

## Chapter 33 A from Victoria's novel

Translated by Nermin Nizar

- Victoria... Victoria...

I heard my name resonating from a car in front of the entrance to my collage. I turned around to see who is calling but did not find any of the colleagues I knew. I saw Yousef peering out of the car window and waving at me. Seeing him surprised me and I rushed towards him. I rushed to asked him if Heba was alright. He smiled saying she is fine as far as he knows so I asked him why was he here. He replied that he came to see me.

Surprise took over my face slowly and I told him:

- Honestly when I heard my name I thought it was one of my friends from collage.

He twisted his lips and asked me if it was usual for me to ride my colleagues' cars. I replied that had never ridden in a car alone with any colleague but that I stand with them in front of their cars or greet them while they ride them or ride with a group.

He smiled again and said that there was no reason for a girl to ride a car with man even if she was among a group of people. He then offered to drive me home. I replied:

- I told you I don't ride cars alone with anyone.

He left the car closing the door quietly telling me I had ridden his car more than once with Heba. I repeated the last part of his sentence "with Heba". He nagged and explained that he is not a just another person but my friend and roommate's cousin. Moreover, I know his family.

I rode next to him and felt a happiness I tried to conceal. I asked him why he cared whether or not I rode with my colleagues. He smiled and leaned towards me whispering:

- Jealousy. Would this answer be enough?

I was confused and heat flushed all over my body. My underarms and palms broke out in sweat, and my heart raced. Yousef laughed and said that had not changed in the past four years although I had become much prettier. I was overwhelmed with joy and touched my hair confirming that I had become prettier.

Youssef sighed and continued that it was not only jealousy but a matter of principle. He said:

- A respectable girl does not ride cars because a car is just like a bedroom. Anything can happen in it.

I looked at him and spoke as if I had been accused and was defending myself:

- By the way I have many friends, girls and boys, and they ride cars together and nothing happens between them.

He asked with in a nervous tone:

- And where did you get to know these darlings?

I quickly replied:

- From collage

I did not mention my friends from the theatre troupe, but he surprised me by saying:

- There are no friends from outside of the church. Not even just anyone from church is our friend. I mean these from outside are colleagues. Muslims are colleagues and we don't believe a word they utter. I think you understand.

I did not tell Heba about meeting with Yousef. His visits continued. He would finish work at a car oil company at five. He had a prestigious position that he got as soon as he graduated the school of Engineering, through a powerful connection. His mother paid tens of thousands of pounds for it as he had told me. He said:

- I am Christian but rich. I can buy what a poor Muslim can not buy. This is the only advantage I have in this country.

In a few weeks I cut all connections with the theatre to comply with Yousef's request. Heba asked me why I stopped replying to calls from our friends in theatre. I told her about my relationship with Yousef. She smiled and said that this is, actually the expected effect of a relationship with a man like him. He deprives the woman of everything claiming that fears for her while giving himself the right to indulge in his pleasures. She warned me that he has let many girls down because his mother, Auntie Samah, refuses to accept his relationship with any girl claiming the girl is not up to their standard and is only interested in Yousef for his money. Strangely he does not try to defend his love. He leaves the girl with the excuse that his mother objects to their marriage. The way Heba talked about Yousef annoyed me. I dismissed the memory of what Auntie Samah did with me in Baltim because I believed Yousef. He told me he loved me and was planning to marry me as soon as I graduated.

I limited my presence in collage attending only some of the lectures and neglected the projects. I no longer hung out with the friends I made over the previous years and started going out with Yousef. I gave him a detailed report of my day. We got used to going to his favourite places and spending the weekend in City Stars Mall which I don't like but Yousef loves.

I especially loved his car because that is where I got my first kiss. I almost fainted so he laughed and kissed me some more. He told me he is madly in love with me. His kiss was better than what I had imagined in my dreams. The sweetest thing my lips ever tasted. He asked me to touch him wherever I wanted but his offer made me nervous. However I imagined myself touching his neck with my palm. His touch became real over my lips. My hands became lighter when touching his body after Yousef held my hand and taught me how to touch him. I loved his trimmed beard. Its friction over my neck drove me to want more. I wished it could touch all my body. I loved even the touch of his fingers over my body when

he reached out under my clothes and felt me up. I waited for him to invite me to visit him at home so we can do together things that don't drive a virgin to lose her virginity but he did not mention this not did I dare to mention it.

I loved the car and the time I spent in it but we were about to cause an accident more than once when Yousef would compete with other drivers over bridges. I was not able to prevent himself from racing girls who drove at high speed.

One day I skipped my last lecture of the day so we can go out. We were on our way to Heliopolis when I repeated to him how much I hate his harassment of girls when I am with him. I asked him what he did when I was not there if this was the situation while I am beside him. He replied, losing his temper:

- Victoria don't start a fight as usual. You women enjoy quarrels. Besides, you are one thing and these girls are something different.

I turned to face him and asked:

- What is the difference between me and them Mr. Youssef?

He replied quietly:

- You are respectable and do not have a car to use in fishing for men

I did not like what he said but I decided to ignore him and asked:

- What does the car have to do with it? I don't understand.

He laughed and said:

- As I said, because you are respectable. A woman driving a car who decides to challenge a man who cat calls her or cuts her way is giving him a sign to continue to the end because if she was respectable she would have minded her own business and let him be.

What he was saying was repulsive so I asked him with disgust:

- Why do men block the road on women?

He laughed out loud and told me:

- It's a hobby. Something you will not understand. And stop being sour Victoria.

I stuck my face to the window and asked him:

- If I was always sour, why do you insist on marrying me?

He said without looking at me:

- Because you are an clean sheet and I like you

I turned to him and demanded sharply that we return to Manial. He grumbled but when I insisted, he tried to flirt with me and pulled me towards him as was his habit. I turned away from him and that was unprecedented. We crossed the bridge and looked for a quiet street to park the car. He asked me violently if there was another man in my life that I had met recently as my rebellion and my many questions were not a good omen and makes him question me as wife. I told him he was hallucinating and that I wanted to return home. He tried to approach me again so I pulled back. I repeated my wish to return home. He raged and cursed me with words I only hear on the street. He accused me of knowing another man who may be a professor or teaching assistant in university who will guarantee me graduation with honors. I got angry and told him:

- You are a bastard

I don't know how this word escaped my lips. I shuddered and I tried to think of a way to apologize but Yousef left the car, slammed the door and lit his cigarette making my thoughts rush and words stumble over my tongue. After a few seconds of quiet that hovered over the car I loved, I saw what I had been doing over a number of months. I stopped designing t-shirts and selling them at university after Youssef told me that he would not accept his wife begging by patching clothes and selling them. He also constantly made fun of my studies and told me "So what is the faculty of Fine Arts? You go there to become Michael Angelo? Cut the crap you are a bunch of rascals, I see them in front of the collage with their clothes and hair"

I did not tell him about my work with the theatre troupe and I gave up on it against my will because Youssef had set a rule that I should not go out alone except to collage. Heba and Hussam tried to get me to retract these decisions and I wished to agree with them but my desire to marry Youssef was bigger... How Heba said "What happened to you Victoria. You change and gave up your dreams for such a sassy... he spends his salary on hash and women... do you know he sleeps with women?" I told her that he swore to me that he has stopped behaving this way and it had been a passing stage that ended with his decision to marry me and that he is waiting for us to be together. Heba snorted in protest and told me quietly not to blame her someday that she had not warned me and then left.

I asked Youssef to accompany me to the [old book market in] Azbakiya on Friday to buy books for me and my father rather than go to the mall. He ridiculed my request and hinted that these places and practices make me appear dull and weird. He then set a list of places we can go to on Fridays starting with mass at the church in Heliopolis and meeting his confession priest; a famous priest that appears on TV and who Youssef considers his godfather and brings him gifts every once in a while and gives him his mothers' tithe.

My father would ask me sometimes "where are the great books you got me used to you moron?" I would reply that I stopped going to Azbakiya because I am busy with my graduation project. My hands started being empty every time I returned home. No books, no new equipment, no smoked ham since all the pork shops closed after the pigs were executed the previous year.

My passion for studying vanished and I did not take one step in the graduation project. Youssef became my only passion which made him very happy. I paid attention to how I looked and spend time learning to

make dainty designs with my nail polish. I bought a curling iron to make my curls more stable and Youssef showered me with expensive gifts. I did not know how to use all of them.

The sound of Youssef slamming the door brought me back to the car. He had smoked more than one cigarette and sat quietly behind the steering wheel. He then turned and spoke to me

- I don't think you are the type I would want to carry my name.

He straighten up and drove so fast that his speed terrorized me. I started crying and was breaking down with fear. We arrived in front of my house in Manial without exchanging a word all the way. I knew then that this was the end. Rather than apologizing to him as I had thought I would, I breathed quietly and told him:

- By the way Youssef, you never overtook a girl you were tailgating. They always precede you because they are braver than you. You are a coward and fear for your car and maybe for yourself. They also give you a rude sign with their finger. Honestly they have the right to do that.

I then left the car and closed the door violently.

**A chapter from Victoria's novel  
translated by Dina Ezzat**

Victoria – Excerpt

“...From the window, I saw Egypt to be very big – much bigger than when I saw it with uncle George and my dad; actually, too big for me to survive on my own.

The driver called on the girl who wanted to get off by the Fine Arts Faculty; I did not notice he was talking to me until an older man poked me to draw my attention to the driver's call. I got up very fast and I immediately got off the bus.

I felt alright. I felt that I can breathe. But I kept making sure that my blouse was long enough to cover my hips properly. Again and again, I kept pulling the blouse down; again and again I kept looking right and left to make sure that nobody is coming too close.

I looked at the stores around, hoping to find one where there is a woman assistant to ask about the specific place of the faculty, as I am supposed to do. I found none. So, I just kept on walking and hoping to find other students with backpacks like myself so I can follow their trail.

I walked on the side streets, hoping to find the students, but instead I found lots of foreigners with fair skin and coloured eyes – with women wearing short skirts or short dresses, sleeveless tops – with some throwing shawls on their shoulders.

I thought to myself, how come they are not worried to be harassed by someone who would pinch them on the ass and I immediately reached out for my blouse to make sure that it is still hiding my hips.

I instantly loved the streets of Zamalek. It was my first time to see such villas in the intense surrounding of trees and to see stores that look nothing like the stores on the streets of my city or even like the stores on the streets of Shubra. I noticed a nice brown bag in one of the window shops; I had a close look only to realise that all the big fortune that my dad had given me prior to coming to Cairo does not amount to half the price of this bag; I just walked on.

Then I saw this pastries store which seemed too unreal for my eyes; it really looked like it came out of an animated film. I looked at the pastries. I was not familiar with any of them. I had missed breakfast and I was very hungry. It was however out of the question for me to buy one of those pastries simply because the price of a single piece amounts to my bus tickets budget for ten days. I regretted that I did not get some breakfast before leaving the dorm.

We were never poor but right after the death of my mother, my dad started to panic about spending money and he became so focused on economizing. I asked uncle George who told me that my dad was so scared that any of us would get sick and we would not have enough money for our pharmacy bills or that we would have to count on public hospitals and therefore

die before we are admitted in for treatment or even that he would get sick and die to leave me with no sufficient financial security.

I was not sure how long I kept strolling on so distracted. Then, I remembered the instructions of the nun at the dorm that pressed on me to avoid falling prey to the temptations that Masr offers because they would pollute my ideas.

I had to regain focus and find strength to stop a lady to ask her about the road to the faculty. She gave me directions. I knew I was not very far.”

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/62/484263/Books/Reviews/INTERVIEW-Karoline-Kamel-deconstructs-all-stereoty.aspx>

**Angels chapter from Victoria's novel**

My parents had enrolled me, their only child, in the kindergarten class at the Frères, where I spent just one year for financial reasons. All I can remember from that time is a picture of myself in a pink uniform. Then they enrolled me in Khalid Ibn al-Walid Primary School, affiliated with the Islamic Association, two streets away from where we lived. I do not know why my father thought of enrolling me in an Islamic school, maybe because it was the closest school to our home. I tell myself this, although there was another public school just across the street.

Khalid Ibn al-Walid is a small school, part of the Islamic Association, known as the “Sunni school.” There were two classrooms for each grade, and each classroom had around 30 to 40 students, so there were around 400 students in total, and among them us Christians, about 20 of us.

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“So dad, do angels think?”

“No they do not, not like humans do.. but they certainly possess comprehension.”

“So why did God create them if they can’t think?”

“To praise and serve him.”

“So why didn’t God want to them to think and acquire knowledge like us?”

“What would be the point of thought and knowledge when their fate is determined before their creation?”

“You mean God created them with all this might and beauty only to praise and serve him, only to carry out his will?”

“That’s right.”

“But how did the fallen angel think when he doesn’t have a mind to think for himself?”

“Because that was God’s will — it was to achieve a specific purpose.”

“So did God create humans capable of thought?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So why was he displeased when Eve thought and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?”

“Because she wasn’t supposed to eat from it.”

“Why?”

“Because that is what God had commanded.”



“But it happened because she used her thought.”

“She wasn’t meant to think this way.”

“Does this mean that thinking is evil and a sin, dad?”

“If it is ill thinking, then it is evil... when it is about matters we ought not to think about.”

“So the angel who thought for himself, it was God who made the angel think, so that means it is God who created evil.”

“No, God had foreknowledge and knew the angel would do this..”

“So why was it this particular angel who could think?”

“Because that was his fate.”

“Then God was unfair to him, because he created him to act this way.”

“Don’t say God is unfair... we can’t understand his plans... I told you before: we ought not to think about certain matters, don’t repeat what Eve did and think about unnecessary things.”

This forever thorny conversation was one my father and I had from time to time — I asked the same questions, and always received the same answers, answers that spin around inside me but that my mind cannot digest or accept. I rerun the conversation from the beginning, maybe this time my father will realize it’s a maze we enter together, then we stray away from each other in its paths, until each one comes out a different way. We ask each other what the other has seen, and we would swear on what we saw there, even though we did not see the same things. Yet, again, we try to find a path to unite us inside this maze, maybe my father could finally see my questions for what they are, or maybe this time his answers would convince me.

My mother’s voice from the bedroom interrupts our journey in the maze:

“Mafdi, if this girl does not go to bed right now both of you will see the angel of death tonight! What is wrong with you Mafdi, it is past midnight and I have work in the morning. Go to your beds right now!”

My mother can tell scary jokes sometimes too. To this my father would reply mockingly in a whisper:

“Deliver the beast from this ass!<sup>1</sup> ... Go to bed now and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

I laugh every time my father says this saying deliberately wrong. I hug him and let him go, and then I hug him again.

“I can hear you Mafdi! Stop this nonsense and go to sleep.”

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<sup>1</sup> The correct idiom, in Arabic, translates to: “Deliver the ass from the beast.” It is a rhyming idiom.

I run to my room because my mother's sarcastic tone is the warning of a coming storm if the lights are not turned off, and if she hears us still talking instead of snoring. My father tries to sneak to the kitchen to smoke one last cigarette but he realizes how risky it is. He keeps it for his dreams where maybe he can find a safe spot to enjoy it without my mother ambushing him.

I can't just go to sleep after talking about angels and demons. I keep thinking about the angel whose fate led him to become the devil, because he — against his will — had thought about things he was not meant to bring to his mind. I pity him because he lost his beautiful white wings and the blessings he had up in the heavens, and I don't know how to blame him for being different, for thinking about what he is not supposed to consider, even though that was God's will for him.

I was also distracted by the idea of collective punishment, how God punished the angels under the command of Satan, the angel who thought. Why should they all pay for the sin of a single individual?

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I enjoyed reading the Bible before going to sleep to put my mind at ease. It was the only book I could read openly back then, as my father felt that none of his books were suitable for me at that age. I used to hide the books that I liked the covers of under the mattress of my bed. I'd read them when my parents were distracted or busy and return them later to my father's bookshelves. By the time I went to high school, I had read several volumes of *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant, and some of the volumes of *Description de l'Égypte*, beside others of my father's many books and novels that he would buy every year from the Book Fair, causing terrible fights with my mother who complained that there was no space for them.

It seems that I had read the Book of Genesis and its stories about the beginning of creation dozens of times. I wanted to ask my father many questions. Wasn't God aware before he created Eve out of Adam's rib that she would think; why wasn't Adam the one who thought; what if Eve did not exist, would Adam have thought of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? He did live alone for some time, and he realized his loneliness, and wondered why he was alone while other beings enjoyed the warm company of their spouses. Nevertheless, he never thought to seek the answer in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Why did the serpent not attempt to talk with him instead? Since all of these coincidences were planned by a higher power, why was God so strict in his punishment of Eve, why was Eve's punishment so much heavier than Adam's?<sup>2</sup> These questions were left unanswered, covered by layers and layers of other questions stacked in my mind.

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<sup>2</sup> "Unto the woman he said, 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.'" (Genesis 3:16)

The Book of Genesis did not mention that animals could talk in heaven, so was the serpent capable of speech, in the human tongue? I found that the serpent and its whispers to Eve similar to the inner voice that tells me to open my mother's purse to take some small silver coins, or to drink water during fasting hours. Maybe the serpent lives only inside of us, women, that is why it knows our language and speaks to us. Maybe it was passed onto Eve's children when she gave birth to them, and only Adam lived without a serpent inside of him.

I had a sudden insight that the Bible resorted to the use of metaphors — which we had studied in Arabic class — to talk about the voices we hear inside our minds, employing that terrifying beast, the serpent, to warn us not to listen to this odious voice. I was thrilled because finally, I was able to decode the Bible and learn the identity of the serpent. It is life, and from its name Eve was derived because she is the mother of all the living as Adam called her.<sup>3</sup> I am in awe of the Arabic, but it doesn't love me back.

So many why's, that's how I was, so full of questions.

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<sup>3</sup> "And Adam named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living." (Genesis 3:20)

**A Day in the Life of a Saturday Market Trawler in Cairo**

<https://themarkaz.org/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-saturday-market-trawler-in-cairo/>

Karoline kamel

Translated to english by Rana Asfour

During every visit to the Saturday market, with my seven-year-old nephew, to buy him a new toy, I find myself involuntarily dictating what he should get. In a lucid and succinct manner that brooks no debate, I explain that I have an exceptional knack for making the right choices. I neither let him browse in peace nor do I pay any attention to his rebuffs. Instead, I launch into listing all the advantages that come with my choice. In most cases, he remains firm and insistent that he would rather do things his own way. Despite setting his sights on one or two choice models, he continues his valiant search, with an admirable shrewdness engineered so as not to upset me, for I am, ultimately, the financier of this expedition. However, I recall that during our last outing, he turned to me, quite exasperated and said: Karo! If you like this toy so much, why don't you buy it for yourself and then you can play with it?!

I remember laughing at his cheeky yet endearing spontaneity. Not only did it tickle my heart strings but proved the signal I had needed, to cease my errant behavior. I apologized for encroaching on his freedom and left him alone to wander around, while I took a seat by the salesman at the front of the store where, still upset by what I had done, I gave myself a proper scolding.

As I sat waiting, my thoughts wandered to my childhood, and all the toys I had never had. We didn't have much then, which meant that us children got not what we desired, but rather what money, stretched as it already was, could bring us. Sadly, most of the playthings my siblings and I owned were hand-me-downs from well-to-do relatives, toys that their children had gotten bored with and since discarded.

My nephew soon came trundling back brandishing a toy certainly not to my taste. Nevertheless, I congratulated him on his choice. I paid and we left.

Over the years, I've developed a habit of visiting second-hand markets. Every Saturday when I'm in Egypt, I make my way to the country's oldest market, Diana Cinema, adjacent to the famous Emad El Din Street in downtown Cairo. Once there, I'm greeted with a scene in which every inch of the ground appears covered with the wares of dozens upon dozens of vendors who offer, as Egyptians succinctly say, everything "from a needle to a rocket" — from suitcases that still bear their airport tags, rusted cutlery that have definitely seen better days, piles of eyewear that have long lost their luster, branded watches none of which work, vases made of clay, China and glass, decorative pieces that tell of a bygone era when Egyptians decorated the walls of their homes with tableaus, handmade carpets, and motifs depicting Chinese and Japanese mythology, and other knickknacks and junk too many to count.

I have never been a fan of fishing, for it is a practice that requires patience — a skill which I do not possess. However, with my regular outings to the Saturday market, I have found that patience pays off and leads to joy, particularly when encountering the unexpected. Although I no longer go to the market with any specific thing in mind, I do keep a keen eye out for old printed manuscripts and letters, and whenever I return home with my prized paper booty, I commend my newly acquired patience and meticulousness in searching among the exhibits.

As I rummage through the scores of photographs I have amassed, I am deeply moved by the lost and scattered histories they hold: the weddings, birthdays, summer vacations, and family gatherings all now relegated to the sidewalks, privy to the hands of the highest bidder. I am seized by an irrational fear that, one day, my belongings too will end up lying on a filthy sheet, exposed to the scrutiny of strangers.

Second-hand Barbies in an Egyptian flea market (photo Karoline Kamel).

When I was growing up, in the nineties, Barbie was the coveted doll. The svelte model with her long lashes, cascading blond hair, and vast wardrobe, sat supreme on the throne of all playthings. To me, she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and the various knock offs that flooded the Egyptian market paled in comparison. And yet for all of that, I never owned one, and she was forever absent from my childish tea table whose guests included a mishmash of playthings, ranging from a stuffed frog seated beside a classic Cadillac and some chess pawns and knights leaning precariously next to various farm animals. In the end I reasoned that it was probably for the best that Barbie was not present at my absurd tea party as she wouldn't have fit in beside the tea sippers — the knight might have flirted with her, or the frog might have leapt up for a kiss that would turn him back into a prince. And so it was that I found refuge in my fertile imagination to make up for the paucity of my toy box.

This time I found Barbie at the Saturday market. A number of her namesake were strewn haphazardly across a table, looking exhausted and neglected, their luster and glamour washed away. The sadness I felt in that encounter was a far cry from my imagination's Barbie, and the experience vastly removed from my childhood recollections of her standing tall inside her cardboard box decked out in her glamorous adornments and sparkly accessories. She was just like everything else there: a discarded, neglected and abandoned consumable commodity. And yet what is most unexpected and surprising is that despite the child in me that has never stopped yearning for her own Barbie, the adult me, who can now afford the latest model, isn't the slightest bit earnest. Coming face to face with these deserted models, their shoes now lost, their hair dull and faces stained with crayon mark smears, remind me I shall never be a child again. Owning her now would merely be to fill a void in my soul, nothing more.

I moved away to peruse the other stands. But, despite the hustle and bustle, it felt as though Barbie were calling out to me, urging me to provide her with a retirement home where she could spend her remaining days as a decorative piece in the house of a woman in her forties who still harbored an inner girl, her memories tainted with the bitter circumstances that had prevented her from obtaining the toys she had longed for.

I blocked my ears to the sounds, but it seemed fate was not done with me. I had stopped in front of a stack of old magazines dating back to the 1950s. Flipping through them, I realized the articles were endorsing the concept of marriage as a significant undertaking of national importance that every young male and female should invest in. The accompanying photos were of women in bridal gowns sitting in newly furnished homes, radiating stability and contentment. The entire stack resembled a grand wedding extravaganza and I resolved to obtain as many of those magazines as possible, and with luck on my side, I did.

Loaded with my new purchases and a handcrafted genuine South African leather bag adorned with intricate patterns, I felt like I had scored well. However, despite this, Barbie's voice was still ricocheting in my ears. Succumbing to the insistence of the little girl within me, I paused and reconsidered what harm it could do to return to the Barbie table and buy just one doll that I would take home, clean up, and lay beside me on my bed, finally fulfilling a life-long dream.

I had reached a considerable distance before finding myself standing in the street engaging in a firm dialogue with the obstinate inner child residing within me. In an adult voice, I calmly and rationally explained to her that the cats in my house wouldn't allow Barbie to live out her retirement in peace, nestled next to me. Between them, they would simply tear her to bits – the remains of which I would have to gather up one by one to toss in the garbage. It was better, and certainly more sensible, for another child to have her and to cherish her and for the two of us to keep her flame burning between us. After all, the adult me reasoned with her, many dreams were destined to remain as such anyways.