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In Case We're Separated
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Q: In this collection, what made you decide to imitate a double sestina by including six images that reappear in each story?

A: I like to give readers something extra, something that's just fun— or, to put it another way, something that's pure art, if art is in part a game. I've put something quirky and playful into most of my books: recurring images of hitchhikers in *Men Giving Money*, *Women Yelling*, a book within a book in *The Book Borrower*, a zany play in *The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman*. I'm not sure why I had the idea of imitating the pattern of a sestina here, but I did like the juxtaposition of that snooty literary form and the plain people in the book, most of whom wouldn't know or care what a sestina is.

Q: A glass of water, a sharp point, a cord, a mouth, an exchange, and a map that may be wrong are all images in Lilly's sestina, and are woven throughout the stories. What is the significance of these images?

A: I don't know. I knew I wanted six repeating images before I began writing the stories, and I spent months thinking them up. When I'd think of one that felt right, I recognized it, perhaps in the non-rational way an abstract painter recognizes that one color is wrong but another is right for a particular painting. Later, knowing about the six repeating images helped me make up the stories. At one point, for example, I realized that several of the images suggested dentistry, so I made sure to include a visit to a dentist in one story.

Q: Your note to the reader about the images is found at the end of the book. Why not at the beginning so the reader can be on the lookout for them?

A: I almost kept the sestina pattern a secret, but finally couldn't resist putting in that note. I didn't put the note first because I don't want to imply that the repeated pattern is essential to understanding or enjoying this book. It's a book about people, not about sestinas. If you like the pattern and repetitions, it's yours—go look for the glasses of water and the maps. If not, forget it.

Q: How do the characters in these short stories compare to your own family?

A: Nobody in the book is based on any particular real person, but the family I grew up in had the structure of the family in the book: my mother was one of five sisters and a brother whose parents had immigrated from Eastern Europe at the start of the twentieth century. My father also came from a large Brooklyn immigrant family, and I grew up in Brooklyn with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins within easy reach, while others arrived for frequent visits from the places they'd moved to. My life is still enriched by a sister and quite a few cousins, now widely scattered geographically. So these characters are people who might have been my family, but are not.

Q: Of all the characters, which one do you relate to most?

A: I think I relate most easily to Bradley. There's something about the way he thinks that feels familiar. Ruth's life is a little more like mine, but I don't recognize myself in Ruth except very occasionally. I also relate to Sylvia:

Q: Were these stories well-formed and interrelated before you set down to write each? Or did one story inspire another?

A: I knew I was going to write interconnected stories, and I had ideas about the first half of the book before I began writing. When I wrote the last half dozen stories, I wanted to answer questions I'd raised in the first ones. All I knew when I reached the middle was that Ruth would never resolve the question of how Jewish she was, and Lilly would not commit suicide. Anti-depressants—not yet developed when she was young—would come along and save her.

Q: Each character is rich and complex, layered with human frailties and strengths, and despite their familial relationships, each is unique. How did these characters develop and take shape?

A: Writing fiction, I have the feeling that the characters already exist and it's my job not to make them up but to find them. It often takes a while to sense one person's obsession or another one's odd way of moving. I spend a lot of time backing away from them, trying to watch them in my imagination, wasting time while listening for their voices. It often takes me many, many revisions before a story and characters seem right.