

Sex is the alibi

Tethered and bound

Our backs across the room

From each other we sing

— OLGA BROUMAS, 'THE PROHIBITION'

## Prologue

IN 1982, WHEN my daughters were four and one, I decided to kill them.

It was a hot, late June day; in the landlord's garden, blue lupine climbed the garage wall. A dull, rotund cat sun-bathed on the stone fence. It was two o'clock, and there was a humming silence on our quiet East Vancouver street. My children were sleeping, sweetly sleeping, Carolina in her yellow flowered sundress, Amy in only a diaper with the red ribbon from her soother falling across her chest. Both girls slept on their backs with their limbs askew, their hair damp and curled on their brows. Carolina clutched her blanket and Amy, her grey elephant.

I was so in love with them, there at the door of their bedroom, that all I could think of was murder.

I had not folded up my bed yet, and I lurched through the musty basement hallway to the disarray of my sheets. The suite was all of a parcel: I slept alone in the living room, which adjoined the ungenerous kitchen. I stripped off my robe and crawled into bed, wrapping humidly around myself.

My thoughts were in a formative language, a language without letters. Just one thing was clear: I must kill Carolina and Amy. I considered drowning them, how hard it would be to hold Amy and still compel Carolina to walk with me into the cold ocean water.

I took the girls to the beach as often as I could, with their plastic buckets and shovels and day-old bread for the gulls and ducks. I never tired of watching them out of doors, their adorable, still-creased legs, their fascination with castles and muck. How large the world must seem, I thought as I sat watching them and smoking, my back up against a log, the mountains blue and hazy across the inlet. Dogs were big to Carolina and Amy, and so were cats. Even the greedy, swooping gulls were big. I was big.

Someday, I thought, they will think of me as small. Like everything, this will be a discovery. For the first time, two months earlier, Amy had said Mama. For the first time, two weeks before, Carolina had flushed a grown-up toilet. I tried to understand the experience they were having, this theatre curtain rising, this heart-stopping adventure called childhood.

If I had a gun, would I shoot them? That would at least be fast. I wondered if I would have the courage: could I look at Amy, curly-haired Amy with her luminous blue eyes, with her legs kicking in her crib, and shoot her? Point blank? That body, those bodies I grew so enthusiastically inside my own, those luscious small bodies, Carolina's little toes and spatulate fingers, her toss of black hair?

When Carolina was almost nine months old, after she had crawled for only two weeks, she began to walk. It was Christmas Day, 1978. She wore a smocked dress of robin's egg blue my mother had sent from Arizona, white tights and no shoes. We were in her bedroom, all of us, me and her father, Frank, too, showing her multisized coloured rings that slid onto a tube, when Carolina began to catapult from me to her father, giggling and tilting drastically forward, two steps then four then eight, her momentum finally cascading her into her daddy's arms in a wild peal of laughter. From then on, Carolina walked everywhere. When we went along the city streets to shop, she would toddle beside me, clutching my hand, improbably propelling herself along. I'd walk bent because she was so very short. She was a baby, very nearly an infant, but she was walking, and also talking articulately, in sentences. People stopped to stare.

Everything Carolina did was a sort of miracle to me. Living with her was living in a brilliant maze of miracles, turning every corner to find a new delight, a surprise, a rapture.

Pills are the thing, I thought all of a sudden. The realization was

as hot as the mean June afternoon, there in my bed: pills, yes, whatever sorts of pills killed. Barbiturates. I could put powder into ice cream; I could lie us down in my big bed and hold the girls tight, and we could drift off to a game of Itsy Bitsy Spider, to Raffi on the tape deck.

Something loosened inside me. I slept.

I didn't know why I wanted to kill my kids. I knew it arose from instinct, that I felt like a cornered animal, fiercely protective. That murdering them, annihilating them, was a thought both unbearable and unbearably sweet in its release. This was our den; even holed up in it, though, we were still not safe. *They* were not safe. Carolina and Amy were in utter jeopardy. I knew that as thoroughly as I knew my name. It was knowledge that had been growing in increments since before Amy's birth, gaining momentum until now, nearly three months after my separation from Frank, it was at fever pitch. The girls were in trouble.

The problem was, on that Wednesday late in June, I didn't know why. I only registered the threat as it swelled towards them like fire, pressing its vivid story. I only knew I had to save my daughters, that saving them was more important to me than breath.

And so, I should kill them.