

Emily and I had agreed not to use the terms “Mommy” and “Daddy” in Ellie’s presence; we didn’t want to upset her. But not in our wildest dreams could we have imagined that she wouldn’t be told of the adoption. The poor girl was discovering it accidentally on a playground, and now she couldn’t stop crying. “All right, young lady,” her stepmother said, “time to go home. If you can’t behave yourself. . . .”

“I hate you, I hate you, I don’t want to live with you!” Ellie wailed. She seemed surprised by her words and a little scared but refused to turn back. An entire underworld had been exposed and subjected to the sun’s perusal, like an ant colony some child had suddenly unearthed.

“You don’t mean that,” her father said nervously.

“Yes, I do,” she screamed. “You’re afraid of her. She doesn’t want DJ because he’s different. What if I was different?” Her words were barely discernible through her crying.

“Let’s go home,” the woman said.

“What if I was autistic? Would you get rid of me, too?” The worst thing you could do to this woman was to embarrass her publicly, and I feared for Ellie. Passersby had stopped to take in the confrontation, as if watching theater in the park. The whole way back to the Upper East Side Ellie cried. When we reached our parting point, she broke into uncontrollable sobbing. “When am I going to get to see DJ again? When?” Her father promised her that she would see him soon, in the summer perhaps. I said that she could come visit us in Florida or in South Carolina at Emily’s folks’ house. Now I was telling the girl half-truths. All of it sounded as desperate and hollow as a punctured drum.

DJ, in the meantime, had made himself into some sort of mental bat, narrowing his consciousness to the point that it had squeezed into the space between two particles of light. When Ellie went to hug him, he just hung there motionless. “I love you, DJ,” she said, “I love you. I’ll write to you.” I couldn’t look at anyone for fear of breaking down—Ellie was by this point gasping for air, so convulsive was her sobbing. Emily said that we’d call when we got back to Florida, though she knew we probably wouldn’t, at least not for a while. Then, she turned and told Ellie that her brother loved her very much, that he pointed to her picture each morning at breakfast. “Remember how he kissed you, Ellie. Remember that.” And then we started walking, the three of us, one foot in front of the other, hands clasped, concluding this impossible goodbye.

#### VI

What’s left of the story is sad and, in a sense, almost ridiculously foreseeable. To paraphrase the playwright Anton Chekhov, if a gun should appear in the first act, it must go off by the third. Suddenly, guns seemed to be discharging everywhere.

DJ had a seizure at Emily’s brother’s house in Garden City. We had put him down for a nap the following afternoon up in one of the kids’ rooms on the third floor. He had apparently awakened suddenly, which, as we found out, can set off an epileptic event—especially when anti-convulsant levels are low. By the time we made it to the third floor, he was screaming and banging his head against the wall. He seemed

excessively disoriented and his eyelids were still fluttering. We rushed to the hospital and spent four hours while a very kind pediatric neurologist conducted tests and consulted with our doctor back in Gainesville by phone. The tests indicated that DJ had had a seizure, but I also think he must have panicked up in that room all alone. Emily's brother has five children, and the house might have reminded him of his first foster home, where he was beaten. Maybe he even feared that we were leaving him there. Anyway, DJ was put on another anti-convulsant, and we were instructed to see our doctor first thing Monday morning.

On top of this, the flights back to Florida the following day were horrific. DJ experienced a full-blown rage attack—far worse than what had occurred on the flights to New York. The trip to Jacksonville was especially excruciating. Picture an unchecked bobcat loose in coach. DJ mauled our arms and legs. He kicked the seat in front of him, spilling coffee on an elderly gentleman. Too far gone to stop himself, he bit the hand that held his mouth; he pulled some hair and clawed a careless forehead. He'd turned his parents into a desperate human octopus. We were squatting on his legs, trying to immobilize his head, which he flung ferociously against the cabin window. A passenger shouted, "Control your fucking kid!" Another yelled, "He's going to break the glass!"

At one point, the co-pilot actually entered the cabin and asked if we needed him to "put down short of our final destination." It was almost laughable the way this stilted phrase resounded. No matter where we landed, we would be short of our final destination, well short. (In language just as stilted we had once described our goal on a DCFS form as "a relatively open adoption with vigorous sibling birth-ties.") We told the pilot that we had to get to the hospital in Gainesville—our doctor would be waiting—and begged him to bear with us.

Did DJ know that the visit had ended disastrously? Did he know that he probably wouldn't get to see his sister again? Was he spent? Had we pushed him too far and, in doing so, reactivated his trauma? Was something happening neurologically? Was he mad at us? What did he understand? We weren't sure of the answers to any of these questions. When you live with a non-speaking child who is only beginning to learn sign language, you'd better be able to accommodate ambiguity. Because ambiguity is what you get—enormous crates of it, delivered every morning free of charge.

In time, I'd be able to say with confidence that DJ *had* been responding to the visit—indeed was still responding to it. Exactly what he understood remained unclear, but after we returned to Florida, he seemed to point more insistently at his sister's picture on the refrigerator. He seemed to want us to talk about her, to tell him what had happened.

Toward the beginning of June, we called DJ's birth-father to inquire about the possibility of the kids getting together over the summer. We were hoping that enough time had passed that everyone had recovered from Ellie's outburst; we weren't particularly sanguine about this prospect, but we thought we would call nevertheless. The man told us that his wife had forbidden such visits, believing them too upsetting

for Ellie. Ellie had been acting out in school, he said; there was no way his wife would allow another visit now. His hands were tied. He went through his usual routine of feeling bad and then a few days later sent some pictures from the visit and a present for DJ.

Six months after that, almost unbelievably, we received a call from the New York Department of Children and Family Services. It was investigating a charge of child abuse and was required by law to check on the status of any of the alleged victim's siblings. The records showed that the alleged victim had a brother in foster care in Florida. After explaining that we had adopted DJ, I asked the caseworker what had happened to Ellie. He told me that recently in the principal's office she had said that she was afraid to go home, that her mother would kill her for getting in trouble. She was hysterical; she wouldn't stop crying; she spoke of being beaten. The caseworker made it clear that he didn't feel the accusations had merit, but he was required to investigate.

I was flabbergasted. I could only imagine the woman's response to the humiliation of an official DCFS investigation. I'd seen what these were like. (I'm tempted to think that if Ellie hadn't been beaten before, she might very well be as an effect of such an inquiry.) I knew that Emily and I were at least partially to blame for Ellie's downward spiral, and I felt awful. By championing DJ's progress, by refusing to accede to an exaggerated sense of his disability, we had made her situation unbearable. Of all of the ironies in my son's story, that insisting on a full life for DJ would ensure his estrangement from his sister still seems the cruelest.

But the lesson of this debacle surely wasn't that progressive attitudes about adoption and disability had to be punished. Ours wasn't a case of classical hubris, of fatal overreaching. This wasn't art, however perversely "well-made" the chain of discharging events might have appeared to be. Whatever tragedy had ensnared us, it was that of particular human beings with highly particular foibles.

Each of us, at least to a point, could have put aside our respective resentments in the name of fostering the well-being of both children. Even Ellie's outburst could have been viewed as something positive: a chance to work through a heartrending predicament. God knows we have endured any number of outbursts from DJ. In fact, we have come to think of them as the necessary, if almost intolerable, prerequisite for healing.

In the three years since, we've had very little contact with Ellie or her father. We really don't know how she is doing. Shortly after our failure to arrange another visit, Emily began to assemble a scrapbook of DJ's milestones: a collection of photographs and report cards, school assignments and drawings—anything that might later give Ellie a sense of the time she missed with her brother. It already contains copies of the three Christmas and birthday cards that DJ has written to her; after all, we can't be certain that the originals ever reached Ellie. If they didn't, she will be able to read these duplicates later. DJ enjoys assembling the scrapbook—cutting out the colorful matting paper, pasting the photographs.

At night sometimes, when I'm having trouble sleeping, I like to imagine the kids on another visit, except in my imaginings they're usually no longer kids when the visit takes place. Ellie's twenty-one, let's say, her brother's twenty. Her parents have died or perhaps they're still alive. It doesn't matter; she's old enough now to make her own decisions. The two siblings are in a rollerskating rink somewhere, maybe in Florida. DJ's just handed his sister the scrapbook and in sign has asked her to go skating. She can't believe how like a man he is. He takes her by the hand and directs her all over the floor, smiling. She can't believe how well he skates. He even skates backward, something he learned to do, she discovers, when he was ten, just about the time his adoptive father decided to write a book about him. He struggled mightily to master this backward movement, figuring, he tells her, that once they did meet, he and his sister would have to go backward if they ever hoped to catch up.