

5 Nina Olshaker had been married for ten years to Sam Olshaker who currently worked the night shift at Parish Plastics, one of the largest factories in the country. They'd moved to Colvin Heights six years before. They had a nine-year-old son Billy and six-year-old Alice and they'd had a younger daughter Sophia who'd died of leukemia in March 1961, at the age of three. "This place poisoned her, Mr. Burnaby. I can't prove it, the doctors won't say so, but I know."

10 Nina's and Sam's families were from the region. Sam had been born in Niagara Falls, where his father worked for Occidental Petroleum; Nina had been born in North Tonawanda where her father had worked for thirty-five years at Tonawanda Steel and had died last summer of emphysema at the age of fifty-four. She said, bitterly, "And Daddy's death, too. Tiny bits of steel in his lungs. He'd cough up blood. He could hardly breathe, at the end. He knew what was causing it, all the men at the steel mill know, they're resigned. The pay is good, that's the catch. And maybe, though they know what's happening to them, they don't exactly believe it. We felt that way with Sophia. She was getting weaker, losing weight, her white blood cells were failing, but we kept praying and always we were thinking she'd be getting better. When Sophia died I wanted an autopsy done on her, I mean I thought I did, until it was explained to me what an autopsy is, and I changed my mind. Now I wonder if I did the right thing? If it was leukemia, just that, like something you inherit in the blood, like the County Health Department told us, or maybe it was something else, too? Some poison here? I can taste it myself. In wet weather like this. But they told us there's nothing, no poison in the air, or in the drinking water, they've done tests. Or so they claim⁽¹⁾. Oh Mr. Burnaby, I'm worried sick about Alice, now. She doesn't gain weight, doesn't have much appetite, I take her for blood tests and she has 'fluctuating low white cell-counts'⁽²⁾ – what's that mean? And Billy gets headaches over at the school, his eyes are sore and he's coughing a lot." [...]

25 "I want justice, Mr. Burnaby. I don't want money, I want justice for Sophia. I want Billy and Alice protected from harm. I want whoever is responsible for Sophia's death and for other children sick or dying in this neighbourhood to say they are responsible. I know there is something wrong here. You can smell it, sometimes it burns your eyes and nostrils. In the back yard, in lots of back yards here, there's this strange disgusting black fudge that oozes up like oil, but thicker than oil. I'll show you, it's in our basement. In wet weather it oozes through the walls. You call the city government, you get a secretary or somebody who tells you to wait, and you wait and the line goes dead. You go down there to City Hall and you wait. You can wait for weeks, months. I'd guess you can wait for years if you lived that long. [...] I have photographs of all these things, Mr. Burnaby. I have photographs of Sophia, I want you to see. Billy? Billy, come here."

30 A sniffy tow-headed boy had been hanging in the doorway of the living-room, and now came reluctantly forward to meet Mr. Burnaby – "He's a lawyer, Billy. A famous lawyer."

40 Dick winced. Famous!
"I want Billy transferred to another school but they refuse to transfer him. Because to give in to one parent⁽³⁾, they'd have to admit there was something to give in to, and they won't do that. Because then everybody would want their children transferred to a safer school. Because then maybe they'd be 'liable'⁽⁴⁾ – the school administration, the Board of Education, the mayor? They all protect one another, you can see they're stalling⁽⁵⁾ and lying, like at the Health Department, but what can you do, we live here, we just about make our mortgage payments and the car payments and if we have extra medical costs like taking Alice to St. Anne's instead of where they want to send us for tests, at the county medical clinic, all that adds up, we just can't afford it on Sam's salary and if something happens to him, there's the medical insurance at Parish, and the pension, and Sam is worried they could 'retaliate'⁽⁶⁾ against him, if we cause trouble – is that possible Mr. Burnaby?"

He said, "It's possible, Mrs. Olshaker. I'd have to examine your husband's contract, to have an idea."

Joyce Carol Oates, *The Falls*, 2004 (abridged and adapted)

⁽¹⁾ So they claim: that's what they say

⁽²⁾ Not enough white cells

⁽³⁾ Give in to one parent: admit that the parent is right

⁽⁴⁾ Liable: Responsible by law

⁽⁵⁾ Stalling: gaining time

⁽⁶⁾ Retaliate: get a revenge