Our airport was always under construction. They tore down a wing that they didn’t need anymore and were building another section, so for years we’d put up with mazes of plywood walls. The United corridor was about a year old and they chose some nice art. The ceilings were so high that they hung art floating in the air, reflecting colored shapes from the light of the windows. By the security checkpoint where we waited they had a flock of paper airplanes, each a little different, suspended and hanging, barely disturbed by the highest breezes of everyone’s comings and goings. I looked up at one airplane, painted pretty blue and sleek, sharp at the ends, like it would really fly.

My daughter always hugged me first. But this time she looked at me, and hugged Arnold. The whole time, she looked at me that way she did, her little wire glasses low on her nose. She looked right over the top of them. No one under 65 should look over the top of her glasses at you. I used to find it rude, unnerving. She thought it made her far away but imposing, and it did make it hard to look at her. I hoped she wasn’t noticing the three new tiny red veins at the tip of my nose.

She didn’t even hug me. “Mom!” she said. “What happened?”

“Do you like it?” I said, trying to smile and show it off, but she made me so nervous.

“I can’t believe you... you look like someone else.”

“Welcome home, honey.” I turned to show her my profile. “It’s different, huh?”

“Mom!” She said the word like an insult. “No. Yes. It’s bizarre. You got a fucking nose job? What happened to ‘You have to love that nose; it’s our family jewels’? Whatever happened to ‘Don’t give in to magazine beauty, it’s created to make women feel bad and buy things.’” She even got my flat-Chicago vowels right.

“There comes a point when you can’t listen to anyone’s dogma,” I told her.

“Bullshit!” she said.

A small child dragging a large backpack stared, and his mother pulled him away.

“Honey if I had done it twenty years ago, it would have been for the wrong reasons. You know how I’ve always hated my nose, so why not change what I can?”

“But Mom it’s your nose. You were born with it. Should I believe anything
you used to say? What...what if I came home and said that I’d gotten Baptized last week?"

Thank God Arnold stepped in. “Sharon, you know we’d be disappointed, but --”

“You are both crazy. I don’t believe either of you. This is so weird.” She laughed a little. Then we all laughed, not really laughed, but snickered at each other. “Did it hurt?” she said.

We headed past the gift shop, through the construction tunnel, to baggage claim. And then my daughter was her old curious self, asking about how much of my face turned black and blue, what kinds of tools they used, did I hear the bone break? It was a pleasure to tell her about how Dr. Fabbal broke the bone. I didn’t feel anything. He said he’d never seen one like mine. He had to redo it because at first I couldn't breathe well. I was lucky that he specialized in noses. Once he took out that nasal packing, and then really once the splint was off, I knew he was good. My daughter even nodded as I said that. Then she asked how much it cost, and when I told her nine thousand dollars, it was a big job after all, she got this terrible look on her face.

“Mom!” she said it that way again. “Mom! That’s ridiculous. I can’t believe, after all your talk about how--”

“Honey. I know. But look, it’s just a normal old nose, now. Aren’t you a little happy for me?” It used to have such a bump that I could see it without a mirror, if I just looked at it a little cross-eyed. And it had too much flesh on it. If it had been all bony, it would have been elegant, European, but it was simply ugly. It was like this UFO that landed on my face. It was wrong. Now it even dips a little at the top. I wasn’t expecting that.

Arnold went to get the car. I was about to follow him out, to tell him to come back and help us carry her things when my daughter said, “Mom.” She said it under her breath, but loud and tight and it grabbed me back to her. “You. We don’t have this kind of money.”

It’s amazing what fabrics luggage comes in these days. I saw a woman with one that had the ornate stitches of an old carpetbag. Then she snapped out wheels from secret compartments and I knew it was brand new. Well, I had to tell my daughter that she couldn’t go back to her fancy college in the fall. She ran off to the other end of the conveyor belt and stood watching people’s luggage go by. She was hugging her sides so hard as if she wanted to cry.

She was usually so stoic. Sure, occasionally she did something strange. She went through a period in junior high, at least five times in a couple months, she’d call me from school and beg me to come pick her up immediately. I didn’t mind so much. Usually she just did the best with what she got. I had always been very proud of her for that. What did I know? Maybe she had changed drastically over the school year. She hadn’t come home for Winter Break. She said she’d rather save the plane ticket money, and stay out there and work. How could I have argued with that?

Arnold and I wanted things to be different with our kids. We didn’t want them to need to go so far away.

I walked over to her, and for some really long minutes she didn’t say
“You can’t let me go to school for two years then yank it away,” she said. “Next year I was going to study with the best physiology prof. You don’t know how amazing it is. You never even came to visit.”

“You never invited me, honey,” I told her.

“That’s not the point. Could you grab one handle?” she said, disentangling her duffel bag straps from someone else’s suitcase.

“You know education is very important in our family,” I told her. “Let’s get a cart for all your luggage.” She said she didn’t need it, so I continued. “We never really could afford it. All those rich kids, it’s just not real life. You can study biology at Portland State. Your brother Mark is grateful to go to University of Oregon next Fall. When you get out into the world, you’ll realize that this is just a small part of life.” I didn’t want to lecture her. I wanted her to hug me. She didn’t say anything. I started to tell her that I had to get the operation. I had too many years of hating it packed into that hump on my nose.

“Mom.” She ran off to the customer service area, and pulled a long skinny bike box back to where I stood. She smiled, crooked. “Mom,” she said again. “You know, don’t you, that all research proves that a person’s nose is one of the few body parts which continue to grow throughout her whole life. There’s nothing you can do about that.” She said something about calling the financial aid office. Then she hauled off her things, well, as fast as she could go, but she had to slow down for the automatic door. I caught up to her at the curb, where she and Arnold were inside our old station wagon, lowering the back seat to make room. They were almost yelling at each other, and Arnold does not get angry. I thought it might be about me, but she wanted to use his computer at work and he didn’t think that was ethical. She said she only needed it for half an hour, and he said that didn’t matter. She said she’d meet him after six on Monday, and he said he didn’t want to stay that late. My daughter is not a whiner. Finally, Arnold said he’d do it himself on his lunch break and she growled a thank you.

I offered that she could squish in and sit up front with me, but my daughter got into the back and lay down next to her bike box.

I stood in the basement, leaning against Arnold’s workbench, with those hammers and saw blades hanging behind me. On top of the doorway I had hung a few of our old banners: “Equal Pay for Equal Work” and “Keep Your Laws Off My Body.” I watched my daughter lay out the pieces of her bike. I didn’t know where she learned to fix it. I didn’t know where she got that bike, because she didn’t get it in Portland. As far as I knew, she hadn’t rode a bike since her yellow one got stolen in sixth grade. I told her I liked her skirt. It was sweet: thin brown material and little flowers on it. But it was short. She said it’s perfect for biking, which I didn’t understand at all. She finally stopped shaving her legs. When she was 12, when I had just joined a consciousness-raising group, we fought about her shaving. I wanted to save her from that, but she kept skipping gym class so she wouldn’t have to wear shorts. Then one of my old friends gave her an electric razor for her Bat Mitzvah, and that was that. Billie, from my group, gave her Our Bodies, Ourselves. It was the first edition then. I think both gifts scared her a
She’d always been handy, like her Dad, and also klutzy. She kept dropping the wrench. Either she thought she was holding it more firmly than she was, or she was testing how lightly she could hold it but her bravado kept failing her. She worked carefully, though. She was good that way, my daughter, very focused and very independent. She did her own laundry when she was five; she used a cute little step stool, and she insisted. I studied her for what she wouldn’t tell me. I wondered if maybe I did the wrong thing; my daughter clearly disapproved. I had hoped that when she got home we’d find a favorite cafe and go to matinees together. I was watching her attach the seat, and she said, “Mom, you’re hovering. I’ll tell you when I’m ready to go.”

Arnold and I had talked about renting a tandem bike down at Waterfront Park. He would sit in front. It looked so fun, those couples biking along the boardwalk, legs going round and round together. But I hadn’t been on a bicycle since I was a girl.

I read in the paper how all these women thought Barbra Streisand was glamorous, but I was older than her and even if she had grown up in our neighborhood, made millions when I was still a girl, she wouldn’t have been beautiful. Not when I was growing up. Ugly Jewish girl. Ugly, Jewish, and girl. It was that bump. It was. Sometimes after I got it fixed I was like Ahab with his leg he lost but kept feeling, but that enormous bone and flesh hill of my nose, more than the length, was what made me furious. Even the Jewish kids teased. My baby sister did, because she got my mother’s, long and straight enough to be called aquiline, that’s all.

When I got older people told me it wasn’t THAT big. But people looked at me, especially when Arnold and I moved out here. They never saw my yellow-green eyes. In Portland, I never saw a nose like my old one. It was bigger than Barbra’s, but definitely not like Jimmy Durante. Men got away with bigger ones. Mark’s nose had a huge bump, in a funny place, too. More like a lump in the middle. I didn’t think he had ever thought about it. I hoped he didn’t, but it was not fair. I knew that Sharon struggled. I knew she was fighting. She tried to look like she didn’t care what anyone thought, but I saw it. Sometimes I wanted to shake her and tell her that being so defiant wasn’t going to help her figure out who she really was, but she had to learn that for herself.

All that consciousness-raising I did, co-counseling, couples therapy. In 1977 I almost signed the lease on my own apartment. Billie and I even convinced Rabbi to say “men and women” in the Prayer for the Congregation. All of that was and wasn’t enough.

When my daughter came home with her bike it was perfect for me to try biking again. I sat upstairs reading the newspaper, waiting for her to fix her bike. I overheard her on the phone, silly, light. I could hear her getting louder, probably talking over her friend, escalating, to add to the joke they made. “They never grounded me in high school,” she said. “They didn’t believe in it. Now I’m grounded from college because my mom wanted a new nose.” Then she said, “I was just realizing how cool she was in the 70s. Next she’s going to tell me that she’s going to break my nose for me. That way, I can have one like hers, but they
won’t have to fucking pay for it.”
I turned on the radio, but my favorite station was playing some very grim Brahms, and I wasn’t in the mood.

One day I met Billie at the Jewish Community Center for a lecture on pioneer Jews in rural Oregon. It was about a year ago, because it was right after Billie had hers done. After the lecture, we wandered around the Center and caught up on each other. We passed by what was usually a glass case with all the trophies. Mark was in there, in a couple of team pictures. But the wall was knocked out, and pylons and yellow tape kept us from looking too closely at what they were doing.

Billie and I got to the preschool wing, and it was dark but a nice long hallway for walking. My daughter loved that preschool. She begged to stay all day.

On a bulletin board, in big letters was the word “SMELL.” There were little pockets of cinnamon and pine needles to sniff at. There were some violent drawings of things that smelled bad: garbage, a baby brother with arrows to his tush. Then they had hung a whole class-worth’s of papier mache noses. Little ones, they almost all looked the same. A tiny flatter here, slightly wider there, but no bumps, not yet.

Billie’s face still looked a little beat-up. I told her I was surprised that I felt almost as angry and scared as I felt happy about her bruises and her new nose. “I know,” she said, and started to cry, and then we both cried. I could not look at her. I just stared at that pocket of pine needles.

“I don’t want to drive to the bike path with you,” my daughter said when she carried her bicycle up the stairs. “I mean, I’d rather bike. I don’t want to pull apart my bike again, I’d feel sorry for it.”
“Sure?” Arnold said. “Is that a 32-inch frame?”
“I’ll ride. I know a shortcut,” she said, putting on those gloves with the fingers chopped off. She opened the door for me.
“You can give us any tools you want us to bring,” I told her. “Or equipment. I don’t know what you need, but whatever.”
“Beat you there,” my daughter said.
“I don’t think so,” I said.
“Don’t worry about it. I’ll meet you at the viewpoint where the path starts.”
Arnold, left hand on the steering wheel, right hand on my headrest, still the man who rescued me from my father’s house, Arnold and I talked about our daughter.
“She’s gotten mean,” I said.
“No, it’s like this when she comes home, remember? It’s just out East, they’re so fast there. It takes her some time to slow down. Everyone keeps some of their roots. We can’t help it. You know that.”
“Did you notice how skinny she’s gotten? She’s all muscle now, even her big arms. Well, she’ll have time.”
“That’s what she’s edgy about,” my husband said. From the side he looked like Prince Charles. “You could have broken it to her easier last night.”

“Honey,” I said, “we’ve always said we’d be honest with our kids.”

“You could have waited.”

“That would have been lying.”

We pulled into the viewpoint parking lot, and got out. My daughter wasn’t there yet. The view was beautiful on a clear day. It wasn’t a clear day, it was cloudy and not that warm, but I still saw over the tops of the evergreens to the timber floating down the Willamette River below and also across the river to the horizon to Mt. St. Helen with her flat wrecked peak. I looked out and was so grateful that Arnold and I left Chicago. My kids didn’t know how lucky they were to grow up in Portland. Sometimes we joked that we moved there so our kids would turn blond.

“I supported you.” Arnold said as we got out of the car. “I’m glad you did it. And I can’t wait to see what the photographer did. But, you know, with Sharon so upset I wonder --”

“--Of course it was right. You know it’s important that I take care of myself. You agreed.”

“Think about it,” Arnold said. He watched a bicyclist who held the leash to a dog, both of them panting and persisting up the steep hill. “It’s too late, we can’t undo it--”

“--Thank God.”

“I never fought you on this one. I was disappointed she never even thought about University of Illinois. But try to imagine how she feels.”

I turned and saw a biker standing to pedal up the hill, then crouching over, her shiny blue helmet sliding back. Then I saw her face all bunched up, determined, and the little brown skirt flapping.

“She can get her own apartment when she finds a job,” I said.

“Hi you guys,” my daughter said smiling, looking all pleased with herself, as she leaned her bike against a parking meter.

“How was the ride?” my husband asked.

“Long. These hills are excellent,” she said. She flopped over and touched her whole hands to the ground, without bending her knees, then got up and stretched out her legs like runners do. “That’s one good thing about Portland.”

Arnold took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped some sweat off my daughter’s forehead. “Maybe I’ll rent a bike sometime, and we can find that new trail through Forrest Park,” he said. “I don’t know if you remember that tax levy a few years ago, it must have been the first election you voted in, that’s what funded it. Our parks haven’t gotten any funding since.”

“Sounds fun. Ready, Mom?”

I didn’t want to start on the hills, so we said we’d meet at the bottom.

They were still repairing from the mud slides this spring. We drove by one place where the hill took over the road and it was still only one lane in that spot while they pushed the dirt and plants back to where they belonged and built another road through it. It was a terrible mess.

My daughter made a big show of adjusting the seat for me. Her legs had
gotten long. Arnold held the bike and I sat on that hard narrow saddle, and saw her college’s vehicle registration stuck to the bike’s neck. She heaved the seat, and me on top of it, up and down by inches, until she said my feet had perfect contact with the pedals. She demonstrated how the hand brakes worked, and she was patient and kind.

It was too cold for her out there anyway. She kept saying how she needed a down coat, a down comforter, silk long underwear. She didn’t need those things at home. Sitting on the bike seat it seemed crazy, but I had thought my daughter would be happy for me, that she’d see how happy I was, that she’d be happy to have such a pretty mother. She was just a little angry right then.

“You’re ready to go,” she said, almost looking through her glasses at me.

“What about your helmet?” I said.

“You don’t need it on the path, Mom.” She swung her helmet by the chin strap.

“Are you sure? I’d feel better.”

“Don’t be so scared. You’ll remember how fun biking is in a minute.”

Arnold kept holding the bike steady. He bent over, and kissed my forehead. “Ready?” he said.

I nod, and I am riding. I wobble some, and teeter. The bike has the skinniest wheels you’d ever want to see. One tiny shard of beer bottle, and they’d go flat in a second. Then how much can fancy hand brakes help? I roll forward not too fast, but it’s still more downhill than I thought it was. I pedal a little. I pass families, everyone in sweaters and parkas, picnicking under tall evergreens and at unusable exercise stations. Those rollerbladers zip by me so fast, and they get so close, they’re worse than the cars. Even joggers pass me by, but I don’t mind because, hey, this is fun, I feel so free and almost flying. I turn around and look back to my husband and daughter. They smile and wave. They’ve been watching me.

I turn back in time to steer around a construction site. I’m getting good. I pedal harder, up a small hill, my heart pumps faster now and it feels great. Poor Sharon. She’s tough, she’ll be fine. But I wonder when she’ll realize all the ways she’s like me that she just cannot change. A dog wanders in front of me, right in my path and I brake! I can’t stay on the bike! I’m falling. I throw my hands out, and they skid and sting on the sidewalk. My elbows give in and I roll over to my side. Or I try to, but one leg catches in the damn bike frame, then the chain lands heavy on my thigh, then the whole bike does. Something pounds inside my thigh. I can’t get the bike off of me. I try to kick it off, to kick out my leg. I want the bike off of me. My leg hurts. The spokes spin wildly and I turn to look for my family.

Arnold runs toward me, calling my name. The dog licks my face all wet and slobberly, until his owner apologizes and apologizes and tugs his dog away. My daughter crouches at my side, pulling the bike out of me, asking if I am all right. She asks if I can move my legs, can I get up, am I bleeding? My husband kneels down and gently lifts my head, my hands, and looks at me. He asks my daughter if I look pale, then asks me how much it hurts. I shake my legs, but I want to stay where I am. My husband says something over and over, soft. I rest
my head in his lap and I close my eyes then squint up at my daughter. She holds her bike with one hand and the other hand covers her mouth, and I can tell by her eyes that she is laughing.