Alice Mathson: In Case We're Separated
New York, Harper Perennial 2005

In Case We're Separated

"You're a beautiful woman, sweetheart," Edwin Friend began. His girlfriend, Bobbie Kaplowitz, paid attention: Edwin rarely spoke up and complimented her. He tipped his chair against her sink and glanced behind him, but the drain board wasn't piled so high that the back of his head would start an avalanche today. He took a decisive drink from his glass of water and continued, "But in that particular dress you look fat."

It was a bright Saturday morning in October 1954. Edwin often visited Bobbie on Saturday mornings, and she had dressed up a little, anticipating. Now she didn't bother to speak. She reached behind to unfasten the hook and eye at the back of her neck, worked the zipper down without help, stepped out of the dress, and in her underwear took the sharp scissors. She cut a big piece of brown wrapping paper from a roll she kept next to the refrigerator, while Edwin said several times, "What are you doing?"

Bobbie folded the dress, which was chestnut brown with a rust-and-cream-colored arrowlike decoration that crossed her breasts

and pointed fetchingly down. She set the folded dress in the middle of the paper, wrapped and taped it, and addressed the package to her slimmer sister in Pittsburgh. Then she went into the bedroom and changed into something seriously gorgeous.

"Come, Bradley," she called, though Edwin would have babysat, but Bradley came quickly. He was a thin six-year-old with dark curls and the habit of resting his hands on his hips, so from the front he looked slightly supervisory and from the back his pointed elbows stuck out like outlines of small wings. They left Edwin looking surprised. At the post office, a considerable walk away, the clerk said the package had to be tied with string, but lent Bobbie a big roll of twine and his scissors. Bobbie was wearing high-heeled shoes, and she braced herself on the counter with one gloved hand. She was short and the shoes made her wobble. She took the end of the twine in her mouth, grasped it between her teeth, and jerked her head back to pull it tight. It was brown twine, now reddened with her lipstick, and its taste was woody and dry. Fibers separating from the twine might travel across Bobbie's tongue and make her gag. For all she knew, her poor old teeth might loosen.

Much was brown: the twine, the paper around the package (even the dress inside if one could see it), and the wooden counter with its darkened brass decorations. The counter was old enough to have taken on the permanent sour coloring of wooden and metal objects in Brooklyn that had remained in one place—where any hand might close upon them—since the century turned. But Bobbie's lipstick, and the shoes she'd changed into, and her suit—which had a straight skirt with a kick pleat—were

red. She wore a half-slip because she was a loose woman. Joke. Edwin's hands always went first to her bare, fleshy midriff. Then he seemed to enjoy urging the nylon petticoat down, sliding the rubber knobs up and out of the metal loops that attached her stockings to her girdle, even tugging the girdle off. She never let him take off her nylons because he wasn't careful.

Bobbie tied a firm knot. Then she changed her mind. She poked the roll of twine and the scissors toward the clerk with an apologetic wave, called to Bradley—who was hopping from one dark medallion on the tile floor to the next, flapping his arms—and went home. As Bobbie walked, one eye on Bradley, the package dangled from her finger on its string like a new purchase. At home she found Edwin taking apart her Sunbeam Mixmaster with her only tool, a rusty screwdriver.

"Didn't you say it wasn't working?" Edwin asked.

"There's nothing wrong with it. I didn't say anything."

Edwin was married. He had told Bobbie he was a bachelor who couldn't marry her because he lived with his mother, who was old, silly, and anti-Semitic. But his mother lived in her own apartment and was not silly or anti-Semitic as far as he knew. Edwin had a wife named Dorothy, a dental hygienist. She'd stopped working when their first child was born—they had two daughters—but sometimes she helped out her old boss. Now, fumbling to put Bobbie's mixer back together, Edwin began to wonder uneasily whether it wasn't Dorothy, dressing for work in her uniform, who happened to mention a broken mixer. He had

never confused the two women before in the years he'd been Bobbie's boyfriend.

Edwin's monkey business had begun by mistake. He was a salesman for a baking supply company, and Bobbie was in charge of the payroll at a large commercial bakery. Though Edwin didn't wear a ring, he believed that everyone in the firms through which he passed assumed he was somebody's husband. However, a clerk in Bobbie's office had moved to Brooklyn from Minneapolis. When this young woman, who had distinctive habits, asked him straight out, Edwin misheard the question and said no. He had heard, "Mr. Friend, are you merry?"

Edwin was good-natured but not merry, and the question puzzled him until he found himself having lunch with Bobbie, to whom the young woman from Minneapolis had introduced him. He realized that he was on a date. Bobbie seemed eager and attractive, while Dorothy liked to make love about as often as she liked to order tickets and go to a Broadway show, or invite her whole family for dinner, and with about as much planning. Not knowing exactly what he had in mind, Edwin suggested that Bobbie meet him for a drink after work, nervous that she'd refuse anything less than dinner and a movie. But she agreed. Drinking a quick whiskey sour in a darkened lounge, she suggested that next time he come to her house. So his visits began: daytime conversations over a glass of water or a cup of coffee; suppers followed by bed. Bobbie was always interested. She only needed to make sure Bradley was sleeping.

Bobbie rarely spoke of her marriage. Her husband had been a tense, mumbly man, a printer. He'd remained aloof from her family. At first he said she was nothing like her crude relatives. "I

felt refined, but I didn't like it," Bobbie told Edwin. Later her husband began to say she was *exactly* like her family, and at last he moved her and Bradley, an infant, into a dark two-room apartment where nothing worked and there was hardly ever any hot water. He said he slept at his shop, and at first he brought her money, but soon that stopped. "I didn't have enough hot water to bathe the baby," Bobbie said. "Let alone my whole self." Edwin imagined it: naked Bobbie clasping a thin baby and splashing warm water on herself from a chipped, shallow basin. She'd moved back with her mother and got a job. Eventually she could afford the apartment on Elton Street where Edwin now visited her. When Bradley was two she had taken him on the train to Reno, lived there for six weeks, and come home divorced, bringing her sisters silver pins and bracelets with Indian designs on them, arrows and stylized birds.

Bobbie's family wouldn't care much that Edwin wasn't Jewish, she assured him, and they'd understand that he couldn't be around often because of his mother. But they did want to know him. So Edwin had consented to an occasional Sunday lunch in Bobbie's kitchen with her mother or one of her sisters, eating whitefish and kippered salmon and bagels off a tablecloth printed with cherries, and watching the sun move across the table as the afternoon lengthened and he imagined Dorothy wondering. After the bagels they'd have coffee with marble cake from Bobbie's bakery. He'd tip his chair against the porcelain sink and consider how surprised his wife would be if she knew where he was, being polite to another woman's relatives. His own house was bigger and more up-to-date.

Dorothy would be even more surprised if she knew, right now,

that Edwin was in that same kitchen, which was less sunny in the morning, fixing a mixer that wasn't broken. Edwin would have preferred to be a bigamist, not a deceiver. When he reassembled the mixer, it didn't work. He left the bowls and beaters and took the big contraption home in the trunk of his car. He'd work on it when Dorothy was out. She had promised Dr. Dressel, her old boss, a few hours in the coming week.

The day Edwin carried off the mixer, Bobbie's sister Sylvia and her kids, Joan and Richard, rang Bobbie's bell after lunch because they were all going to the Hayden Planetarium. Sylvia, a schoolteacher, had said, "Bradley's ready," as if she'd noticed blanks in his eyes where stars and planets belonged. Her own kids had often been to the planetarium. So the sisters walked to Fulton Street, urging along the children, who stamped on piles of brown sycamore leaves. Climbing the stairs to the elevated train, Bobbie was already tired. She'd have changed her shoes, but she liked the look of the red heels. They waited on the windy platform, Joan holding Bradley's hand tightly. She and Richard were tall, capable children who read signs out loud in firm voices: "No Spitting." "Meet Miss Subways." They had to change trains, and as the second one approached, Sylvia said, "Does Bradley know what to do in case we're separated?"

"Why should we get separated?" said Bobbie.

"It can always happen," Sylvia said as the doors opened. The children squeezed into one seat, and Sylvia leaned over them. She had short curly hair that was starting to go gray. "Remember," she said, "in case we get separated, if you're on the train, get off at

the next stop and wait. And if you're on the platform, just wait where you are, and we'll come back for you. Okay?"

Joan and Richard were reaching across Bradley to slap each other's knees, but Bradley nodded seriously. Bobbie rarely offered directives like that, and he probably needed them, yet she felt irritated. At the planetarium, Bradley tried to read aloud words on the curved ceiling that was covered with stars. The theater darkened. While the stars revolved swiftly, a slightly spooky voice spoke of a time so far back that Bobbie felt disjoined from herself: she in her red suit would surely never happen. Anything at all might be true.

Then Bradley whispered something. "Do you have to go to the bathroom?" Bobbie asked. "I can't go in with you." If Edwin would marry her, he'd be there to take Bradley to the bathroom! The size of Bobbie's yearning, like the age of the stars, was suddenly clear. But Bradley shook his head. "No. No. I can't remember what I do if you get off the train without me."

"I wouldn't do that, honey," she said, but of course he continued to worry. She could feel his little worry machines whirring beside her.

"You scared him," she said to Sylvia as they shuffled toward the exit with the crowd, later. "About being lost on the subway."

"He needs to know," Sylvia said, and Bobbie wondered if Sylvia would be as bossy if she didn't have a husband, Louis—an accountant, a good man; although Sylvia said he was quick in bed.

They spent an hour in the natural history museum—where Joan held Bradley's hand, telling him what Bobbie hoped were nonfrightening facts—before taking the long subway ride home again. At the stop before theirs, Bradley suddenly stood and ran

toward the closing doors, crying out. Richard tackled him, knocking him to the dirty floor, and Bobbie took him on her lap. Bradley had thought a departing back was hers. "Oh, sweetie," she said, brushing him off and kissing him. She carried him as far as the stairs.

"Well, I shouldn't have said anything," said Sylvia as they reached the sidewalk and turned toward home. The train's sound grew faint behind them.

Bobbie said nothing. If she agreed, Sylvia would change her mind and defend what she'd said after all. Bobbie glanced back at the three kids, who were counting something out loud in exultant voices—passing cars, maybe. "Seven! No, nine!"

"I have chopped meat," said Sylvia at last, when their silence had lasted for more than a block. "I'll make mashed potatoes. Lou will drive you, later, okay?"

"That would be nice," said Bobbie. They reached the corner of Sylvia's street and turned that way.

"Unless you have a date?" Sylvia added.

But it was cruel to make Bobbie say what was apparent. "No such luck."

"That guy has a problem," said Sylvia. "It's Saturday night!"

"Edwin says I look fat in that brown dress," Bobbie said. She never let herself think about Saturday nights. Edwin said his mother cooked corned beef and cabbage then, and minded if he went out. "Remember that dress? With the design down the front?"

"That gorgeous dress!" Sylvia said. "To tell the truth, you do look a little hefty in it, but who cares?"

In the dark, Bobbie cried. She hoped her sister would notice

and maybe even put an arm around her, but that wasn't their way. Maybe Sylvia did notice. "I'll make a nice salad. You like salad, don't you?" she said soothingly.

Edwin's house was empty when he came home on Tuesday. Dorothy was working, and the girls were at a neighbor's. He spread newspaper on the dining-room table and fixed Dorothy's mixer, the one that had been broken in the first place. It was not badly broken. A wire was loose. Then it occurred to him that the mixers looked alike, with bulbous arms to hold the beaters, and curved white bases on which bowls rotated. He'd bought Dorothy's after seeing Bobbie's. Edwin set aside Dorothy's bowls and beaters. He carried Dorothy's fixed mixer out to his car, then returned and put Bobbie's broken one on the sheet of newspaper.

He jumped when he heard Dorothy and the girls arriving, but there was nothing to worry about. Dorothy asked, "Did you fix it?" and Edwin truthfully said, "Not yet." She stood behind him, watching as he took apart Bobbie's mixer. By this time it was hard to remember that the broken mixer was the one he had broken himself, not the one Dorothy had reported broken, and he listened attentively while she told him what she'd been about to mix when it didn't work. As he listened, his back to his wife, he suddenly felt love and pity for her, as if only he knew that she had a sickness. He looked over at Dorothy in her thin white hygienist's uniform, her green coat folded over her arm. She had short blond hair and glasses.

The girls had begun to play with a couple of small round dentist's mirrors that Dorothy had brought from Dr. Dressel's office.

Mary Ann, the younger one, brought her mirror close to her eye. "I can't see anything," she said.

"Wait a minute," said Eileen. Her light hair was in half-unraveled braids. Eileen turned her back on Edwin and Dorothy, and positioned her mirror just above her head. "I'm a spy," she said. "Let's see . . . oh, Daddy's putting poison in the mixer." Eileen would say anything.

"I'm a spy, too," said Mary Ann, hurrying to stand beside her sister and waving her mirror. "Show me. Show me how to be a spy."

Edwin couldn't fix Bobbie's mixer and it stayed broken, on a shelf in Edwin and Dorothy's kitchen, for a long time. Meanwhile, Dorothy's working mixer was in the trunk of Edwin's car, and it was a natural thing to pretend it was Bobbie's and take it to her house the next time he visited.

On many Thursdays Edwin told Dorothy a story about New Jersey, then arranged a light day and drove to Brooklyn to visit Bobbie. Bobbie prepared a good dinner that tasted Jewish to Edwin, though she said she wasn't kosher. Little Bradley sat on a telephone book and still his face was an inch off the plate, which he stared at, eating mostly mashed potatoes. "They're better the way Aunt Sylvia makes them, with the mixer," Bobbie said on this particular Thursday, the Thursday on which Edwin had brought her his wife's Sunbeam Mixmaster and pretended it was hers.

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring it sooner, babe."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I just don't bother, the way Sylvia does."

Edwin watched Bradley. With the mental agility born of his

mixer exchange, Edwin imagined carrying Bradley off in similar fashion and replacing him, just temporarily, with talky Eileen. If her big sister was out of the way, Mary Ann would play with Bradley, while Bobbie would enjoy fussing with a girl.

"What are you thinking about?" said Bobbie.

"I wish I could take Bradley home to meet my mother."

"Take both of us. She won't be against Jewish girls once she sees me," said Bobbie. "I don't mean I'm so special, but I don't do anything strange."

She hurried to clean up and put Bradley to bed, while Edwin, who hadn't replied, watched television. He couldn't help thinking that his family was surely watching the same show, with Groucho Marx. Over the noise of Groucho's voice and the audience's laughter, Edwin heard Bobbie's voice now and then as she read aloud. "'Faster, faster!' cried the bird," Bobbie read. Soon she came in and Edwin reached for her hand, but she shook her head. She always waited until Bradley was asleep, but that didn't take long. When she checked and returned smiling, Edwin turned off the set and put his hands on her shoulders, then moved them down her back and fumbled with her brassiere through her blouse. Dorothy wore full slips. Edwin pulled Bobbie's ruffled pink blouse free and reached his hand under it. Even using only one hand, he'd learned that if he worked from bottom to top, pushing with one finger and pulling with two others, he could undo all three hooks of her brassiere without seeing them. In a moment his hand was on her big round breast, and she was laughing and opening her mouth for him, already leading him toward her bed.

. . .

Edwin forgot that Dorothy had promised Dr. Dressel she'd work Saturday morning. As he dressed in Bobbie's dark bedroom on Thursday night, she asked, "Will you come Saturday?"

"Sure, babe," he said. He had fallen asleep, but he could tell from Bobbie's voice that she'd remained awake, lying naked next to him. He leaned over to kiss her, then let himself out, rubbing his hand on his lips and checking for lipstick stains.

But on Saturday he had to stay with Eileen and Mary Ann, then pick up Dorothy at Dr. Dressel's office. He was more at ease with the girls in the car than at home. Made restless by his broken promise to Bobbie, he left too early, then had to look after his children in the dentist's waiting room. He didn't know how to braid Eileen's hair and it had not been done that morning; Edwin noticed as he reread the dentist's posters, which urged him to eat carrots and apples, that one of yesterday's rubber bands still dangled off Eileen's mussed hair. He called to her and tried to remove the band without pulling. "You're hurting me," she said, though he didn't think he was.

At last Dorothy came out in her coat. "I heard them whooping it up," she said, but she sounded amused. She took two rubber bands from the receptionist's desk and swiftly braided Eileen's hair. Leaving the car where it was, they walked to a nearby luncheonette. Dorothy took Edwin's hand. Sometimes she spoke to him in baby talk; it was a kind of game. "I am going to teach you to bwaid hair," she said. But he didn't know how to answer, so she spoke again, now taking his part, in a gruff voice like the Three

Bears. *"How on earth do you braid hair?"* He let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders as she answered with elaborate patience, "Well, first you make a center part. . . ." Edwin imagined Bobbie watching them, not jealously. "Squeeze," the imaginary Bobbie said, and Edwin squeezed his wife's taut shoulder through the green coat.

Bobbie didn't use her mixer often. She was not sufficiently interested in its departure and return to put it away, so she left it on the extra chair next to the kitchen table where Edwin had put it. On Saturday morning she put on makeup and stockings, but he didn't come. Ordinarily, if Edwin didn't appear by a quarter to ten, Bobbie took Bradley out, rather than brooding. This Saturday, though, Bradley had a cold. To distract herself, Bobbie called Sylvia, who asked, "Does he have a temperature?" Bobbie's thermometer was broken, so Sylvia brought hers over. Bobbie made coffee. Bradley sat on the floor in his pajamas, wiping his nose on his sleeve while putting together a jigsaw puzzle, a map of the United States.

Bobbie offered Sylvia a cookie and she and Bradley said together, "Before lunch?" but then everyone took a Mallomar, since Bobbie said a cookie might cheer her up. Bradley licked his fingers and then placed Florida in the puzzle correctly.

"Edwin didn't come today?" Sylvia said, playing with her spoon.

"Sometimes he's busy on Saturdays."

"You need more."

"I manage," Bobbie said. If Sylvia knew all Edwin's ways, she thought, she wouldn't object to him. "He's worth it."

Sylvia laughed, stretching her arm and actually taking a second cookie. "Oh, I know what you mean," she said. She interrupted herself to supervise Bradley's placement of California. "I know what you see in your Edwin. I see the way he looks at you."

"When you've been married a long time," Bobbie said, "I guess it's not so exciting."

Sylvia laughed. "I know how you feel," she said again, not scolding.

"You mean you felt that way about Lou, once."

"Well, I suppose."

"What *did* you mean?" Bobbie said.

"Oh, I shouldn't say anything," Sylvia said. She tipped the bowl of her spoon with one finger, making the handle rise.

"He's not listening," Bobbie said, tilting her head toward Bradley. "You mean—someone?"

"Someone I met at an in-service course."

"Another teacher? A man."

"He teaches at Midwood."

"A high school teacher. You—have feelings?" Bobbie said.

"Did this ever happen to you?" Sylvia said, now glad—it seemed—to talk. "At night, you know, picturing the wrong person?"

Bobbie thought she knew what Sylvia meant. She wasn't sure what an in-service course was, whether it consisted of one occasion or several. "How many times have you seen him?"

"Wait a minute," said Sylvia, but then she crouched on the floor. "Doesn't Colorado belong where you put Wyoming, Bradley?" Wyoming was nice and tight. "Could the map be wrong?"

"Did you have lunch with him?"

"Oh, I'm exaggerating, it's nothing," Sylvia said. She remained on the floor, helping Bradley with a few more states. Then she got up, reaching out a hand to steady herself on the extra chair. She gave the Mixmaster a pat. "Hey, you didn't just buy this, did you?"

"No, I've had it for a while."

"I might have been able to get you a discount. A client of Lou's . . ."

"I bought it last year."

"Oh, right." Sylvia seemed to expect Bobbie to explain why the mixer was on the chair, so Bobbie told in full the story Sylvia had heard only in part: the story of the dress, the walk to the post office, and her return to find Edwin fixing a mixer that wasn't broken.

"He took it home? Why did he do that?" Sylvia asked.

"At home he has tools."

"Maybe he took it to a repair place."

"Oh, no. I'm sure he fixed it himself," said Bobbie.

"You're sure he brought back the same mixer?"

"You mean he bought me a new one? I hope not!" Bobbie said.

"Or he could have bought a used one," said Sylvia.

"Oh, stop being so suspicious." She liked the more tremulous Sylvia who had spoken of the teacher from Midwood High School. She wasn't ready, yet, for the usual Sylvia. "Of course it's mine."

But as she spoke, as she insisted it was hers, Bobbie suddenly sensed that the mixer on the chair might never have been in her house before, and then, looking hard, she was certain. It was the same, but somehow not the same. It had been cleaned differently, maybe with a sponge, not a dishrag. But that thought was ridicu-

lous. It had been handled in a way that was not Jewish. An even more ridiculous thought.

Bradley had abandoned the puzzle and left the room. Maybe Sylvia would say more. "Did you have lunch with him?" Bobbie asked again.

But Sylvia would not be deterred. "Maybe Edwin has another girlfriend," she said, "and this is her mixer. Hey, maybe he has a wife!" She gave a short laugh.

"He has a mother. . . ." said Bobbie. His mother didn't sound like someone who'd plug in a mixer and mix anything. She now remembered that the metal plate with the "Sunbeam" insignia on her mixer was chipped. She looked, and this one was whole. She looked again. "I *trust* Edwin," she said.

"I know you do. Boy, that would be something," Sylvia said. "If it turned out Edwin was married."

But Bobbie was experiencing one of those moments when one discovers the speed of thought by having several in an instant. First she felt ashamed of being stupid. Of course there had been plenty of hints that Edwin was married. Once she allowed herself to consider the possibility, she was sure it was so. Bobbie didn't need to know whose mixer it was to know that Edwin was married. Then, however, Bobbie felt something quite different. It wasn't anger at Sylvia, at her sister's gossipy curiosity.

She was not angry at Sylvia. She felt sorry for Sylvia, a little superior to Sylvia. All her life, Bobbie had known that Sylvia was smart, so Bobbie must be smart, too, even Bobbie who carried her clothing back and forth to the post office. Once they knew Edwin

was married, Sylvia would imagine there was only one way to behave—to laugh bitterly—but Bobbie understood that there were two.

That there were two different ways to think about Edwin's marriage—like thinking about the stars, which might be spots of light, close together, and might be distant wild fireworlds—struck Bobbie with almost as much force as her sorrow. Sylvia's way would be to laugh bitterly and tell everyone the story. Edwin's marriage might be a bad joke on Bobbie, but then Edwin would no longer tip his chair against her sink, or walk her to her bed while his hands grasped all of her body he could reach under her loosened clothes. His marriage might be a bitter joke—or it might be something Bobbie just had to put up with.

Bobbie would never marry Edwin, but Bobbie had the mixer that worked. She stood and plugged it in, and it made its noise. The years to come, during which she'd keep Edwin's secret, not letting him know she knew—because it would scare him away—and not letting her sisters know she knew—because they'd scream at her to forget him—became real in her mind, as if she could feel all their length, their loneliness, at once. She would be separated from Edwin, despite Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings. Bobbie turned off the mixer and wept.

"Oh, of course he's not married," Sylvia said, and Bobbie didn't say that wasn't why she was crying. "Me and my big mouth, as usual," Sylvia continued. She stood up and put her arms around Bobbie, and then the sisters were hugging and smiling. "Edwin married," Sylvia said. "If there's one man on earth who couldn't manage being a two-timer, it's Edwin. Sorry, baby, I

love the guy, but that swift he's not." And she went on and on, hugging her sister and calling her baby. Baby! The unaccustomed sweetness, like the cookie, comforted Bobbie for a while. Maybe she and Sylvia both had secrets, like Edwin. Maybe life required secrets. What an idea.

Not Yet, Not Yet

Visiting from Boston with her baby, Ruth watched as her father uncapped his fountain pen. On a paper napkin, he drew a map of his Brooklyn neighborhood, where she'd grown up. Her father's large, well-shaped ears stuck out from his bald head, and his chin was pointed, giving him a resemblance to an alert Greek vase. He struck a spot on the map with his finger until it seemed the napkin would shred. But his finger concealed the street Ruth didn't remember—where her sister, "Lillian with all her troubles," now lived. It was 1974. Ruth had graduated from Brooklyn College a decade earlier and immediately moved away.

"So what's your secret?" said her mother. "How come the psychiatrist says she can see *you*?"

"I don't have a secret," said Ruth. In a phone conversation, Lilly had said, "I want to see the baby."

"She's a few blocks away, and we haven't seen her for a year," said Fanny. She imitated Lillian's breathy voice. " 'Not yet,' she says. 'Not yet.' " Fanny left the room.

Ruth's baby was asleep in the bedroom. "Don't wake Laura,"