Sophie and I had been a nursing couple for over two years, through the family move from Ossining to Tarrytown and the staticky beginnings of my sobriety. We’d found no legitimate reason to give up the ritual, even though some raised eyebrows at us or cleared their throats, like we were Amish or nudists. It wasn’t something either of us thought about during the day. It was simply there at bedtime for about five minutes as Sophie fell peacefully asleep and I had a built-in quiet time. Then I’d go back downstairs to do the dishes, check Clio’s homework, and head out the door for AA.

My pint-sized milk supply dried up after Harper left. One evening there were four of us in the kitchen eating meatloaf, the next, a new woman in the car with Harper’s retrieved suits and ties. I was suddenly centrifugally occupied, losing all that had been previously battened—a tough time to keep to comforting routines. At night I
lay on my stomach on the family room floor and screamed into the carpet. During the day I roboted around, passing for a mommy.

Clio came home from school that spring with her first sex questions. She was in third grade and had overheard some smirky innuendo. I got a kid’s book out of the library and we curled up on her bed one evening with Sophie and Hubert (Clio’s stuffed lion) and I gave it a try. My own mother had done this well; in fact, I’ve never run into anyone whose mother did such a creative job of telling them the right things at just the right time.

*Remember, Molly, sex is for love. It’s for having babies, of course, but most importantly, it’s for love.* Not bad for a rabid Catholic.

I wanted to go in the same direction with Clio, and I found myself at the love part, having glossed over the actual penis-in-vagina part, although Clio seemed satisfied—and I got genuinely stuck. Harper’s absence at that moment was as large as it would ever be again. I was mute in the middle of it and looked helplessly at Clio. Sophie had fallen asleep between us, and Clio, reading the last page of the children’s book of sex over again out loud, the part where the man, woman, and baby smile at the reader from their watercolor wash, said: *It’s okay, Mama, I love you.*

At eight she took the helm, and the three of us sailed away.