She wished she had never picked up the book in the first place. Wished she had never gone into the bookstore and lifted it from its shelf. But there was the morbid curiosity thing: that stopping to look at accidents on the highway compulsion from which we all suffer.

The book was a collection of crime scene photographs, with notes from a New York homicide detective, who was now retired. These actual scenes of death had no glamorous patina that some thriller movie would give them. The blood was real; the suicide victims with their heads blown off real; the burned bodies real; the executions real… clinical in black and white; sad demises recorded without one whit of sentimentality or sympathy. It made her realize that death was just as mundane, and ugly, as eating a piece of cabbage or taking a shit.

And then she came to the little girl. Oh God, she wondered, hand trembling, match’s flame wavering as she brought it to the tip of her cigarette. Oh God, why did I have to turn the page? Why did I have to see that photograph?

It was just one of many. There among the murders, the decapitations, the lovers’ quarrels that had ended in a way that ensured no one would ever love again. All of these were shocking, she could give them that much, but they were so outrageous, with all the blood, the grim display of brain and other interior matter, that they managed to keep her at a distance. She couldn’t get emotionally involved.

But then she came to that page.

That one photograph had burned itself indelibly into the soft pink tissue of her brain. A kind of branding…. As much as she would try, she knew she could never forget it. Almost of its own will, the photograph would rise up in memory, painstakingly detailed, as if she were doomed to open the book again and again to that same page, reliving the nausea for the rest of her life.

The little girl had been seven years old. She lay on a concrete floor: a women’s restroom near Coney Island. Her hair, looking light brown in the stark black-and-white forensic photograph, lay in ringlets. Her pale limbs, straight, thin, with no womanly development, were as white as marble, contrasted with the grimy floor. Cigarette butts and Kotex wrappers lay nearby. She was just another piece of garbage.

And her little outfit! It never failed to bring tears to her eyes to remember those clothes. She remembered wearing outfits like that herself as a little girl, circa 1965. Her outfit, she thought, biting her lip to hold back the sob/hiccup
The homicide detective’s notes said that the little girl had been strangled by her mother.

She stared at the photograph for longer than she should have. Maybe if she had flipped to another page, horror and sorrow making her recoil, she would not be a prisoner of this image. But she had stood in the air-conditioned chill of the bookstore, unable to tear her gaze away from the little girl lying on concrete, lips parted and eyes staring at nothing forever.

* * *

It was hot. One of those days where the box fan in their apartment window did nothing but blow the hot air around, wasting electricity and offering not even the smallest refuge from the heat and humidity. The sky was an overturned teacup of milky white, trapping the shimmering waves of heat near the concrete three stories below them, keeping every bit of moisture in the August air down low…mugginess so real it was palpable, like living inside a sponge.

And it was only nine o’clock in the morning. It had broken 100 degrees the past three days and, unless they had a storm, it would do so again today. She was listening to the radio, a Pall Mall burned down to the filter between her fingers. WNBR, out of Brooklyn. She had listened, with closed eyes, to Brenda Lee singing “I’m Sorry”; Roger Miller, “King of the Road”; and Burt Kaempfert, “Red Roses for a Blue Lady.” Maybe she wouldn’t be such a blue lady if someone had given her red roses. But they would have only wilted in the heat. And the only one who would have ever given her red roses was gone. But thinking about him only made the pain behind her eyes greater, as if he had stuck around to throw a final punch. She had placed a tepid dishrag across her forehead, thinking it would help, but all it did was force her to breathe in the smells of wiped-up Maxwell House and burnt toast crumbs.

Her head pounded, throbbed. The music didn’t help. The dishrag didn’t help. The fan didn’t help. Her right eye felt swollen, the pain coming in waves.

There was nowhere to go to escape the pain and the heat.

“Mama…”

She shut her eyes tighter. Lucy. Lucy was awake and now the real fun would begin. She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and got up from the Formica-topped table, the back of her aluminum chair sliding with a shriek across the chipped linoleum floor.

“Mama…”

“I’m coming, honey.” She paused long enough to light a fresh Pall Mall and continued down the grimy hallway to her daughter’s bedroom. Outside, an ambulance or a fire truck wailed, an open fire hydrant hissed in protest to children’s voices screaming as they played in the water.

Lucy lay in bed, brown curls plastered to her forehead with sweat. The poor kid.

“Mama, I’m hot.”

“You and me both, honey.” She crossed to sit on the bed. Lucy was small, even for seven, but pretty, like a doll. Sandy hair that fell in ringlets to her shoulders, naturally. She never used rollers or even her fingers to make the tight sausage curls that sprouted from her daughter’s head: a wild riot of hair that set off the elfin features—the button nose and big brown eyes.

She ran her hand across Lucy’s mop of hair, already damp, almost soaking near her neck and forehead.
“Can we go to the beach today?”

“Aw honey, I don’t know.” She wondered from where the fare for the train would come. The task of packing up Thermos, blankets, radio, swimsuits, towels, and snacks daunting with the way her head ached, with how the heat made her languid, each movement real effort. She wanted to lie in a dark room, fan blowing on her, no sheet. She remembered how he used to run an ice cube down her body on other hot summer nights, the traffic below them as they lay on a mattress he had dragged on to the fire escape.

But he was gone.

“C’mon, Mama. It’s so hot.” Lucy swung her legs over the side of her bed. The little girl stretched and rubbed her eyes. She wore only her panties, and her baby skin was already moist.

She wanted to hug her, because she was the only thing in this world that was really hers. But it was so hot. And the pain behind her eyes so great…she just didn’t have the energy.

Lucy crossed the room to look out the window. She leaned out as the music from the ice cream truck swelled as it neared their building.

“It’s the ice cream man!” Lucy turned to her mother. “Mama, it’s the ice cream man! I want some ice cream!” Already, she was rummaging in her drawers, looking for shorts and a shirt to throw on so she could run downstairs.

She put a hand to her forehead, trying to hide the wince from her daughter. “Honey, you can’t have ice cream for breakfast. C’mon, I’ll fix you a nice bowl of Cheerios.”

“I don’t want Cheerios! I want ice cream!” Lucy bounced up and down, features creasing with desire. Her lower lip was out and beginning to tremble.

Her mother shook her head. She had no money for luxuries like ice cream. Lucy would have to get used to that. She had money for hardly anything since he had left.

Lucy began to wail, staring out the window, arms outstretched beseeingly at the children and truck below her.

“Honey, c’mon.” She placed a comforting hand on her daughter’s shoulder. Her reward was Lucy shrugging the hand away. She turned to her mother, with tears glistening. “I hate you.” Lucy rushed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

She collapsed on her daughter’s bed, pulled the pillow over her head and lay there until the sweat trickled down her face to dampen the sheets. Wearily, she got up, crossed the hall to the bathroom door and tapped.

“Lucy? Better hurry up in there ’cause we’re goin’ to Coney Island!”

* * *

She put a hand to her own forehead, where her own headache was beginning. It was so easy to imagine them. Why did she want to, though? Why couldn’t she get the little girl and her mother out of her mind? She found herself thinking of them on her way to work in the morning, el train rumbling beneath her. She would think of them at her desk at the agency, thoughts drifting off for minutes at a time, imagining them, almost feeling as if she were coming to know them.

She didn’t want to think about them. Didn’t want to imagine a scenario in which she could make sense of what had happened. Who were they anyway? Why should the death of a child affect her so much? Was it because she had been about the same age as the little girl back in 1965? Her own mother never had the strength to spank her, let alone…

Oh God, the image rose up again. Her little lips parted, perhaps to draw in her final breath.

* * *

At Coney Island, heat shimmered off the sand. The beach was crowded, but not as bad as it would be on the weekend. She moved through the oiled bodies, the umbrellas and the transistor radios blaring songs like, “Alley Oop” and “Downtown,” hanging on to Lucy’s hand. The little girl had so much energy. Already, she was bouncing up and down at the sight of the Atlantic, pointing at the waves rolling in. “Look, Mama! Big waves today.”
She had only enough energy to nod at her daughter, giving her a wan smile.

They managed to find a space big enough for them to spread out the blanket they had brought from home.

“How about right here?” she asked.

But Lucy had eyes only for the sea.

She threw down the blanket, towels and beach bag. The heat was adding a twisting nausea to her gut, to keep company with the headache no amount of aspirin would alleviate.

Lucy let go of her hand and started running toward the surf. “Lucy! Lucy, come back here! Aren’t you going to help me put the blanket down?”

“You do it!” she cried, and ran, splashing, into the water.

Normally, she would have dragged the little girl back for sassing her like that, but she just didn’t have the energy. She began to unfold the blanket.

* * *

There must be a way, she thought, to rid herself of this imagining a dead girl and her mother. Perhaps she could go to a hypnotist and have the memory excised from her brain, like a growth. She knew she couldn’t do what she wanted most: turn back time to the day she went into the bookstore and listened to her own voice of reason when it told her not to look inside the book of crime scene photographs. But if we could do that, she thought grimly just before putting out the light next to her bed, everyone would be going back in time to correct his or her mistakes. She let out a whispered snicker in the dark: there would be no one in the present.

She wondered if the little girl’s mother had rued the day she had strangled her daughter. Had it been some horrible scar she had borne the rest of her life? Was she still alive in prison somewhere, able to see that same picture in Technicolor memory over and over, tormenting her so much she would want to die? Did she too wish she could turn back time and change the one thing on that day that led to her killing her own child? Or was she a sociopath with no feelings, not even for her own little girl? Had she died in the electric chair? What were her last thoughts? Were they of her daughter? Had she been relieved to die?

She turned over and closed her eyes, but the image from the book was there: imprinted on a matte of black inside her eyelids.

* * *

“Why?”

“Because I said so!” She didn’t mean to snap at Lucy. She realized just as her little girl was all she had that all Lucy had was her mother. She deserved kindness.

But she could be so exasperating! She had never been an easy child: loving one moment, impatient and demanding the next…and always so active. What she wouldn’t give for just a small sample of the energy her daughter had. She had been trying for the last half-hour to get Lucy to come out of the water so they could go home. Her headache had only gotten worse. The heat and the sun had already caused her to vomit in the women’s restroom what little she had eaten that day.

And she had tried to give Lucy a nice day. It was nearing six o’clock. Many of the people on the beach had gone home to their suppers. The wide expanse of beach was no longer crowded, but dotted with just a few people, unwilling to leave.

She pushed the towels down into the beach bag, threw away the brown paper sack she had brought the apples and the cheese sandwiches in and returned to Lucy. She had run back into the water and was standing up to her neck, turned away from her mother.

“Lucy! Lucy, I am counting to five, little girl…”

But Lucy started a dog-paddle out toward the bright red buoys bobbing on the waves. Oh God, she’s going to make me come in and fetch her. Angry now, she began padding across the sand, feet coming down hard. She was tired to her bones and felt so sick she was beginning to wonder what was wrong with her. She couldn’t tolerate this
behavior. This ingratitude.

She reached Lucy, who turned and giggled, splashed her mother, soaking the front of the blouse she had changed into for the ride home.

“You little bastard!” she cried, and then bit her lip. When he was around she had never even allowed him to use bad language in front of Lucy.

Lucy started dog-paddling away and, in order to follow her, she would have to get the bottom of her clam-diggers wet and she wasn’t about to let that happen. She grabbed onto her daughter’s ankle and tugged...hard. Lucy went under the water and came back up gasping and sputtering.

She pounded her back, then tucked her under her arm like a parcel and moved as quickly through the surf as she could, ignoring the stares of strangers that her daughter’s wails inspired. She set Lucy down hard on the sand, ignoring her tears.

“A fine way to treat me,” she said, pulling a brush through Lucy’s wet hair, yanking out tangles that caused the child to scream. “I didn’t have to bring you here today, didn’t have to try and make it fun for you.”

She finished brushing Lucy’s hair. Already, with the heat, it was drying and turning back into coils. She shook her head. The kid was so damn pretty; it was hard to stay mad at her. She chucked her under the chin. “Let’s forget the trouble, kiddo, ’kay?”

Lucy nodded, rubbing her nose.

“You wanna get dressed here?”

“Don’t be silly, Mama. And have everyone see me buck naked?”

“We can get you changed in the ladies’ room. It’s right over there.” She took Lucy’s hand and began leading her off the beach, to the small cinderblock building at its edge.

Then something caused her to stop. A man and a woman were ahead of them, about a hundred yards away, maybe a little more. But even from the back, she recognized him…the dusting of freckles across his broad shoulders, the way his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck. They were hand in hand, laughing. She had short red hair, a pixie cut. He let go of her hand and slid his arm around her slender waist, pulling her close.

Lucy tugged and suddenly she realized her daughter was there. “C’mon, Mama. Let’s get this show on the road.”

She stood frozen for a moment longer, then let her daughter lead her to the ladies’ room, feeling numb.

It was cool inside the washroom, cool and too dark after the brightness outside. She groped her way to a sink, where she set down the beach bag—Lucy’s outfit she had carefully folded and placed on top, so it wouldn’t wrinkle. It was hard to stay mad at her when she had the two-piece outfit on: red and white with big polka dots, a midriff top and short, frilly skirt. She may not have been the best-dressed mother, but she always made sure Lucy looked good when they were in public.

And then she thought of him, seeing him again in her mind’s eye. The two of them. Laughing. It made her sick to her stomach. She saw them in her mind: fucking. Saw him saying all those sweet lies with which he had once wooed her.

“Come on, Mama! You were in such a big hurry. Let’s go.” Lucy tapped her foot.

Lucy’s voice came through a fog of pain and memory. Her voice, high and yes, a little shrill, had a weird effect, almost as if it were coming from a distance, as if her daughter was much farther away than the foot or so she actually was.

“Mama!” Lucy snapped.

She turned her eyes dully to her, imagining the way a cow might turn to look at a fly on its flanks.

Lucy had pulled off her wet suit and it lay in a heap on top of the outfit she had so carefully folded earlier. Lucy had crossed her arms absurdly over her chest and had pulled her legs together. “My clothes! I need my clothes!” She stamped her foot.
She bent down to her daughter, the damp red-and-white polka dot outfit in one hand. She stretched the elastic waistband of the skirt and said, “Step in.”

She didn’t really notice the passage of time. It could have been an hour, it could have been thirty seconds, but there Lucy was before her, fully dressed. There was a buzzing sound that drowned out what little noise her daughter may have been making, her mouth open in a gasping scream. Her dark eyes bulged.

She had her hands around Lucy’s throat, pressing in on her windpipe, cutting off the air, thinking, “I gave you life and I can take it away.”

Lucy, in a voice in her mind, chided her, calling her an Indian giver.

Suddenly, she stopped as Lucy’s hands went limp, hands that had been tearing at her own, trying with her small child’s strength to stop her. She dropped her hands to her sides and moaned. Lucy was gasping, sucking in air in wheezing breaths, a caw-cawing noise that broke her heart.

“Oh God, honey, I’m so sorry. Oh God, what have I done?” Her voice went up high and dissolved into wracking sobs. She drew the trembling, wheezing little girl to her bosom, holding her tight, blotting out the image of a necklace of bright red thumbprints around her throat.

* * *

She pulled the sheet over herself, even though the August air wafting in her bedroom window was sticky, mired in heat and humidity. Dawn’s gray light filtered into the room, filling it was a flat gray presence. She turned and closed her eyes, finally able to sleep.

The End