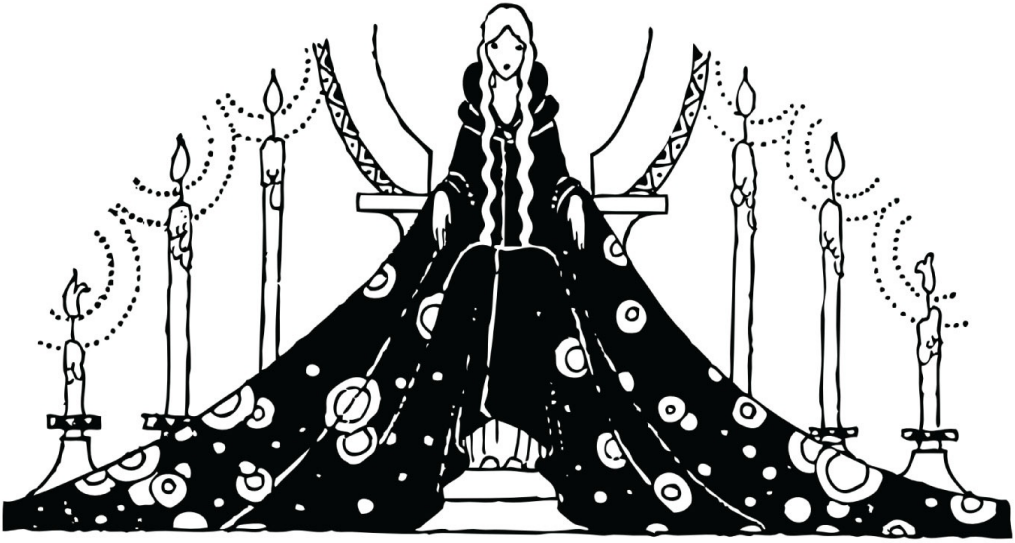
Playing for Their Lives



Lois

The Princess in the Tower

Dorothy Singer

LOIS, THE PRINCESS IN THE TOWER

Dorothy G. Singer

LOIS, THE PRINCESS IN THE TOWER

The Effect of a Parent's Death on a Child

The Mother

The mother came for her first visit on December 2. She died on October 5 of the following year. Although it was early December and an icy-cold day, on her first visit she wore no coat, but a heavy black sweater, a long gray skirt, and a black jersey turban hiding her thin wisps of hair. She reminded me of old Gloria Swanson photos taken when this kind of headgear was fashionable.

Jean Melton had called the week before, referred by a colleague of mine. She was forty-one years old, slim and of medium height, with piercing gray eyes. She examined my face and in a tormented voice asked, "Can I entrust my child to you? Will you help her handle her fears, her worries? How will we cope?" A flood of tears followed.

When Jean appeared calmer, I asked her to give me some facts. She had a rare form of leukemia and the prognosis was not good, but Jean was determined to live: " 'Do not go gentle into that good night.' I say these words by Dylan Thomas over and over—my private prayer. Do you know the poem?" I nodded. "I read these words and I rage and rage. I'm prepared to undergo all kinds of treatment. I can't leave Lois. She's too young to be without a mother—it's unfair."

Gradually, the story unfolded. Jean seemed to be reciting from memory, as if she had rehearsed her personal history in advance so that nothing would be omitted. From time to time as she spoke, she would hesitate, turn away, and stare at the floor or at the wall, trying to recall some detail. It was important to her that I understand her background and the urgency of her situation and of her child's need for therapy.

Jean had divorced her husband, Ron, four years before, when Lois, the only child of that marriage, was four. Jean had been awarded physical custody of Lois, but both parents had been granted legal

custody. Ron Melton had holiday visitations at Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and each parent had Lois for one month of the summer vacation. It was clear that Jean resented any contact between father and daughter, and during the initial session with me, she spoke of Ron in completely negative terms. He had recently remarried and was now the stepfather of two daughters, aged eleven and nine, his second wife's children from a previous marriage.

Jean continued, "After Lois was born, things seemed all right—at least until she was two. Then Ron started to drink, and life was hell. He had been an alcoholic years ago, but when we married, he had been abstinent, and I had no reason to believe that he would give up his sobriety. Lois witnessed terrible fights between us, was harshly disciplined by her father, and often saw him push me, strike me, and abuse me verbally.

"I remember one vivid scene when Lois was almost three. We were in the kitchen about to have dinner. Lois was at the table seated on her booster, and I was at the kitchen sink preparing the salad. When Ron came in, he spotted the soup on the stove bubbling. Before he or I could get to it, it boiled over, making a green pea trail on the stove, running down the oven door, and ending in a mess on the floor. Ron exploded: "Can't you get anything right?" He grabbed my arm and hurled me against the tile wall. Lois was now screaming, and I was terrified. Ron was like a madman, completely out of control, because I had simply forgotten to turn the burner down. Sometimes I do daydream, and I'm not thoroughly efficient. Things like that upset Ron—meticulous, exacting, practical Ron. No wonder he's an accountant! I think he had been drinking. He was under a lot of pressure at work, and since I had stopped working when Lois was born, we had always seemed pressed for money. I often wanted to leave but didn't have the courage or the resources. I also suspected that Ron was involved with Susan, the woman he later married, but Ron denied this whenever I mentioned it.

"Eventually we separated, and soon after the separation, I decided to go back to school. I had been a paralegal before our marriage and had continued doing this work until Lois was born. We had thought we could manage on one salary, and until the drinking and Susan, we seemed to. Later, with financial help and encouragement from my sister, I was able to begin divorce proceedings. At the same time, I applied to law school and decided to fulfill a dream of mine."

Jean paused and stood up. She asked for some water and, gulping it, asked for more. Because her voice had become hoarse, and it was clear that she was getting tired, I suggested that we take a break. But Jean wanted to continue—we could not afford the luxury of wasting time:

"We had lived in Pennsylvania during our marriage, but after the divorce—it took almost a year—I took Lois to Connecticut where we lived with my sister and I took courses and later attended law school. Last June, I completed my degree, and in July, my world caved in: the cancer was discovered. There had been moments of extreme fatigue, dizzy spells, and feelings of nausea, but I had thought all these symptoms were related to the stress of the divorce, law school, and trying to raise my child alone, so I put off going for a checkup until my days and nights had become unbearable. I've undergone treatment of every variety. I'm almost completely bald. I'm tired all the time. And yet I'm determined to fight. I've heard of a new treatment at a hospital in Texas and plan to explore my options."

Jean was a highly intelligent, strong woman, but facing tremendous difficulties, physical, financial, and most pressing now, psychological. She was consumed with worry about her daughter's future, adamant about wanting Lois to remain with her sister if she should die, and yet aware that Ron would be granted custody of Lois because he was her biological parent and, in the eyes of the law, her rightful guardian. Jean was also filled with guilt about her "mothering role" during the past three years while she had attended law school.

As Jean told me all of this, I made notes, listened, and observed her closely. Her hands never stopped moving, accenting her words, expressing her pain, her anger, and her bewilderment. Her weeping under control, she spoke quickly, as if there would not be enough time to tell me everything about her experiences over the years. I tried to get her to focus on Lois, to tell me about the child: what she thought Lois knew about the illness, whether Lois was aware of Jean's negative feelings toward Ron, and what Lois's feelings were about him.

Jean was forthright: "I've told Lois I hate her father. I know that's wrong, and I try not to express it, but why should he live and have her and why—why—should I die? It's not fair! I know I sound bitter. I try not to be but I am, I am." Jean looked at me imploringly. "How can I tell my child that I might die? How can I tell her that she will live with Ron and his new family? How do I do this? It will shatter both of us. Is

there a right way to tell her?"

I told Jean that I would try to help Lois deal with her feelings through our play, but that, at some point, if her death was inevitable, Jean must tell Lois herself. Jean nodded assent and went on to express concern about leaving a more favorable memory of herself. She felt that her time in law school had robbed Lois of a positive image of her as a mother and that she now had too little time to make up for the past three years of Lois's life.

During our first session. I obtained a history of Lois from Jean. Lois had been a full-term baby with a normal delivery. She had walked and talked within the usual period and had been a "good" baby until the marriage became more disruptive and fragile. Jean told me that Lois was a bright eight-year-old who was not happy at school, although she adored her teacher. She had no close friends, was teased at school constantly, was called a crybaby and was now "worrying" about her mother. Although Lois said she "hated her father," she spent summers with him and, during the year, saw him on the prescribed holidays for extended visits. According to Jean, Lois was now an A student and loved to read, write, and play imaginative games. She was in third grade and seemed to be getting along with some of the children, but others still teased her. One child, teasing her about Jean's baldness, had told Lois that it was contagious and that Lois and everyone who played with her would get bald. After Jean had met with the school principal and the third-grade teachers concerning that incident, Lois's teacher had carried on a discussion in class about various diseases, including cancer and the fact that it's not contagious. With materials from the American Cancer Society, the teacher was able to handle this issue in an informed and intelligent manner.

Jean went on: "Lois is clingy lately and wants to stay in my bed at night. She seems babyish at times and often says to me, 'Don't go bye-bye. ' I know she senses that I'm quite ill—I have given her *some* information. I haven't had the courage to tell her exactly what the circumstances are. Look, she must know 'bye-bye' means 'die,' doesn't she? Help me—help me—help me to tell her."

Our first meeting ended with some suggestions concerning how Jean might prepare Lois for her visit with me. I told Jean to tell Lois that I was a person who listened to children and who tried to help them with their problems. We would play games; we would talk; we would share feelings. Jean left, and I

felt somewhat relieved that she had taken the first step in coming to grips with her possible death. She was willing to entrust Lois to another adult and to allow Lois to express her deepest fears, and I knew that one goal was to enable Jean and Lois to share their feelings and accept the reality of Jean's illness and fate.

I felt humbled by Jean's request. She was demanding a great deal of me and I could not disappoint her. But how does anyone prepare a child for the death of a parent? This lovely woman was seriously ill just at a point in life when she was ready to launch a career in law. I tried to put myself in her place, but it was too frightening for me to contemplate. It was important for me to focus my energies on helping Lois. I was eager to meet her and apprehensive as well.

After Jean's first session with me, she telephoned and expressed concern about Lois's Thanksgiving visit with her father: Lois had come home rather mournful, and Jean could not get Lois to share her feelings. My first meeting with Lois would take place in mid-December, and Jean hoped I would be able to find out what was troubling Lois, who seemed clingy, depressed, and anxious. Jean was also apprehensive about the coming Christmas holidays and wondered whether she should send Lois to Pennsylvania to visit Ron. After our first session, Jean had called Ron to tell him about the seriousness of her illness and had begged him not to discuss it with Lois over Christmas.

During my second session with Jean, approximately one month later (and after my first contact with Lois), she described her law school years in Connecticut: "They were good and bad—good because I was using my brain at full speed. I thought it had atrophied during my seven years of marriage. I found the professors, students, and readings stimulating, but I was consumed by my eagerness to do well. Lois was so young when I started school; she was in kindergarten and miserable. If I had classes or library work, a sitter picked her up. My sister worked full time as an architect, and eventually, I had to get my own small apartment; there was just too much tension between us. I was in debt to her and to the bank. Ron's support checks for Lois were always late. I struggled with finances continuously and hated this aspect of myself. I became a Class A worrier. I was a physical wreck: no sleep, no time for vacation or recreation, no sex! I was short-tempered with Lois—she'll tell you herself; she called me 'picky-picky.' Lois became even more clingy, demanding every minute of my time at home, and I finally decided to study after she went to sleep, but even then it was difficult. She awoke nearly every night with bad dreams and sobbed until I

brought her into my bed. It was obvious to me that just as I did, she felt the strain of the divorce and the added demands that law school was putting on me. Through signals that I wasn't even aware of, I was communicating all of my distress to her. I'm afraid I was not a very good mother. Now, almost too late, I've started to see a therapist.

"My brother, who is quite well off, is now helping me out with finances. We've never been close, but I know he cares for me, and since the divorce, he's rallied to my cause. I felt humiliated at first, having two siblings support me, but now I'll accept everything if it means a chance to survive for Lois's sake. I thought that when I finished school, I'd have a good job in a prestigious law firm. Look at me now! No job, in my family's debt, no future, no more Lois. Oh God, what am I saying?"

Jean broke down again; she was in torment and desperately needed help. I was relieved to learn that she had started psychotherapy for herself, and that she and I could concentrate on Lois's problems.

What was I to make of this account? Jean was obviously distressed, facing death, weakened by her long illness, and facing bouts of nausea, exhaustion, and depression following chemotherapy. She was consumed by anger—anger because of her husband's treatment during their stormy marriage, anger because he had made a new life for himself, anger because he was the survivor, anger because he would become Lois's custodian, and anger because she would not see Lois grow into womanhood. This anger surged up and gave her the courage to continue fighting her illness and searching for remedies that unfortunately did not exist.

I tried to sort out the details in the long history that Jean had presented. How much was true? Was Ron the villain described by Jean? Did Lois really dislike her father as much as Jean insisted she did? Would I be able to help Lois deal with the inevitable loss of her mother? Jean and I agreed that we would meet once a month to discuss Lois's progress, and that Jean would telephone me with questions and concerns about Lois as the therapy proceeded.

I felt the urgency of Jean's request. Although I did not know then that the cancer was terminal, I was about to engage in a battle against the passage of time: I needed time to help Lois, and I didn't know how much time there would be before Jean died. Jean was hopeful that she could be cured, and for Lois's sake, I wanted to believe in a cure as much as Jean did. If only I could play a trick on death as Gramps does in

Paul Osborn's play *On Borrowed Time*. Gramps, like Jean, is near death, but he does not want to die until he can find a proper home for Pud, his grandson, just as Jean wanted someone other than Ron to take care of Lois. When Death, in the guise of a Mr. Brink, comes for Gramps, Gramps persuades him to climb up a tree to pick "one last apple before I go." Once up the tree, Brink is trapped by the branches, and for a short time, Gramps has a reprieve. I, too, was searching for a reprieve for Lois. But of course, death does triumph in the end.

Between my first two monthly sessions with Jean, I met Lois, and our play therapy began.

The Intellectual: Codes and Words

Our first play therapy session took place approximately two weeks after Jean's initial meeting with me. My plan was to meet with Lois twice a week if possible. Thinking about her as often as I did, I found myself confronting my own mortality. Just as Jean raged against death, I raged. But while Jean suffered physically and mentally, I needed to find a way to help Lois with the possibility of her mother's death and with what this loss would mean to her. I had to remain a constant and a supportive figure for her in a crumbling world. First, I wanted Lois to trust me. As our relationship deepened, I planned to become more active in directing our sessions. Although at first, Lois would choose her own toys and games, later I would guide her, to help her express the pain and mourning that she would eventually experience.

Lois came willingly into the playroom, obviously well prepared for our session by Jean. Lois told me that I was going to be her "helper" and then sat down at the table and announced, "I'm a mover." She explained, "I'm always on the move. I never sit still. I really like to do things. I'm even a monitor in school."

- You like being a mover?
- Yes, I do. It keeps me busy.
- When you're busy, you don't have to think.

Lois became quiet, and I could sense she was pulling back. I had probed too quickly. After we had sat awhile in silence, I asked Lois if she knew why she was coming to see me.

- Yes. I get sad, that's all. I'm thinking of Mommy and my dad, that's all.

• Can you tell me what you're thinking about?

Again, she resisted. She was guarded, refusing to expand on this topic, and I decided that for all her bravado and characterization of herself as a "mover" and of me as a "helper," she needed more time to become truly comfortable with me.

Producing a small notebook, Lois proceeded to tell me that it was her "code book" and that, if I wanted to, I could try to figure out her "codes." While she made one up for me, I had an opportunity to note her features. Lois was of about average height for an eight-year-old, but somewhat chubby. She had long blond hair, blue eyes, and a sweet smile, very much like Jean's, but dimples gave her an impish expression. She wore sneakers and was dressed in a two-piece exercise outfit, pink and gray with designs of small balloons floating across the top of the shirt. Her hair was long and loose and kept falling into her eyes as she worked. She brushed it back with her hand or chewed on a strand, frowning as she intently devised a coded phrase for me to solve.

When she finished, she challenged me but generously offered me some hints. When I successfully deciphered her message—"School is fun"—Lois seemed pleased that I took this game seriously. When I asked her to tell me more about school, Lois again retreated. It was clear that she was not ready to share her feelings with me, and that she would try to control our discussions through secret "codes" and messages that I would have to decipher.

We had more time left in this session, and Lois found some *Highlights* magazines on the bookshelf. She wanted to do the puzzles, again using her intellectual strengths to relate to me while keeping me at a distance, and clearly wanting to impress me with her cognitive skills. Lois finished the puzzles in the magazine and further explored the bookshelf, avoiding the games, toys, and other play equipment in the room. She felt safe with her word games and resisted my attempts to probe about school or her friends and family. This was all right. We would go slowly until Lois felt comfortable enough to share her concerns about her mother.

At the beginning of the session, I had explained the rules of the playroom to Lois: what she could and could not do, the fact that the toys must remain in the room, and the length of time we would spend. I also explained that what she told me would be confidential. I told her she could call me Dr. Singer or

Dorothy. Lois chose Dr. Singer. It suggested to me her need to be formal. Now, as we had only five minutes left, I told her that our session was drawing to a close, and Lois immediately blurted out, "I go to visit my dad in Pennsylvania. He has a house on a lake and it's OK."

- You like to go there?
- Yes! Well—No.
- You're not sure?
- (*Silence on Lois's part.*)
- Can you tell me more about the house or your visits?
- No, I don't want to.
- I had touched a sore spot and Lois resisted.

Our time was up. She gathered up her notebook and pencils and said, "Thank you for the visit. I'll be happy to come again and do more puzzles." Lois's speech was formal, controlled, and very much like Jean's.

When we entered the waiting room, Lois and Jean hugged. Jean buttoned Lois's coat, tied her sneaker laces, and spoke to her in a babyish way. When Lois told Jean she would come back and it was "fun," Jean seemed relieved, and they left holding hands. The intellectual "mover" and "coder" became the helpless "baby" in the presence of her mother. I reflected on Jean's need to baby Lois. Was she trying to make up for all those years when she had been in law school and had spent very little time mothering Lois? Or was Jean trying to move the clock back, to hold onto Lois as a baby, to revive those years before the diagnosis of leukemia? Jean needed to be "Mama," to cling to this mother-daughter relationship, to suspend time, to refuse to acknowledge Lois's growth—Lois growing up without Jean. The future was too painful for Jean to contemplate.

Lois had given me clues about her worries, just as she had given me clues to the secret code she had devised for me. I wondered, had Lois tested me to see if I were worthy of solving her problems—her fears of her mother's illness and perhaps her death and her concerns about her father and the family in

Pennsylvania? Lois, the "mover," was using codes and puzzles to communicate with me. Our first session had been filled with intellectual defenses and also with hints to me of her distress. She had been resistant to my probes but had not shut me out completely, and I looked forward to my next session with this articulate, intelligent, complicated child.

The following week Lois brought some of her test papers for me to see, to admire her A pluses and 100 percents. She wanted to play tick-tack-toe, and while we played, I tried to engage her in conversation about her family. As before, Lois avoided my questions and wanted to focus only on the game, expressing great pleasure that she could beat me.

- You like to win.
- Yes, I sure do. I feel awful whenever I lose a game.
- Why?
- I don't know. It's like I'm no good or dumb.
- Do you think you always have to win?
- Well, no, but losing is bad, or scary.
- Scary?
- Yes. "Don't lose anything," that's my rule.
- Grown-ups lose games, and even very smart people lose games. We can't always win.
- Well, you have to. That's all.
- Why?
- I don't know. Anyway, I don't want to talk about this.

Here was another topic that was taboo: winning and losing. Lois was afraid of loss: the loss of her mother and the loss of her security. It was important for her to hold on tightly to whatever she had, and her games were symbols for her family.

Lois shifted away from our tick-tack-toe contest and to the doctor's kit. She took the teddy bear and proceeded to examine it, using the toy instruments. While doing this, she told me about an incident in her life when she was about four years old:

- I swallowed Tylenol—a whole bunch—and I went to the hospital, where they pumped me out.
- That must have been scary for you.
- Yes, I remember it. I don't like to be sick, and I don't like anyone to be sick.
- Who's sick, Lois?
- No one. Let's play "house."

Lois took the bear and the dolls to the couch, cuddled them, fed them, and put them on the slide. She play-acted "mother" for about ten minutes. I felt she was reassuring herself that her mother was well and doing her job of tending her "baby. " I made some comments about Lois as the "mother," such as "You are really taking good care of the doll and teddy," but it was clear that Lois was not inviting me to join this game. She was not ready to explore its significance for her in terms of the mothering she had missed during Jean's law student years and the mothering she was afraid of losing now.

She soon tired of the game and asked me to help her to write a letter to *Highlights*. She drew a house and wanted to send it to the magazine editors, who chose readers' submissions each month for reproduction in a special section. Again, I could be her "helper" in an intellectual task. Her drawing was of a house, perhaps the house and home she wished she could have, a complete family, all well and together under one roof, but it was too soon for me to say this and too soon for Lois to tell me what her drawing meant.

Our session ended. I gave Lois a Christmas present, a book she had mentioned to me that dealt with science experiments that could be done in one's own kitchen. Lois was excited, telling me that she planned to share the book with her father over the Christmas holidays, and that she would see me "next year."

Our next meeting was indeed in the New Year—in January. I wondered how the visit in

Pennsylvania with her father had gone and was eager to see Lois. Jean had communicated with me regularly since Lois had begun therapy. She called at least once a week, had had the second session with me, and kept me informed about her medical condition, which was gradually worsening. She seemed pleased that Lois wanted to come to the sessions and felt that at some level, Lois was aware of how serious the illness was. Lois wanted to sleep with a light on in the hallway, and many times, when Jean awoke, Lois was in her bed. Time was growing short for Jean. She was not responding satisfactorily to treatment.

I also felt the pressure of time. It would be important for me to take a more aggressive role early in play therapy and try to get Lois to open up. Her codes and word games were strong defenses against the reality of her mother's illness. They were challenges that Lois could easily tackle. All the fragments became whole, solved, and deciphered—unlike Jean's illness. But I was caught in a dilemma. I did not know how much time I would have to work with Lois to uncover her feelings about her mother's illness. Lois needed time to adjust to the possibility of Jean's death—and time to begin the grieving process for Jean and the healing process for herself.

I decided to try some tests with Lois. During our next two sessions after the Christmas vacation, I gave Lois the Blacky Test, which consists of pictures of a dog and his family in various encounters. The scenes are constructed to evoke children's spontaneous feelings about their relationships with their siblings and their parents. Themes emerge such as contentment, friendliness, and playfulness, or preoccupations with food, toileting, and hostility. A child's self-concept and defenses can be determined from his or her responses as well as from an avoidance or denial of certain aspects of the scenes.

Lois made up stories about each card and answered some structured questions. She described Blacky as always seeking attention, getting his own way, and threatening to "break something" if he did not. Her responses also revealed her worries about separation and loss, as well as her view of her mother as "good" and her father as "bad." Blacky (like Lois) had "secret passwords" and "secret clubs" and clearly liked his mother better than his father.

In addition, Lois drew her family and gave me her Three Wishes, another test. Her wishes were for (1) a family that was normal because no divorce had ever taken place; (2) a club with lots of people in it; and (3) lots of toys.

We were able to talk about these two tests and what they meant. Lois's responses to the cards and my gentle probing had had an extraordinary effect: she was able to talk with me more openly than before. I also picked up on her first wish for a "normal" family. Lois talked at length about how "awful" it was when "Mommy was at law school. She never read me a story." Lois remembered this period as one of tension, during which there had been no time for games, stories, and play with her mother. She also remembered the arguments between her parents over custody and visitation rights. Lois described her family members as "picky": "Everyone was picky-picky-fighting. I was two when it started and five when it stopped."

The tests were crucial in allowing Lois to reveal some of her feelings to me and in letting me gain insight into her current situation. The Blacky Test was the catalyst that helped bring Lois's thoughts to the surface, and yet I was still wary. Lois spoke about the past, but she still avoided talking about Jean's illness and the possibility of her death.

During that session, Lois wanted to tell me about a dream she often had. She was in a forest and seemed to become a unicorn, but lately, new elements had appeared in this recurring dream: "I changed my shape and became a monkey. A flood came and then snow. Then I went up to the North Pole in the flood. I put two parts of my body above the surface of the water. I was then a horse again. Pegasus, up on all fours. I escaped. But then a person caught me around the neck. I awoke."

The person, she told me, was an "animal catcher." The catcher put her in the stable and made her a racehorse. This horse won all the races.

The dream seemed to be one of flight and transformation: Lois was almost drowning but was saved, was put in a stable (where she could be taken care of), and became a racehorse. Lois told me she often daydreamed about being Pegasus, the mythological winged horse, or the racehorse and "winning." Lois called this her "adventure dream." In this recurrent dream, she left the earth as a unicorn, was transformed into a monkey, almost drowned, became a horse again, and was rescued from cold, icy waters or won a race by running "so fast."

Lois had shared her feelings with me for the first time: her memories of her unhappy household, her desire to escape from the world around her, her fear of drowning, and her rescue. The dream made

me think of Lois as the lonely unicorn, a mythical creature who is odd, unusual. It reminded me of a cartoon I had seen years ago in the *New Yorker* in which Noah's ark sails off, leaving a unicorn alone on the shore, a misfit, left behind, as perhaps Lois would be left. But the unicorn in Lois's dream changed shape and became a racehorse, an animal that is real—one that survives and wins.

Could I help Lois? Was I going to be the "animal catcher" and keep her in a safe stable? Would Lois win? Could I rescue her from her unspoken fears about her mother's death, from her future with her father? These sessions, although only our second and third, were critical. Lois was able to express her anxieties about the divorce and her own fear of being alone and "drowning" or losing safety and control.

The Circus and the Horses

Our fourth session took place two weeks later, in February. Jean was quite ill and could no longer drive. This information unnerved me. I felt the pressure of time and realized that I would have to be more direct in my work with Lois. I no longer had the luxury of waiting for Lois to reveal her feelings about her father and her future living arrangements. I would have to take a chance and interpret her remarks even if I caused Lois some temporary discomfort. Arrangements were being made for a full-time housekeeper, and in the interim, Lois was supposed to go to her father in Pennsylvania. At the last moment, Ron had canceled the visit, and Lois was spending the time with her aunt. According to Jean, Lois was furious and felt rejected by her father, but she had taken the stance that "It didn't really matter," and that Ron was "mean" and "selfish." When Lois came for her session, she looked morose and troubled. Nonetheless, she did seem relieved to enter the playroom and asked if we could play "circus."

Lois took some miniature horses from the shelf, made a tightrope out of pipe cleaners, and proceeded to construct some cages out of blocks for the various toy animals. Two small horses became a "father" and a "mother," which she made walk along the tightrope. The father horse kept falling off the rope, and Lois became rather rough with him, knocking him down, picking him up to kiss him, and knocking him down again.

- I commented about this ambivalent behavior:
- You seem angry at the father horse.

- Yes, I am. He's not good, he's not fair.
- Why isn't he good or fair?
- He can't keep a promise—so down he goes!
- Sometimes things happen that prevent us from keeping promises.
- Well, this father is mean.
- But you kissed him, too.
- Well, so I did, but he's mean.
- Do you want to tell me more about why he's mean?
- No, he's mean, mean, mean!

With that outburst, Lois tossed the father horse down, broke up the circus arrangement, and then, of her own accord, proceeded to tell me that her father had canceled her visit with him. Instead of going to Pennsylvania, she had spent the past two weeks with her aunt and was very unhappy. Through her play, Lois was able to express her feelings and then transfer them to words and tell me about disappointment.

- When your Dad cancels a visit with you, it makes you angry.
- Yes. He does that a lot. Maybe he doesn't really care about me.
- Do you think that's really true? Sometimes we love someone, but something happens and we have to disappoint that person.
- But he does it a lot!
- It seems like a lot when you want something so much. Do you know why you are so disappointed this time?
- No. Well, yes, maybe . . .
- Can you tell me the maybe?

- No!

Lois carefully avoided discussing Jean's illness and the reasons she had been supposed to visit her father. When I tried to broach the subject of Jean's treatment and illness, Lois withdrew, became sullen, sat on the couch, and just stared ahead, her signal to me to stop probing. Despite my need to move more aggressively, it was still too soon in our relationship for Lois to express her fears about Jean's cancer.

I talked with Lois about the new housekeeper, Diane, who was helping out and would be driving Lois to our sessions. Cheering up, Lois told me that they had stopped at McDonald's on the way for hamburgers and that it had been fun. We ended the session by cleaning up the circus mess, and as Lois put the toys away, she kissed the father horse once again.

The following week, a bubbly Lois came with great news to share: "My Mom cut herself—and guess what, the cut clotted! That's good. It means she's getting better."

This was Lois's first mention of her mother's illness since she had started therapy, giving me an opportunity to explore what Lois knew about the cancer and how much she really understood about its consequences.

- You've been worried about your mother, but you didn't want to tell me about this worry.
- No, I didn't. I feel OK about it today. Mommy seems OK lately. I'm making her a heart. Look!

Taking a large white piece of cloth out of her book bag, Lois showed me the design of a heart stenciled on the material. She was almost through with the stitching and was quite proud of her design and embroidery: "It says, 'I love you' in the middle, see? I only have that much left to do. All the heart around it is finished. It's a surprise. Don't you tell her! It will be for a pillowcase."

Reassuring Lois that I would keep this secret and that I thought her work was excellent, I tried to help her to talk more about her mother, but she only gave me her good news about the clot and would go no further. At least the door was opening a bit more. Perhaps this was the beginning. Despite my own desire to make faster progress because of my awareness of Jean's condition, I had to be patient and could not rush the process.

During this session, Lois again played circus. She placed the horses in the stable and again hit the father horse. One horse fell and broke a leg, and Lois called the "doctor." The baby dolls were used in her game, too; one doll also became ill and needed a shot but hid from the doctor. Putting five baby dolls on a Big Bird scooter, Lois took them for a ride to the doctor. She spent a considerable part of the hour between the two games—"circus" and "doctor"—injuring the horse and one baby doll. My comments to her concerned healing:

- Doctors help people get well. Is that what you're doing to the horse and the baby doll?
- Well, yes, but, see, this horse just keeps breaking his leg—and then he's saved.
- He's like the horse in your dream. I think.
- You mean Pegasus? Yes, he gets saved, but that's an "adventure dream." Remember, I drown and get saved. I don't need a doctor.
- But you were saved by the animal catcher weren't you?
- Yes, but this is not a dream. This horse needs a doctor.
- Your mom needs a doctor, too, doesn't she?
- My Mom has lots of doctors and may even have a special kind of medicine put in her when she goes to Texas.
- Do you think about that a lot?
- Yes, Dr. Singer, a lot—and today it's OK. I told you, her blood made a clot.
- So today you feel better. Can you tell me, Lois, when you feel worried? Can you share that with me? You said I was your helper.
- You're my helper—but you can't help Mommy.

This was true. I could only remark to myself that this child knew that I was powerless as far as Jean's illness was concerned. But could I help Lois deal with her feelings about this tragic event? For the first time, Lois had used my name (I was *her* doctor), a signal to me that she was comfortable with me and perhaps ready to confide.

As Lois was leaving the room, she gave me a present, a postcard with a reproduction of Picasso's painting *First Steps*. It is of a mother holding onto a child's hands at it tries to keep its balance and walk. Lois had chosen this card herself during a class outing to the local art gallery. She had no way of knowing that this was one of my favorite paintings, a copy of which is on my office wall at the university. *First Steps*—what did this mean to Lois? I liked to think it was her first attempt to separate from her mother, her first attempt to go by herself into the world. Perhaps I was reading more into her selection than was there, but it was significant to me that Lois had now reached out for me with this little gift. It told me that a relationship was developing. She had written "To Dr. Singer from Lois" on the back and seemed delighted that I was so enthusiastic about the card. Time was up, and I hoped that during the next session, we could talk more about *First Steps*.

Babies and Dr. Butterscotch

Lois was pale and sleepy. Her nose was stuffed up; she was whiny and out of sorts. She had fallen asleep in the car on her way to my office and was trying to wake up. She lay down on the couch for a while and refused all suggestions about play. Finally, I asked if she would like to draw.

- Okay, but what?
- Well, how about three drawings for me?

I decided to give her the House-Tree-Person and Kinetic Family Drawings tests to see if they would help to release some emotions. These tests are based on the premise that patients' drawings symbolize feelings about their families and themselves. Seeming to cheer up, Lois came to the table and proceeded to draw a house:

- This is my house, way up on a hill. I'd like to live in it. It would have an attic, my room, a bathroom, a living room, and a dining room. In this house I have a gerbil, a dog, a rabbit, and a gerbil's girlfriend. My tree is an apple tree in the yard of the house. It's a happy tree. It never gets chopped. I'm going to erase its roots. I don't want it to have roots. I don't like trees—it's a grumpy old tree—it feels happy but always is grumpy. Yes, it's grumpy. It hates everything, rabbits, cats, everything, grumpy old tree.
- Why is it so grumpy?

• Because it is! And this is my person—my teacher. I like this person. She's usually happy.

Lois asked if she could draw another person. When I agreed, she drew a tiny person and then shaded it in until it was completely black except for the face.

• Who is this?

• I don't know. Well, yes, this is a person with three wishes.

Lois remembered our Three Wishes exercise from a few weeks before and became a little intellectual:

• She wants a room to be quiet, all of us to behave, and to work more on computers.

• Lois, can you tell me who that person is?

• It's the teacher!

• Can you draw your family and have each one doing something?

• Yes.

Lois began to draw. The first figure was "Daddy," drawn far apart from her two females. He was holding a book. The mother was "combing her hair. This is a picture of her when she had hair."

We talked about the drawings for a little while. The house was a "dream house" on a hill, because "I don't live on a hill now. That 'grumpy tree' could be me."

• Sometimes you feel that way, grumpy?

• Yes, a lot of times.

• Your tree had roots. Why did you draw over them and hide them?

• I don't know.

• You said it was an apple tree, but you didn't draw any apples. Why?

• I told you, no roots now—it's grumpy.

It seemed clear to me that Lois felt like her tree, empty and rootless: her tree—her self-image. She was no longer happy, feeling less secure. Perhaps, too, the drawing of the tree, the mention of apples, and the tree never to be "chopped" down or die were expressions of her need for her mother to remain vital and blooming. However, Lois felt that her yearnings were being denied, and the tree became grumpy, with no roots, dead. Was the tree her mother?

The desire for her mother's restoration was powerful and was conveyed in her family picture, where her mother held a comb, stood close to Lois, and her long and flowing hair. The father was there, slightly apart from Lois and her mother, holding his book—reading, withdrawn, and passive, similar to Lois, who was portrayed as sleeping and helpless.

I put the drawing aside, and Lois discovered a new toy, a bright yellow "talking" teddy bear. She loved it, picked it up, and named it "Dr. Butterscotch." She seemed to perk up, and started a game: "This doll is Peter. He has a splinter in his belly button. This doll has a sore arm and must go to the hospital for an operation."

Lois gave "shots" and "pills" to each of the dolls and used Dr. Butterscotch as her healer.

This session revealed Lois's concern about her mother in a vivid way. The transformation of the healthy, happy apple tree to a grumpy, rootless tree signified her preoccupation with Jean's illness and dying. The doctor play then enabled her to gain some control. As Dr. Butterscotch, Lois could administer medicine, repair broken limbs, remove splinters, and be in control. She needed to be the "mover," but at a deeper level she was aware of her inability to change circumstances. Of course, the tree had become grumpy. It had lost its life-giving roots—its support system—and it would die.

For the next few sessions, the Dr. Butterscotch game continued, alternating with displays of babyish behavior. Lois would suck her thumb, act sleepy, whine, and ask to sit on my lap. I felt that Lois was worried about Jean and had even suspected that Jean was more fragile than ever. At my monthly session with Jean in March, I had found out that she was now quite weak and spent much time in bed; the cancer was not responding to treatment.

A week before this visit, I had actually spotted Jean as she was leaving a building near my office at

the university. I had just parked my car, and I watched while Jean seemed to float down the street like an ethereal creature in a Chagall painting. As usual, she was dressed in black: a long, gored skirt; her familiar woolen sweater, now hanging loosely over thin hips; and a wide-brimmed hat that shielded her pale face from the strong spring light. I had never seen Jean in daylight, only in the soft light of my office. Now as I watched her, I suddenly saw that the cancer had transformed this once vital woman into a gaunt, fragile person. A tremor passed through my body as if I had seen a phantom, and a fleeting image of death personified passed through my mind—a figure I associated with an old Ingmar Bergman film, *The Seventh Seal*. I restrained an impulse to call out to her, not wanting her to see the distress that I was sure my face would convey. Jean waited on the corner until Diane came to drive her home. When I got out of my car, my hands trembled as I put a coin in the meter.

Jean came to the March session worried about Ron's gaining custody of Lois and again expressed her conviction that he was not a good father. I must admit that I, too, was concerned about Ron. I knew very little about him other than what Jean had told me and what Lois had conveyed to me through her play. I wondered if Ron truly understood the seriousness of Jean's illness. I wondered, too, how he could disappoint Lois so often and deny her the attention that she craved. Was he so unfeeling, or was Jean purposely distorting her portrayal of him in order to win my sympathy?

Jean admitted that she was still putting Ron down in her conversations with Lois. As a result, Lois was becoming more and more angry at Ron, and even when her visits with her father were pleasant, she denied it. I explained to Jean that Lois felt that she would betray Jean if she enjoyed Ron's attention. It was a question of allegiance. If she admitted that her time with Ron was good, Lois felt that Jean would be jealous, and Lois could not hurt her mother. As a result, she denied her own feelings in order to keep Jean happy. She was afraid of losing Jean and wanted to give what Jean asked of her: total devotion. This was a burden and too much to ask of Lois.

"I understand what you're telling me," Jean said, "but I'm in terrible conflict about my feelings toward Ron. I know that Lois will need a parent. It's just too bad that Ron has to be that parent. I haven't the time to work through my feelings about him, and I can't continue my therapy. It's too exhausting to analyze my feelings—to dig down and relive all the memories. It's all too painful, too debilitating. I'm so tired now; I sleep a lot. I can't even read. I feel so weak, and I'm losing ground."

We could not talk further; the visit was becoming too taxing. Diane came to drive Jean home. As we parted, Jean said, "I'll try not to denigrate Ron. But I can't help it—I resent him so."

Before Lois came to her session during the last week in March, Jean was finally able to tell Lois that she might die. Up to this point, there had been hints, but the facts had never been clearly stated. Jean had talked about cancer before, but always with the possibility of a cure. Now, Jean told Lois, there was no longer any hope. This was difficult for Jean to do, but I gave her support in her decision to tell Lois, as did her sister and brother. It seemed apparent to me that Lois had figured out this change in the course of the cancer, but now that she knew, I wondered what the next session would bring.

Lois Begins to Confront Her Mother's Approaching Death

At the end of March, Lois came into the playroom ready to talk about her father. She listed the "bad" things first and then the "good. " The bad things included his choosing her clothes, preventing her from using a night-light ("He wants me to grow up"), and preventing her from petting his wife's cats. The good things included watching cartoons on Saturday morning and staying up until 9:00 p.m. Together, Ron's family usually shopped, ran errands, cooked, and had "great desserts like chocolate chip cookies, but I can't hum at the table or tap my feet."

Lois then told me about Jean: "She's basically just nice unless I treat her meanly, like if I'm in a bad mood. Usually I'm very cooperative." Lois's mood then changed. She became quiet and confided her worries: "I worry a lot when the cancer goes on. I'm just scared. It's hard to explain. When I'm in school, I get nervous. It's like the time when Mommy was going to law school. I was nervous then. I bit my nails. I threw up. I was afraid she wouldn't ever finish. It was not good then. It's not good now."

Lois stopped talking abruptly and I felt she needed relief. I watched as she went over to get out the doctor's kit and Dr. Butterscotch. She began to get wild and silly: "Take that, you—and you, too!"

Lois picked up another doll: "You get this shot, too. See how you like it. Here's one for you, too!"

Lois was jabbing at all the dolls, giggling and shouting at them. Each doll received a needle and was hurled onto the couch.

Lois was out of control, and I intervened. I took the toys from Lois and guided her to the armchair, sitting nearby and urging her to relax. She gradually regained control and soon began to breathe more evenly. I knew that this was a time not to talk, but just to feel. Lois knew that I was there, closeby. She reached for my hand and held it tightly. When I felt that she was composed, I walked with her to greet Diane. Lois smiled a sad smile, waved, and said, "I'll see you."

Lois found relief in playing doctor, but today she had been almost hysterical. I think she knew that "doctoring" was useless for her mother's illness.

Spring was approaching, and Lois and I had been together since early December. April 2 would be exactly four months since Lois's treatment had begun. In that time, Lois had dropped her defenses and resistances and had gradually communicated her feelings to me. I was still concerned about whether she truly understood what death meant. Her play conveyed her anger and her helplessness.

I wanted to cry out and attack, too—but whom and where? How could I ventilate my feelings of impotence in this struggle with Jean's impending death? Death, Jean's own Mr. Brink, was climbing slowly down from those tree branches.

Jean needed to go to the hospital for observation and for a new treatment, and I knew that this next session would be a difficult one for Lois. She came into the waiting room that lovely early spring day looking pale, as she had a few weeks previously. She was sleepy, was sucking her thumb, appeared depressed and listless, and leaned against me as we walked into the playroom. Lois had told me previously that she would like to write a book, *The Magical Voyage*, and I had agreed to find all sorts of pictures for her to put together in her story. I felt that Lois needed a concrete task to do that day, and that perhaps, through the story, she could work out her feelings. Lois wrote her story about a trip through the sky in a balloon that floated all over the world. The heroine was a ballerina, who found lots of food to eat, a magical fish that gave her everything she wanted, and three horses to take on her journey back home. This book would be a gift for Jean, but claiming that she was too dizzy and too tired, Lois refused go to the hospital to give it to her. Lois enjoyed making the book and said she would give it to Jean when she was discharged from the hospital. We talked about Lois's dizziness:

- When did this start?

- Way before Mommy went to the hospital.
- Did you tell her about it?
- No. I didn't tell you either.
- I know that, but why not?
- I'm telling you now.
- Yes, I'm glad you can share this with me. Can you tell me how you feel about Mommy's being in the hospital.
- I'm scared she won't come home.
- Does that make you dizzy? Thinking about her?
- Yes. When I think of her, I worry, and I feel sick, and I can't do my homework.
- Lois, tell me what you think might happen in the hospital?
- She might die. I found a dead caterpillar. I buried him.

Lois started to cry. Our session was drawing to a close, and I felt that she needed to leave on a more upbeat note.

"Well, look, you made this book for your mother," I said. "You told me it's for Mother's Day. Perhaps you will want to visit her then. It would cheer her up. It's a beautiful book, and she'll feel better knowing you were thinking about her."

Seeming somewhat comforted, Lois took the book and put it in her book bag. She then asked if we had time to play "space." She took the miniature plastic space people and made a "space house" on a "distant planet where everyone lived happily ever after."

Lois was attempting to come to grips with her mother's dying, yet still retained her fantasies about a possible happy outcome: about the planet where everyone was safe, about Dr. Butterscotch and his cures, about the animal catcher who saved Pegasus, about the house on the hill where everyone was happy, and about her mother combing her flowing hair. All of these images passed through my mind—pictures

conjured up by watching a child mourning before her mother's death occurred.

Lois then left, and I pondered her need to bury the caterpillar. It reminded me of a haunting French film about World War II, *Forbidden Games*, in which a child sees her parents gunned down by enemy planes flying low over the heads of a long line of refugees fleeing from besieged Paris. The little girl tries to "awaken" her parents as they lie on the road and cannot understand why they won't respond to her voice and touch. As I watched the film, I had felt as devastated as that little girl. Now, as I watched Lois suffer, once again the pain returned. The child in the film tries to master her confusion and fears by repeatedly playing a ritual game of cemetery. She digs small graves for dead animals and places crosses to mark the sites. Like that child, Lois had been trying to understand death as she buried her caterpillar.

A few days later, Jean called to tell me that her bone marrow transplant, scheduled for April, had been postponed. She would not be going to Texas after all. She was too weak for the procedure, and it would be too dangerous to try it at this time.

Ron had telephoned and asked if he could see me. This was the first time he had expressed interest in Lois's progress, and I felt it would be useful to meet him and help him understand her distress. It seemed inevitable that he would soon have physical custody of Lois, and I needed to know more about him as a father. My previous attempts to meet with him had failed. There had always been a reason why he could not get away: his job, family illnesses, vacation plans. But now Ron seemed eager to come, and I was curious about him, given the history of the family and Jean's resentment toward him. I wondered, too, if Lois had expressed any thoughts to Ron about her future with him and his new family.

Ron came during the same week of the session during which Lois had put together her *Magical Voyage* book. He was a tall, slender, handsome man but seemed cold, distant, and reserved. In a very matter-of-fact way, he described his marriage to Jean as a "big mistake" and saw Jean as a "poor housewife" and an "incompetent mother. " He felt some guilt about his past actions, but it was clear that he did not find Jean blameless in their marriage, as she saw herself. Ron admitted that he used to say "nasty things" about Jean to Lois but had stopped. He had explained to Lois that "grown-ups get angry, but it's between Mommy and me, not anything to do with you."

Ron described Lois as "affectionate and responsive" to him, but as wary of revealing her feelings

about Jean's illness. He told me that Lois spent time sitting on his lap, sucking her thumb, and playing with his hair, loving the physical contact with him, and he said, "I do, too!" He felt that Lois tried to keep her two worlds apart—his new family and Jean's relations and friends. She had a secret place where she hid his letters.

Ron had had limited conversations with Jean in the past few months and was dismayed to learn of her setback. He felt that he needed to know more about Jean's condition so that he could share in what would be appropriate steps in helping Lois. Expressing both "anger" and "sadness" that Jean would not share information with him, he found it extremely difficult not to know what Lois was dealing with: "I feel shut out of Jean's life. I don't know what to say to Lois about Jean's dying. It's hard for me to find the proper words. I know Jean resents the fact that Lois will come to live with me and that it must bother Jean more than dying does."

Ron continued in a low voice and was tearful as he spoke: "I desperately want my daughter to trust me, to confide in me. I want her to reach out to me for support. I want to ease her burden. Jean is cheating me of my right to be a father."

As he left, he said, "Will I have to be an active parent? If this is terminal, I have to make plans." He asked if he could see me again in a month or so, and I agreed.

I now had a better sense of Ron as a person. I would never have accurate details of the relationship before the divorce, but at least I now saw a man who truly wanted to be helpful, and who was ready to accept his daughter into his new household.

The Princess in the Tower

Lois had expressed her fears about her mother's death through her drawings, through burying the caterpillar, and only partially through words. My first session with Lois in May was a key one in her the therapy. She came into the playroom, sat down, and blurted out, "I'm scared. I can't put it in words—my brain says I'm scared. I have mixed feelings. I don't know what will happen. If my mom is still in the hospital on Mother's Day, I will visit her. On Mother's Day, I'll give her my book."

Lois was revealing her feelings but still could not say the words *dying* and *death*. She seemed very tense, anxious, and depressed. After this outburst, she picked up the blocks and constructed what looked like a closed box.

- What are you making?
- It's a tower. I'm playing princess. Here she is—inside.
- There are no windows, no doors. No one can come in.
- No one can go out.
- Why is that?
- She's safe here. She's protected. This is a palace all around here. Here is a mother, a father, one brother, a husband, a maid. People can come into the palace—but only four at a time. The jewels are locked up. There are four horses—two boy horses and two girl horses. This horse will always save the princess. He gets apples for a reward.
- Doesn't the princess ever leave the tower?
- No, never. She needs to stay in there always.
- When will she come out?
- She might go out but in disguise—maybe on a picnic.
- When will that be?
- I don't know. Everyone is in the palace—all the people are there to protect her, to keep her safe. She is afraid to go out.
- What will happen to her?
- It's dangerous. She just has to stay in the tower.

Lois then carefully put all the toys and blocks away and told me we would play this game again.

And we did. The princess in the tower was Lois's game throughout the month of May. Many events took place during that month. Jean was able to come home from the hospital. To her dismay, she learned

that the bone marrow transplant had been canceled for good, and that it would be best for her to continue the current treatment. The news shocked her, and she asked to see me again.

Jean and Ron came together to this session, which was devoted to making plans for Lois's future. Both parents were trying to control their emotions. Jean was filled with resentment because she, the "good parent," was dying and Ron, the "bad parent," would win out after all. He would have Lois. Meanwhile, Lois saw herself as the princess surrounded by people she loved but isolated from them in her tower. Her play theme was one of security, protection, and safety. Only in her tower, where there were no windows and no doors, was she safe. She did not have to face her mother's death or leave her. She did not have to cope with Ron's new family. If she remained in the tower, no one could harm her. Lois played this game while her mother fought valiantly to recover, reading about all kinds of medications and various procedures, and taking more drastic forms of therapy. Lois had retreated symbolically from the illness that engulfed the family. My task was to help her deal with this crisis and to help her begin now to plan for the future—to help her emerge from the tower.

I picked up on her idea of "disguise" and asked if she could become another one of the dolls and come out. I promised that the "horse" would be there to protect her, and that we could pretend that the horse had special powers. Was there anything the princess needed or wanted that would induce her to come out? Lois was willing to open a window and look around. Perhaps the princess could visit a family in the dollhouse, where it was safe, and see if she liked it there? Lois sucked her thumb, sat on my lap, and seemed to be giving this suggestion some thought.

- Well, I could try that game, but I'm thinking and wishing now.
- Do you want to tell me your wishes?
- I wish my mom would get better. I wish my family would be happy. Mom has not been feeling good for such a long time.
- Is that why you shut the princess away, so she won't have to think about the future?

Lois looked at me and didn't reply, but I felt that she had recognized what she was doing in her princess game. She became very quiet and then told me we could play "house." She went over to the

tower and removed more blocks, leaving an opening for a door and for more windows, but the princess doll remained inside. Lois took one doll, her favorite "mama doll," and had her put six tiny dolls to bed. She pretended to turn on a night-light and then said, "I wish I had a lot of kids in my family. I'm going to Pennsylvania this whole summer. I'll have more kids there in my family. When I go there, I can cook and clean and play."

"Sounds as if you're looking forward to the summer and your visit with your dad," I said.

Lois didn't answer but took the toy dog and made it bite the father doll's ankle.

- Well, that dog seems angry at the daddy. Why?
- Look at this.

And Lois proceeded to make the dog climb all over the "daddy," knocking him down.

It was clear to me that Lois was still working out her ambivalent feelings toward her father, and the possibility that she would be with him for more than just vacations was beginning to penetrate. At least, in this session, we had made some progress: the princess could look out her window, the door was open, and Lois had now begun to play "family." She was beginning to think of other possibilities for her after her mother's death, and the fear of being alone and abandoned was lessening. She needed a big family, a loving mother, and the night-light for security, and "daddy" was there, but still not fully accepted. Accepting him completely could signify the finality of Jean's death and, in Lois's mind, would be a betrayal of Jean's love.

Playing House

At the end of May and throughout June, Lois's play themes were mainly "house" and "doctor." The princess was still in the tower and remained there as an observer. Lois did not want to play with her or talk about her. She was not quite ready to emerge into the reality of the new family and the new life in Pennsylvania.

The "house" games suggested a tremendous need for a family. Lois usually had two sets of parents

living in the dollhouse. My interpretation was that they were her own parents as they had been at one time, and now her father and Susan, his second wife, and eventually Lois' stepmother.

The game of house was restorative for Lois. She was able to play-act a family life with the routines of meals, bedtime stories, playful antics among the toy dolls, shopping, school, and all of the activities that signified a normal life to her. These miniaturized versions of "house" and "family" enabled Lois to envision herself in a new house with a new family. The repetitiveness of the games created opportunities for her to rehearse and master the emotions that her new life with Ron and Susan might engender. In mid-June, Lois was ready to talk at length about her feelings, and I report them here from my detailed notes. It was a long monologue that I didn't interrupt. The "house" game had stimulated these thoughts:

> I have kind of mixed-up feelings—some go one way, some go another. These are crammed in my head. I don't know how many there are. I'm just estimating—confused, scared, happy. Scared of not going on time to Daddy. I'll miss Susan's children. Sort of confused about my feelings. I want to stay with my mom. Also I like my dad. It feels like they want you to say who I like better. I have no idea. So I'm confused about what to do. I spent time with my gerbil. When I'm angry at Mom, I shut down. I listen to music. I talk to my animals. Little Bear is all worn out. Little Bear and I snuggle—since I was a baby I snuggle next to Little Bear. Sometimes kids tease me about my Mom—call me "cancer kid" or "AIDS patient." I get emotional about my feelings. When someone teases, I get agitated or fussy. I try to hide it inside. I've been crying lately in school. I hurt myself in gym so they call me sissy or baby. That annoys me. I have no particular friend. My best friend moved away. And now I'm looking forward to my birthday party—but who will come?

When Lois finished this outpouring, we talked about her stream of associations, and I tried to make connections for her. She was in conflict about her desire to go to Pennsylvania. She had been exposed to sickness for so long that she needed a joyful household. Yet she was afraid that if she went away, something might happen to Jean while she was gone. She also felt torn between these two parents, each of whom wanted her solely and had fought so bitterly in the past. We talked about how like the princess Lois was, hiding inside the tower, hiding her feelings and not wanting to come out and face reality. We talked about her need to play and to reconstitute a family. We talked about the children who teased her, about how they did not understand cancer and how they confused illnesses. Jean and Lois had now had many discussions about cancer, using the booklets from the American Cancer Society that I had given them. As I have mentioned, the school principal and Lois's teacher had tried to help, but some children remained cruel and unsympathetic.

Lois seemed to feel relief after airing her feelings. She went over to the tower and, one by one, removed the blocks. At last, the princess came out.

Family

At the end of May, and until mid-June, Lois played house, now her favorite game. Sometimes, at the beginning of our session, she would try out tongue twisters or revert to making codes again, but the intellectual defenses she had used in our early sessions were sharply reduced. Lois needed to engage in family play with a mother doll clearly in charge. All the children (six small dolls) and the mother slept in the same bed so "she could take care of them." The rooms were arranged and then rearranged repeatedly, as if Lois could not find a satisfactory plan for her "house." I think she was playing out the uncertainty and chaos in her life. Where would she live? Where would she sleep? Mother would not be there to love and protect her as the mother doll did the six small dolls. The father doll was left outside the house. Lois did not want him "inside." This meant that if he became a more permanent part of her life, the mother would be gone.

Our last session for the summer took place at the end of June. Lois told me about her "comfy blanket," which she took with her on "sleepovers" and to Pennsylvania:

- This blanket is monster-proof. I need it to protect me from slimy monsters—one-eyed or two-eyed monsters.
- Lois, do you dream of monsters?
- Only sometimes, when my dad won't let me have my night-light.
- Can you tell him that you need it?
- I can't. I'm scared to.
- Well, we could play-act "Daddy and Lois." Would you like to try that?
- OK, but you be Lois first.

We role-played, taking turns as Lois asked her father for the night-light several times, until she felt

she could now "ask for my rights." As our session drew to a close, Lois told me she would spend the summer in Pennsylvania. She felt guilty leaving her mother, but she was also looking forward to the change. Jean wanted Lois to go away for the summer because her health was failing and her reactions to the drugs necessitated periodic hospitalization.

Before Lois left for Pennsylvania, she called me to say that she had planted a small peach tree in front of her house. I remembered her drawing of the apple tree and her comments. She had relabeled the originally happy tree as a "grumpy tree." Now, I think, she was trying to plant a tree that might bear fruit. Lois wanted her mother to live, and the tree was her way of handling death: it was a substitute, a living memory of her mother. She knew death was near, and this gentle, sensitive child who was trying to understand life and death felt a need to try actively to control some aspect of nature. Lois had planted the tree next to the caterpillar's "grave."

Death and Mourning

According to the researchers in this area, children do not truly understand the meaning of death until they are about ten years old. Jean Piaget, the eminent Swiss psychologist, was fascinated by the thinking processes of children, and one of his interests was the child's conception of living and nonliving objects. Just as Piaget believed that other concepts, such as language, mathematics, and a knowledge of science, develop through various stages, he also believed that there are definite stages in a child's understanding of death.

Until age three, children's cognitive and language development is too immature for them to have any accurate concept of death. If they are asked to define death, they usually say, "Someone went to sleep," "Someone went away," or "Someone does not move anymore." Death is also conceptualized as reversible (the new puppy takes the place of the dead dog, and the sleeping person wakes up). This conceptualization is analogous to how children interpret animated characters on television, who after disastrous falls, knockouts, or shootings and stabbings are miraculously revived to go on to the next "death" scene—all accompanied by music and special effects.

Children aged five to nine begin to have some understanding that death is final, but they cannot

quite believe that it will happen to them. They have some preoccupation with death during this period, and some children express fears about going to sleep, afraid that they will not awaken. They may also have dreams about dead people or animals and may fear that their parents will die.

Until ages eight and nine, it is difficult for children to understand that death is a biological process. Eight-year-old Lois was curious about what would happen to the caterpillar after she buried it. Through this symbolic burial, she was trying to understand what would happen to her mother's body after death. She was beginning to accept her own mortality as well, but only tentatively. Her magical games of "rescue" were part of her inability to completely assimilate the notion of death as final.

After age ten, children begin to accept the various causes of death, to perceive it as inevitable and final, and to acknowledge the cessation of all biological functions: respiration, circulation, brain function, and body movement. Just as other developmental concepts may be absorbed by different children at different ages, children show considerable variation in their conception of death, and when emotionally threatened, they may regress, denying their intellectual understanding of this natural occurrence.

Lois, who was a little past her eighth birthday at the beginning of her therapy, expressed many of the same ideas about death that are outlined above. Her preoccupation with and handling of Jean's impending death was manifested in *denial* at first and then, later, in acceptance, through the *symbolic caterpillar burial* and her planting of the fruit tree (her desire to find life in another form). Lois also coped with her grief and fears by *regressing* (in her thumb-sucking and her baby talk about Jean's going bye-bye) despite her intellectual understanding of death.

Throughout the summer, I kept in touch with Lois's parents, mainly by telephone. During an interval between hospital stays, Jean and I met. That day in mid-July was the last time we would talk. Jean was extremely weak and coughing up blood, and could barely walk or talk, but she told me that Lois "was doing great" but that she "missed her [Lois]." Jean told me, too, that Lois had "announced her rights" about shopping for clothes for Pennsylvania and had told Jean that she would "tell Daddy to keep the light on at night in the hall." Jean seemed more relaxed despite the severity of her illness, feeling that she had been able to talk more openly with Lois about the cancer and her approaching death. She agonized over the possibility that she might not "hold out" until September: "I promised Lois I would still be

around when she came home. It was important for her to go away knowing I would be here. I call her twice a week, and I've told her to call me whenever she wants to."

We talked about Ron. Jean felt somewhat better about him and knew that she had no choice but to help Lois think more positively about Ron and Susan: "That's where Lois's future lies now, so I have to help her to accept them as her parents."

We spent two hours together while Jean poured out her feelings about death: "It's not myself I think about, but Lois—growing up and not seeing me—and I guess I will never know what beauty she will have or what she will do with her life. Will she remember me with love? Will she only think about our difficult, miserable days? Will Susan be a good mother to her? Will you help Lois after I die? Promise you will."

I promised Jean that I would see Lois as much as possible before she left Connecticut. I also reminded Jean that Lois would return in September and that we had already scheduled our session for the first week of that month. We shook hands and hugged. Clinging to me, Jean kissed my cheek and said good-bye.

The "Princess" Says Good-Bye

Lois came back from Pennsylvania and resumed her therapy. Our first meeting was a mixture of excitement and sadness. She gave me a hug and kiss and then spotted some new dress-up clothes. Immediately she put on a long skirt, a crown, two boas, and a frilly collar: "Look, I'm a princess."

Lois danced around the room in her costume, gravitated toward the playhouse, and, as she arranged the dolls, blurted out, "I'm afraid my mom will die—I don't want to go to my dad's house—he bothers me—I can't put it into words why he bothers me."

- I thought your summer was a good one.
- Yes and no.
- Why "no"?

- "No" because I thought of my mom a lot.
- You missed her.
- Yes, and I shouldn't have left her.
- You feel bad because you left her and maybe because you had fun?
- Yes—no—yes.
- Sometimes we feel guilty when we have fun and a person we love isn't there to share the fun.
- Yes.
- Is that what's bothering you?
- Yes.
- Why does your dad bother you?
- 'Cause—he's there.
- 'Cause he's there and Mommy isn't, is that it?
- Yes, I guess so.

Lois felt that her happiness that summer had not been deserved, that if she enjoyed her father's household and cared for her father, something might happen to her mother: living with her father would mean that Jean was gone. Many times, through her play and through her words, Lois conveyed these confused feelings to me. It was as if she had no right to be happy or to have her father if her mother died.

Lois continued to play house, still in her princess outfit—no longer in her tower but outside, active, trying out her role in her new family. She picked up a toy swan.

- Look a newborn bird will come out of this shell. We will have a magic potion and make a baby mouse, too.
- You want some babies around, I see.

- This will be a game where a witch comes to all these dolls—Lulu, Doo-doo, Pooh-Pooh—and makes all new babies.
- Why so many babies?
- Well—it's new—beginning.

Lois then picked up the two sets of parent dolls and placed them in the dollhouse. She told me both families could live there now. The father was "allowed inside." She took off the costume and put everyone "to sleep."

During September, Lois continued to play with the dollhouse. She was aware of Jean's weakened condition, and she now acted it out in her play:

- The mother is in bed. Sh, sh—no noise please!
- Where is everybody?
- Well, baby is in the crib, and this doll is the big sister.
- She's reading a book. She's sad.
- Why is she so sad?
- 'Cause nothing is the same, that's why.
- Tell me about what's changing.
- Everyone will leave the house.
- Is the father still inside the house?
- No, he's in a new house, and the moving truck is coming to take everyone away.
- Everyone?
- No, they'll leave the mother sleeping in her room.

Lois told me everything in this vignette. It was as if she had a premonition.

Two days later, Jean's sister called to say that Jean was in a coma. Would I come to the house to see Lois? I spent most of the afternoon with her in the garden. Lois was angry. She took me to see her tree: "Look, no peaches on the tree! My mother is dying, and my father is a crumb."

After this outburst Lois refused at first to talk about her mother or father, but lay down on a blanket, curled up in a fetal position, and sucked her thumb:

- I wish I were a baby. It was better when I was a baby. See? Now I look like a baby!
- Yes, you look like a baby. When you were a baby, you had your mom. Now you're afraid.
- It's scary. She's dying. She's all white and doesn't open her eyes. I sleep on the couch in the living room where she is. Do you want to come in with me and we can sit near her?
- Yes, I'd like that.
- Let's do that, but let's look at my caterpillar. Remember? I buried him. He's near my peach tree. (*Lois stopped short and shook her head.*) No, I won't dig it up. It's probably disintegrated by now.

What happens after you die? Lois had buried the caterpillar as one way of dealing with death, and now that death was so close, she was curious but afraid to see the caterpillar—afraid that nothing would be left of it in the earth. She was more realistic now about her mother's inevitable death. She posed questions typical of children her age: "What is a pulse?" "How does one stop breathing?" "What does it mean to be not living?" "What happens to the body?" Curious as she was, the caterpillar was going to remain in its grave.

We went inside to visit Jean. Lois held her mother's hand. Jean was attached to various tubes and looked pale and puffy, breathing with the help of oxygen tubes inserted in her nose. Lois sat quietly and then took my hand and led me outside. We spent the afternoon together talking about babies and her future, and about how "spooky" she felt seeing her mother like that. We talked about some of the things that Lois could look forward to doing in Pennsylvania and about how memories can help us keep a person we love close to us. I left Lois when I felt she seemed more in control, and I told her that we could talk again tomorrow. Her aunt and uncle were staying with her and trying to be of comfort.

The next day Jean died. Lois was out with the housekeeper running errands, and when she came back, her aunt told her the news. Lois called me later in the day and asked if she could come to see me. She came with her aunt, burst into tears, and said, "I wished I had been there when Mommy died."

Lois told me that now she just wanted "to sleep on the couch in the same room where Mommy died, so I can be near where Mommy was." She asked me many questions about the funeral: what would happen and when it would take place. I told her I would go with her to the funeral home (I did so the next day).

She then talked about Ron and Pennsylvania: "It's confusing. I don't want to go away. It's confusing. I don't want to hurt Daddy's feelings. I want to stay here a week or two. Then I'll go. Is that all right?"

I assured Lois that it would be all right to stay in Connecticut until she was ready to go and that I would talk to her father about it. Lois then felt better and played house. She set up the doll family in various rooms, engaging them in different activities: "Today will be school—a new school—and Teddy will no longer be Dr. Butterscotch. He's the teacher."

Lois had no need for the "doctor" anymore. Now she was able to use Teddy in a new role. She was beginning to think about her new school. Lois would have many events to deal with in Pennsylvania, and I wished that I could have more time to work with her, but that was not to be. Time was still my enemy.

Ron called me after the funeral to tell me that he was bringing Lois to me for our last session. He would wait while we talked, and then they would be off to Pennsylvania. He said that Lois had seemed to be all right during the funeral and had handled the day with "appropriate behavior."

Lois came for our last visit. She thanked me for having gone to the funeral parlor and said that it had not been too scary after all: "Mommy looked beautiful and like asleep and not in pain."

Lois knew that this was our last time together. She wanted to play house with me as the "mother" doll, and "I'll be father doll":

- Father goes to work. The children build a hideout. Father can't come in. Now this hideout is a hole in the closet—no one can get in.

- Why do you need a hideout?
- Well, if I need to go in there, I can.
- What will you hide from?
- I don't know.

Lois wanted to be sure that she had a place to retreat to if she became troubled. She played quietly with the dolls, directing me (the "mother") to "cook," take care of the baby dolls, and tell the children to "love Father and respect him." She was working out her feelings about her new family. She then gave me a photograph of herself and wrote down her new address, asking if she could take the "baby doll" with her to Pennsylvania. I reminded her that toys were to remain in the playroom. We continued to play, and Lois put the doll in her pocket.

"Remind me to give it to you when our time is up," Lois said.

We continued our house game, repeating daily routines with all the family dolls involved.

Our last session was soon over. Lois returned the "baby doll," kissed me, and said, "It's hard to go away. I can't be that baby, and you can't be my mother—only in our play—isn't that the way?"

Lois left with her father and continued treatment with a therapist in Pennsylvania. I shared my notes with this woman and felt that Lois would be in good hands. A Christmas card came from Lois with a new photograph. She was smiling, and I saw the alert look of Jean shining through her expression. There was much work left to be done by her new therapist: children may express feelings of sadness, rage, fear, shame, and guilt after the death of a parent. The questions that I had tried to deal with revolved around Lois's concern about her future, her fears about whether she would get cancer, and her fears about her surviving parent. The nine months of treatment had given us time to focus on her perception of her mother's illness, the changes in Lois's home situation and having a housekeeper as a helper, and Lois's adjustment to Ron's new wife and children.

It had been crucial for Lois to attend the funeral and to be able to express her grief. She still needed to deal with her conflict concerning her pleasure in Ron's home while her mother was ill. She would also

have to deal with her guilt about her absence at the moment of her mother's death. Many of these issues were discussed with Ron before he left, and with Lois's new therapist. I could only hope that Lois would continue to make a satisfactory adjustment in her new school, would accept her new family, and would continue to work with her therapist on these areas of concern, but I do believe that Lois's native intelligence, her capacity for insight, and her gift of imagination will free the princess from the tower forever.