

No Longer and Not Yet

EXCERPT I

Hawk in the City

A hawk is sitting on a fire escape across the courtyard. It's such a strange combination of wild on rust: The hawk's feathers overlap into benevolent curves of whites and browns, the eyes are vigilant, the beak is predatory. Its red tail is folded back.

Tess is watching this from her kitchen window.

The bird sits there. Small white feathers blow up into the air around the bird: One feather is stuck to the top of his head.

"There's Mr. Hawk," her father had always said, respectfully, whenever he spotted one in flight. The elegance of their flight made him reverent. Tess starts weeping again. Her father died two months ago. She has been walking through a fog since. Nothing makes sense these days. What is that hawk doing here?

The hawk is pausing, preparatory to that high controlled dive with his legs outstretched behind him, riding the winds up from the Hudson, searching. The loose rust of the iron flutters in the winds flakey under the hawk's claws. She turns her back to the window now.

She's about to make her Saturday morning call to Naomi, to do their news of the week in review.

"You first," one of them will say.

Or, "What did you decide to do?"

The winds have picked up off the river and twisting up into the tall narrow alleyway outside of Tess's kitchen window the sound twists into a wild whine as if she lived in the heights of the Caucasus. Tess loves this feral sound — it makes her apartment into a haven against what is outside. Causes the river to make itself known in this tall brick cavern through these strange calls even though she can't see the Hudson from here.

What led that hawk into this dark alleyway? Tess has never seen one in this enclosed back courtyard.

Naomi too is looking out her kitchen window a few blocks down river with its view of the street. She picks up her cup of tea. Either she'll call or Tess will call. She settles into her small table by the window.

Naomi sees her neighbors hurrying down the street against the fierce winter winds. She feels her own body pushing past against the freezing winds into the warmth of their doorway. Only litter blows along the sidewalks.

"Something's just gone out of me," Tess says as soon as they've settled in. "I've lost my way. I hate teaching now. I don't want to get out of bed in the morning. I don't cook. I know it's about the fact that my father died. It's as if there's a whole country I can never visit again. It was one of my favorite countries and it's disappeared beneath the earth."

"What does Max say?" Naomi asks.

"Max hugs me and weeps. But he's been doing all the cooking, everything. This is going on too long. He doesn't complain but . . . I'm not any good with Paul. I'm always breaking down and crying when I'm with him."

Naomi sighs and then plunges. "When I'm like that it doesn't matter what I do as long as I do something. Anything. I have to make a move in some direction. See a psychic. Quit your job. Do something. It will help."

"I need the name of someone to talk to. I don't know how to get through this one." Tess starts to tear up. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

"I have a really good person for you Tess. She's brilliant and so down to earth. She was one of my supervisors at the institute. Honest and just a good woman. She may have some openings. I wish I could use her as my therapist, but because we have this other relationship . . . I'll get her number for you."

Tess wanders back to the window. There are some small white feathers left on the fire escape where the large bird has been but Mr. Hawk is gone.