

T H E R E A L T H I N G



S H E I L A K O H L E R

1.

I was brought up in a world of women. My mother was one of two sisters. My father died (or so Mother told me) soon after my birth, leaving her nothing but debts. There were no photographs of him in our tidy flat, though Mother did once tell me he was a distinguished man who had dazzled her with his good mind. But Mother did not like to talk about him or why he had died. If I asked she gave bland, noncommittal answers. An elegant Frenchman who had been some kind of lawyer, a solicitor, she had met him when he was stationed in South Africa, doing something for a French mining company. That was about the most I could glean.

“What’s a solicitor?” I asked.

“Someone who deals with wills,” she said, and added, drawing herself up, “His father had been a distinguished judge,” which was probably true.

My aunt, whom everyone called Kitty, was also a widow, a real one in her case, and her husband, a wealthy timber merchant, had left her a grand fortune, a big house with a garden, and many black servants to tend to it. This was Johannesburg, in the forties.

My mother and I lived in a small, sunless, well-polished walk-up flat in Hillbrow, with doilies on the arms of the chairs, my mother's favorite fat books in a small bookcase by her bed, and a smell of camphor in the air. Consequently we spent much of our time with my aunt and her two little girls, Susan and Gillian, who were two and four years younger than I.

My aunt was everything my mother was not, everything I admired: small, pretty, plump, affectionate, and playful. She had tiny hands and feet, of which she was inordinately proud, and an enormous collection of bright elegant shoes in her vast closets. My mother, perhaps because of her sad circumstances, was not playful. She was tall, thin, and intellectual. She read what I considered dry, difficult books, went to church regularly, and led an exemplary life. She wrote daily in her diary, making little lists of her accomplishments: what she ate (as little as possible), how long she had walked (as long as possible), how many pages she had written of a novel she wanted to finish (pages she often tore up).

Her only vice was the cigarettes which she called "fags," which she smoked almost constantly. She would say, "Light me a fag, will you Pet," while driving the car, and I would be obliged to light one with the car lighter, which made me feel sick.

In her heart of hearts, I understood, my mother did not approve of her younger sister's goings on, though she was obliged to humor her, and to do her bidding. I presume it was my aunt who kept us alive, or anyway paid for my schooling and my clothes. Neither of the two sisters did paying work, though they were endlessly busy embroidering, knitting, and crocheting, and made our dresses and sometimes even their own.

Mother was always running around finding the things my aunt had misplaced (her telephone book, the romance novel she was reading, even her little diamond-studded watch), bringing my aunt what she called "the other half" (another glass of whiskey, which she liked to drink), and glancing at us children warningly and saying things like "Little pitchers have big ears" when Aunt Kitty would start to tell the really interesting part of a story. My aunt would say, "I have to make a wee," and my mother would smile her thin, superior smile, and say, "Kitty, I'm afraid that's one thing, I can't do for you."

Aunt Kitty was, to use her own words, "full of beans." She would

come back into the house, after a morning's shopping, all dressed up in her flowered hat and gloves, her triple string of pearls, her diamond rings. She wore her jewelry even in the morning to go shopping. She would drop all her packages on a chair, throw off her high-heeled shoes, unpin her flowered hat, and put a record on the gramophone. She would hitch up her skirts and start dancing. She taught us how to do the Charleston, kicking up her slim, shapely legs with gusto. She liked to eat (lots of eggs, meat – chops for breakfast, cheese) and to drink (beer, Champagne, whiskey), and she was a good storyteller.

I loved to spend the night without Mother in my aunt's big square house with my two younger cousins. Two blond-headed and blue-eyed beauties – their father had come from Germany – they were much more rambunctious and fearless than I was, tearing around the garden, climbing to the tops of trees, splashing up and down the pool in their water wings, and playing *eggzi*, a game with a ball. Yet I could see everyone in the household loved them, though my aunt always had, as she said, “a soft spot” for me. Sometimes she whispered in my ear, “You are my Pet, my favorite one,” and I believed she loved me more than her own. In a way, I resembled her more than her children did. I, too, was small with dark hair, olive skin, and what she called “hazel” eyes (which was also my name), and, despite my demure appearance, an appetite for the good things in life.

I was a much quieter, less demanding child than Susan and Gillian, my aunt's little girls. I was well-behaved and tried to be considerate, to “remember my neighbor,” as Mother would remind me.

In the early mornings, in her house, Aunt Kitty would leave her bedroom door open. We would tiptoe in in our pajamas, the bright light seeping under the lined chintz curtains onto the end of her bed. We would climb up into her wide, soft bed, with all the pillows. She would laugh sleepily but happily, open her arms, and gather all three of us to her ample bosom, which her lacy night-dress revealed.

One of her girls, usually the younger one, Gillian, would ask to play dress-up with her mother's jewelry, and she would obligingly climb out of her bed. I would watch her go to her dressing table, with the three-way mirror, pull out the drawer, and slip her small

hand and arm inside to feel for the secret drawer at the back. She would bring out her Craven A tin, where she kept her jewelry, and allow us to tip out the jewels and spread them all out on the bed. We would sit cross-legged around her and array her and ourselves with the rings and necklaces and earrings.

Aunt Kitty would lift up certain stones to the light and tell us their provenance. Our grandfather had been a diamond evaluator at De Beers in the early days in Kimberley, and some of the rare stones had been left to her by him. She had been her father's pet, she told us laughing. He was the one who called her "Kitty" for her soft eyes, and so she had got the best. I knew, too, that my mother had long ago been obliged to sell anything she had inherited to pay what she called my father's debts. Other jewels, like the star-shaped yellow diamond earrings which Gillian coveted, had come from my aunt's husband.

When the maid came in with the breakfast tray she would remonstrate with my aunt. "You better watch out with those children, Madam, they might lose some of those precious stones," she would say, giving me the eye. I don't think she liked me much, coming so often to the house, as it made more work for her, another mouth to feed, more clothes to wash, tidying up to do. Or perhaps she recognized in my quiet, obedient ways something familiar, a longing for the fine things of life.

My aunt would laugh and say, "Don't worry Gladys, I've got my eye on them."

The stone that I liked to play with, slipping it on and off my different fingers, was the blue diamond. It was a mysterious deep blue stone yet filled with light. For some strange reason I felt particularly attracted to this stone, almost as if it had once belonged to me. It seemed part of me, part of my past, part of my future. I wanted it, and surely, I reasoned in my childish way, my aunt would want her pet to have it.

"You have good taste, Hazel," my aunt would say. "That one is particularly rare. I'm not sure, actually, how your grandfather ever managed to acquire it. He was not a rich man, worked for a small salary, after all, and I suppose they did allow them to buy some of the stones at a reduced price. Still, sometimes I think he might have slipped it into his pocket when no one was looking. It must have been tempting handling these things day after day; and that

one must be worth a fortune," Aunt Kitty said laughing, in her easy nonjudgmental way, watching me put the ring on my ring finger on my right and then my left hand. With the ring there, where it should be, I thought, I felt suddenly almost giddy with happiness and an odd rush of power.

"It looks lovely on you, Hazel. Suits your dark coloring," my aunt said, looking at me curiously. Then she added, "But you wouldn't want to own that one though, as I'm afraid they say it brings back luck."

"Oh, but it is so beautiful," I said, taking it off and laying it down carefully with the rest.

One Sunday afternoon, in our summer, when I was visiting – as I was older, my aunt also liked to use me as a sort of unofficial nursemaid when it was the nanny's day off – the three of us had been told to lie down for an hour after lunch. The big house was very quiet at that hour of the afternoon. Both my mother and my aunt took a siesta every day after lunch, and the servants were given a few hours off to eat and rest. My aunt slept soundly, after drinking several beers with lunch, though my mother would read her *Pilgrim's Progress* or another fat favorite, *Middlemarch*. "Just a moment to put up my feet," she would say primly.

This day, I must have been almost ten years old, my mother had decided unusually to go for one of her walks after a large lunch. Both the sisters were always watching their weight: "The Battle of the Bulge" they called it. My younger cousins had fallen asleep in the December heat on their beds, the little one, who was five, sucking her thumb in the green gloom. I lay there restlessly in the silence, looking around enviously at their spacious nursery. A big bay window opened onto the garden, and a blackboard ran the length of one of the walls, put up to stop my naughty cousins from scribbling on them. There were three beds, as the white nanny, a Miss Prior, usually slept with the two girls, and beside the beds were the bedside tables with their chamber pots.

I rose from my bed and quietly walked down the corridor and into my aunt's bedroom, where she lay sleeping, an arm flung over her face. I stared at her damp dark curls, her smooth olive skin. I thought how much she looked like me, much more than her own children. I wished she were my own mother. Then I went to her

secret drawer and carefully and quietly took out the jewels as I had seen her do. I think I intended just to look at them, but when I had opened the tin and saw the blue diamond, *my blue diamond*, lying there so tantalizingly close to me I slipped it into my pocket, put back the tin, and left the room.

I hid the diamond in a shoebox with some beads and crayons at the bottom of my cupboard. When mother came into my room to wake me the next day for school, I said I was ill. I had a stomachache, a headache, chills. Indeed, I was not feeling well. I was shaking with terror at my terrible act. What had I done? I huddled there, my head covered with the bedclothes, waiting for the police to come to throw me into jail. My darling aunt would never speak to me again, I was convinced. I would never see my dearest cousins.

After a few days, I could no longer get away with my imaginary malady – “There is nothing wrong with you as far as I can see, my lady,” Mother said, having taken my temperature and felt my forehead. I was sent off to the smart private school paid for by my aunt, whom I had just robbed.

Then so much happened and so quickly that I almost forgot about the blue diamond lying hidden in the dark at the bottom of the box, covered over with plastic beads, though somewhere in my mind I was certain it was the diamond itself and my evil action which were the cause of so much unhappiness.

No sooner had I risen from my bed than Mother took to hers with terrible pains in her shoulder. The doctors came and went in silence, and Mother was soon taken to hospital by my aunt. “Just for a few tests, darling,” she explained. I was sent to stay at my aunt’s for the rest of the school term, leaving the shoebox in the cupboard in Mother’s shut-up flat. No one spoke of diamonds; indeed, no one spoke much at all. The big house had become suddenly quiet, the servants unusually attentive to my needs, my rambunctious cousins cowed, watching me solemnly with big eyes. No one would answer my questions. What was wrong with Mother? Why did I find my aunt weeping in her room? “Just hay fever,” she said.

I would be taken to visit Mother every afternoon after school, while my lucky cousins played in the big, beautiful garden. Mother lay there silently in her white hospital bed staring into

space, hardly able to speak, increasingly breathless. Sometimes she would ask for a little oxygen to help her breathe. She looked terrible, her skin a sort of ghastly yellow, like the tips of her nicotine-stained fingers. I knew instinctively she was dying, though she kept assuring me she would be “right as rain.”

At times, sitting by her hospital bed, I was tempted to tell her what I had done. I wanted to just take the blue diamond back to my aunt, certain now that she was right, that it brought bad, terrible luck. This was all my fault.

But Mother would look at me, her brown eyes filled with tears, and say, “My darling, darling girl! You were just born like that, an angel, always so good from the beginning. You have been such a joy to me. My joy and my solace.” What could I say?

Somehow, my poor mother perishing before my eyes, and so fast, I never dared to admit to the theft, or even to ask to be taken back to the flat to recover the diamond. It was obviously too late for that. The irrevocable harm was done. I left the source of my guilt but also of my security lying in the flat in the shoebox while Mother’s condition worsened day by day. Increasingly, the diamond seemed all I had. My father had gone, and now I was losing my mother. And it was all my fault! All I could do was sit by Mother’s side and hold her thin hand, saying silent prayers: *Please don’t let her die! Please don’t let her die!* while she heaved for breath, until a nurse came into the room one afternoon and told me I should leave.

Mother died so quickly and so violently, desperately searching for breath, that the whole theft almost disappeared from my mind. I could not understand how a pain in her shoulder was a sign of lung cancer, but that was what she had had, my aunt finally explained to me. It had “ripped” through her body, my aunt said. They had not even found the primary.

I was not taken to the funeral but allowed to stay in the sunshine, clambering around the rock garden in my brown Clark’s shoes with Miss Prior and my cousins, who were unusually quiet and subdued and strangely kind and considerate. “You take the best potato,” they told me, passing the dish, which made me not want it. No one mentioned the word *cancer*, or even death.

“You’ll have to sleep in the blue room,” Susan said, referring to the little room next door to the nursery. I didn’t know if it would

be polite to ask if I could sleep with them. I didn't want to be alone.

But I was no longer to sleep with my cousins or near them or even to sleep in my aunt's house. On my arrival back from school, only a few weeks after mother's death, as Gladys opened the front door for me, she said, "Your aunt has a surprise for you," and something in her satisfied expression made me wary. It even crossed my mind that the police had now, finally, come for me.

Indeed, when I entered the veranda, I found a strange man sitting there sipping tea from Aunt Kitty's best shell-shaped cups, but he was not a policeman, or if he was he had brought his wife. Beside him, sitting upright, her legs crossed to the side, was a smart, slim woman who wore a white blouse, a tight gray skirt, high heels, and very red glossy lipstick on her thick lips.

Aunt Kitty rose with a big smile to greet me, to take me by the hand and to push me gently forward as she announced her news triumphantly, and with what I could not help but feel was a certain relief, "Your father has come all the way from France to claim you." There was nothing I could do but watch, appalled, as my father rose from the wicker chair in his narrow beige slacks, and, smiling at me, showing his yellow teeth, came forward to put his arms around me, to embrace me.

Aunt Kitty had telegraphed him after Mother's death, I understood, and he had come out immediately all the way from France to get me. How could my aunt have summoned this man my mother had repudiated, saying he was dead? Why had she called him forth? Did she want to get rid of me, her Pet?

I did not find him dashing at all, with his thin, pale face, and the little prim mustache, which pricked my cheek when he embraced me. I did not like his smell or the sound of his French voice, or his curly, oily hair. All I could do as soon as he let me go was perch on the arm of my aunt's chair, an arm slung around her neck while my father plucked at the neat pleats of his beige pants.

That night I went into my aunt's room and begged her not to banish me. "Don't make me go with him," I said.

"There's nothing I can do, Pet," Aunt Kitty said, disengaging herself from my clinging arms. "He is your father, for better or for worse. Every girl needs a father. You are lucky to have him in your

life. Besides, it will be a grand adventure! I wish I could have gone to Paris at ten! Think of it! Gay Paree! I was there with your Uncle Max. We stayed at the George Cinq. You'll love it. And you'll learn French and be so smart and so pretty. Parisians are the only ones who really know how to dress."

"But I want to stay with you!" I said desperately. She shook her pretty dark curls and said, "If he wants you to go with him, you'll have to go," which was, indeed, what I was obliged to do.

I was allowed to go back to Mother's flat for the last time, accompanied by my father, who walked around our two rented rooms with a proprietary air, picking up and putting down a few dusty objects, with some disdain, while I slipped into my room and placed my old cardboard suitcase on the bed. I put Mother's favorite books, a few old toys, my old moth-eaten rabbit, a few skirts and sweaters, and the shoebox with the diamond into the suitcase and closed the lid.

Before I left, I threw myself into my aunt's arms, kissing her passionately, still hoping that at the last minute she might relent. How could she abandon me so easily? Was I not part of her family, her child, her Pet? But what she whispered in my ear was, "You didn't see my blue diamond anywhere by any chance, did you darling child?"

"Oh, no," I said, "Is it lost?"

She smiled at me and shook her head.

Somehow, I could not tell her the truth, which would make her hate me and put me in prison. Also, somewhere in the back of my mind was the thought that I had lost my mother, my home, my cousins, my friends, and my school, and though I might not merit my aunt's affection, I still had the blue diamond. I heard Aunt Kitty saying "worth a fortune." I was a special girl with a special gift from God.

2.

I'm not certain why my father came to claim me. Certainly he was not the person I had pictured in my mind (a rakish, reckless individual with a dazzling smile), the one my mother had conjured up in my imagination. On the contrary, a diligent man, he

worked long hours for low pay in a government office, a *fonctionnaire*, or civil servant, coming home late at night and leaving early in the morning. I could not imagine him running up debts. He was very careful with his money. He was always impeccably dressed and punctiliously polite. A man of few words, he spoke in a soft voice, coming and going in silence with his battered leather briefcase. After dinner he would smoke his pipe and read the newspaper or a book, sitting in the same chair under the standing lamp, stroking his little mustache thoughtfully, while his wife did the dishes with some clatter in the kitchen. Eventually, he would get up and help her, drying dishes while slipping his arm around her waist surreptitiously from time to time. I think he was sincerely fond of his wife.

Certainly the French wife, Christine, had little time for me. She was not a bad woman, and did her duty, but she had perhaps consented to my coming into their household hoping my wealthy aunt would bestow money upon her niece or at least pay for her food. Aunt Kitty did, indeed, pay my tuition at a good private school, the *École Bilingue* in Paris, but my aunt, who was no fool, I came to understand, paid the money directly to the school. I would trudge back and forth daily to the *Rue du Théâtre*, going through the streets of Paris, it seemed to me mostly in the dark and the rain, hugging the walls, my gaze on the gray pavement, leaving early in the morning with my heavy satchel on my back. Winter seemed to last forever in Paris, and it was always raining. I couldn't see what was "gay," as my aunt had said, about it. I missed the sunshine, the garden, the servants, my mother, and above all my adored aunt, who had abandoned me so easily, or so it seemed to me.

There was no other money forthcoming as far as I know. Occasionally, for a birthday or Christmas, Aunt Kitty would send me a parcel with a pretty frilly dress I had no occasion to wear, a pair of smart gloves, or the dried fruit which she knew I loved and which I was obliged to share with my father and Christine. But she rarely wrote more than a postcard – "Wish you were here!" – and my naughty cousins did not answer my dutiful letters.

When I came back from school in the afternoons to our sixth-floor flat in the fifteenth *arrondissement*, Christine made it clear I was expected to help with the shopping, the cooking, and the

cleaning in the tiny apartment. “No black servants here, Mademoiselle!” she pointed out with a slight sneer. I would pull the shopping cart along the narrow pavements, making my way through the crowds, visiting the various shops (*boulangerie*, *boucherie*, *blanchisserie*, etc.) with my list, with the precise amounts and sums to be spent, clutched in my fist. My room was a small closet up some stairs, a *mansard*, or attic, obviously once a maid’s room. There was one tiny cupboard, where I hid my shoebox under some sweaters with its precious contents, but no one ventured in there, as far as I could see.

There was no bathroom up there, and I had to use the facilities in the tiny flat, a malodorous toilet which splashed up high or did not void the waste when flushed. French plumbing, I understood, was not their forte.

Christine was a clever, thrifty Frenchwoman who came from the bourgeoisie. She was slim and smart, and her face was always skillfully made up at all hours of the day and night, and her blond hair neatly caught back in a chignon. She managed the money my father handed her for food cleverly. She was an ace at dishes that cost nothing but took some time to prepare. She made *chouffleur au gratin*, *endive au gratin*, and *épinards au gratin* (various vegetables covered in grated cheese), or a variety of quiches, which were mostly milk and eggs and cheese. “La viande est très chère en France, vous savez!” she reminded me firmly if we ever had meat for dinner, and I dared to reach for seconds. (Fortunately I learned French quickly, as children do, as she spoke no English.) She made me grate the cheese in the tiny kitchen with its view of the Parisian rooftops, and chop the vegetables for her soups and her stews. She was the master of the *petit plat mijouté* – there was always something simmering on her stove, while she stood humming in high heels, taking a few dance steps, twitching her hips, with her frilled apron tied tightly around her small waist, stirring away while smoking a cigarette. Like my mother she chain-smoked. She was often out and about on her own, shopping, she said. I presume she used the money she saved on the food for her own enjoyment.

Did she have a lover, close friends, or even family? If she did, I was never invited to share her secrets. She made me vacuum and dust and polish and do my homework. I was not allowed to bring

friends home for meals, though no one ever paid much attention to when I came home or where I was. Increasingly, I hung around the school in cafés, eating sandwiches and drinking Coca-Cola, with the few friends I was able to make, who were mostly foreigners like me. My best friend was an American girl, Annabel, with a large and generous family, who would invite me home.

From time to time, when I was particularly unhappy or lonely, which was often, I would take out the blue diamond from its box, slip it on and off my fingers, and stare at it, as I had done on my aunt's bed. It would bring back those sunny moments of laughter and love from the past and promise a bright future. I felt better just knowing it was there. When a teacher scolded me at school or when my stepmother reprimanded me for a task sloppily performed, I would stand there not listening to her words. I would think of the diamond. *You don't know what I have, you old cow, you don't know that I have a secret fortune, a great gift hidden up in my room. I am much better than you are.*

Then one afternoon, I must have been thirteen or fourteen by then, coming back from school I went upstairs to my room. From the moment I walked in I could see someone had been up there, though there was no visible trace of anyone's presence. It seemed to me I could smell my stepmother's pungent perfume, Guerlain *l'Heure Bleue*. I went to my shoebox and scratched madly among the beads, the crayons, but to no avail; it had gone. Someone had taken my treasure. I felt as if poison were seeping slowly through all my veins. I felt physically ill, my head spun, and I was afraid I might faint. I could only retreat to my bed and cover myself over, lying there shaking, as I had so many years before when I had stolen the stone.

Christine, eventually, came to inquire about me and finding me ill was unusually solicitous, tripping up and down the stairs and bringing me her *petits plats mijoutés* and trying to coax me out of bed with promises of treats. We would go to the sea together, she said. Eventually, I rose reluctantly and went downstairs, though in my sorrowful state I felt I could hardly walk. I had lost all that made me special. I was just like everyone else, worse than everyone else, a motherless child.

I was curious as to what I would find downstairs, convinced

there would be new signs of wealth. I expected to see signs of my bright diamond in the small flat. Surely Christine and my father would now be rich, having acquired a great fortune, my fortune, but nothing much seemed to have changed. There was not even a bowl of flowers, though Christine and my father did take me for a holiday as promised that summer. We went to the sea in Trouville, Normandy, where they rented a pretty old house, and where my father and I went swimming together in the cold sea and played on the beach, collecting shells while my stepmother stretched out in a deck chair sunning herself in the uncertain French sunlight.

At the *rentrée*, no longer having my diamond, I realized that I would have to count on my own skills to star or just to make a living. I became more diligent, applying myself to my studies. In the evenings after supper my father would now help me with my homework. A clear thinker, he was excellent with the summary, the *exposé*, and the writing of a well-structured essay. "Make a list of the causes," he would say, referring to the French Revolution or the American War of Independence. I came to see what Mother had meant about his mind, and I too discovered the joys of structuring material, working hard, doing well. I had inherited, I found, my mother's good mind and even her love for books.

My father praised my good results, encouraged my efforts, and even took me out for treats when I triumphed. He would take the three of us out to dinner, and would even give Christine money to take me shopping with her once in a while. "Take the girl and get her something nice," he would say. Christine had excellent taste, knew where to find a bargain, and enjoyed outfitting me in smart clothes which suited my new figure. She would sit in a chair in the shop and have me parade before her, regarding me with a critical air.

Though I believed my father's interest in me must be due to the fortune I had brought him, still, I basked in his attention and approbation and with his help and guidance began sincerely to enjoy my schoolwork, the great French writers: Balzac, Flaubert, and his favorite, Maupassant.

I asked my father one evening when we were on our own in the flat, why Mother had told me he was dead. Sitting in his habitual armchair under the standing lamp, he took his pipe out of his mouth, stroked his little mustache, thought for a while, and

smiled. He said gently that perhaps she preferred to think of him as dead. He said he was, indeed, at fault. He had met Christine on a voyage back home when his mother died – “Such a sensuous woman,” he said, smiling slightly at the memory. He had fallen in love with her. “Besides,” he said softly, “I didn’t want to live in South Africa. How could I live out there coming from France, the country of freedom, equality, and fraternity? Your mother was a good woman, she would stand at the side of the road, with the women of the Black Sash in silent protest. She was a very good mother – she loved you so much – but she saw things differently. Unfortunately there was something lacking – for me at least,” he confessed. I could see what he meant.

3.

Four years later, it was 1958, having passed my baccalaureate with *mention très bien*, and prompted by my father, I was allowed exceptionally to telephone my aunt to announce my good news. “You’re like your mother, a brain! I knew you would do well!” she said, and invited me to stay for the holidays as a graduation present and offered to send me a first-class ticket.

My father seemed particularly pleased for me. He told Christine to take me out and dress me up. She chose a smart, light dress, with white polka dots, a new pair of patent leather high-heels, and even a little French hat. She got me a good haircut, my dark curls framing my oval face. I accepted all of this without too many qualms, feeling it was the least they could do, having stolen a fortune from me.

My aunt was delighted to see me on my arrival at her house. “Look at her,” she said to Gladys, proudly. “Isn’t she a sight for sore eyes! I just wish her mother could see her,” she said, hugging me close. “You’ve turned into a beauty, and so clever,” she said.

We sat out on her sunny veranda as I had done so often as a child, in the wicker chairs, sipping tea from her special shell-shaped cups and eating little cakes, listening to all the gossip. My cousins had prospered, done well at school. Gillian was on the swimming team. I told her of my dream to go with my best friend, Annabel, to America and study there, if I could get a scholarship. I

wanted to be a writer, as Mother had sometimes said she would have liked to be.

“You look so much like Pam,” Aunt Kitty said, with tears in her dark eyes. “And what a beautiful dress. I told you you’d learn how to dress in Paris,” she said leaning across and rubbing the fabric between her fingers in an expert way.

“That was Christine,” I said. “She chose it.”

“But your father paid for it, didn’t he? I think he has grown very fond of you. I was worried about you, in the beginning, I must admit, but there really wasn’t much I could do.”

My cousins were both still in boarding school, so my aunt and I had some time on our own together. One evening she said she would take me for a special dinner to the Oasis, a restaurant in Johannesburg that she loved. She told me to dress up, which I did.

It was only in the restaurant, sitting at a corner table with its white starched tablecloth and little bowl of flowers, a small lamp casting light over all, that I noticed it. As my aunt reached for the bread I saw the glitter, the deep blue filled with light: the blue diamond!

Aunt Kitty saw me stare and lifted up her hand to look at the stone. She laughed. “I suppose, after all, that you should be the one to have it,” she said taking it off her finger.

“Oh, no!” I said appalled. “I don’t want it!”

“But you will need it. Even if you get a scholarship you will need money for books and to live for four years, and living in America, even as a student, is not cheap,” she said.

“But I cannot take it!” I said almost weeping now. “What about your girls!”

“They have quite enough, and they would only lose it. You were always the one who appreciated it, weren’t you?”

She laughed at my expression and said, “Of course you realized, those jewels, the ones I let you play with as children, that I kept in the house were all copies. I would never have kept the real ones in a house full of servants and let little children play with them.”

“But they were so beautiful!” I gasped.

She replied, “‘Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder,’ – as they say. It’s remarkable how people will take paste as real if they think the wearer is wealthy. That’s the trick. In a way paste dazzles more than the real thing. It’s brighter. I wore a cheap pair of earrings

once which came from a Christmas cracker to a party, and everyone raved about them. That's what gave me the idea. All an illusion. The real things are not as bright or as pretty, and they were in the bank."

Weeping, I tried to apologize, "I'm so sorry. I stole it and then I thought it was stolen from me! I imagined father . . .," I said, and wept, sitting there opposite her in my Parisian finery, paid for by my maligned father, crimson with shame at my hard, suspicious heart.

She said, "You were a child, and your father called me, and I told him the whole story. He's a fine man, your father, you know. I knew your mother had underestimated him. I would never have let you go with someone I thought would be unkind to you. "

"Oh, no!" I said again, thinking how unfair I had been to everyone, how nothing had been as it seemed.

My aunt took the stone and put it in my hand and closed my fingers on it. She said, "Well, now I want you to have the real thing – I think you deserve it, but I would sell it as fast as you can because I do think it brings bad luck. It will pay for your college and then some."

So I took the stone to one of the big auction houses on my arrival in New York, and it was auctioned for a considerable sum, which allowed me to pay for my four years at Barnard without any debt. I was also able to send my father a rare first edition of Maupassant's stories, which he loved, and my stepmother a bright ruby ring that would match the glossy red lipstick she always wore so bravely.

Yet all the time I was in college studying diligently, doing well, reading all the books I had wanted to read, and despite my relatively secure circumstances, I could not help but feel I had lost something precious, a dream perhaps.