Introduction

They stood huddled around the stove in Cincinnati, the men with their boxy stubbly faces and gaunt cheeks, making plans as the snow piled up on the stoops outside. They had the unmistakable tingle in their fingers, the electric summons of open land. They had the papers in their hands. The papers were brown and crisp, signed by Father Aloysius Scheppe in a fleeting brown scrawl and lettered carefully in a German hand that no one in the room could read. And it didn't matter, because tonight would be their last night around the stove.

The women were there, too, some wincing in the throes of coming full term, all with countenances pale and drawn, most wanting to stay at least through the winter. And it didn't matter, because tonight would be their last night around the stove. They had packed up their soup pots and scarves and letters in brown crates to board the train southward past the snow and the narrowly packed buildings, and it was pulling out in the first bleary light of the morning.

So there in the near darkness around the stove the men mulled over their prospects in their thick unrelaxed brogue, and they all were thinking of the smell of peat and of crystal waters that lapped softly up along deep green shores, but no one said anything about that. They spoke only of acres they had not seen, of whose greens deep or light they were unsure, land delineated not by familiar memory but only by numbers on a crinkling brown sheet of paper. They thought about traveling the rough spots

with the German homesteaders and it made their words come faster and their fingers knead the creases of the paper to rips; they were smiling at the invitation but they shuffled their feet and wrinkled their brows, that last night around the stove.

They came southward on the train, the Mearas and the O'Briens and the Sullivans alongside the Kuehlers and the Brechts and the Weimanns. And when they got off at the station at Nashville they purchased their horses and wagons and food and they didn't speak much to each other because they couldn't. The men communicated with the sparks in their eyes, and the women found kinship in the echoes of one another's profiles, in the shadows of the swelling melon bellies that both camps shared. The two German priests said Mass in Latin around the fire and they all responded, although not in unison, and then they packed it all away and climbed into the wagons in the cold, and they rode silently southward.

The weeks passed and they struggled through the woods and the rain and the chill, and three of the babies died, two Irish and one German, and they left them in the woods of Tennessee with only circles of stones in the dirt to mark them to passersby, if anyone should ever pass by. And they went on their way. Some of them were sick and lay like corpses in the backs of the wagons, wrapped in blankets tight as swaddling and stuffed between the crates of china and the crates of flour, unnaturally immobile when the wagon vaulted upward in the chug of a swollen creek or rumbled violently over rocks in the trail. But the ones who were

healthy sat impassively upon the board seats, and as they neared their destination they saw the outer skirts of farms run close by the trail, and they saw spotty towns along the river in the distance. They saw the white wildflowers sprinkled in the brush, and the tangle of starry yellow blossoms over the creek where the chestnut and maple trees grew thick, and the hills that rolled and made a gracefully undulating line where the sky touched the grass. Whatever they thought, it was not in their faces, it was not even in what they said to each other.

At last the wagons stopped.

These spreading fields and running waters and barely budding trees were theirs, by the power of the brown German papers that no longer crinkled but were soft and leathery, and the traveling companions spread out over the grass, each to his own plot. All the plots encircled a tiny mining town too small even to have a name, and the Scotch merchants and miners and farmers who lived in this town watched the newcomers from their houses.

First the shanties went up, and then one by one the stoic houses with their plain lines and generous dimensions, and then the stack fences, and then the low stone walls of the outlying farms. From the edge of town rose a magnificent brick church with German inscriptions in the windows, and a young Irishman climbed the scaffolding inside to paint a host of angels over the high altar. On the day when the last man climbed down from the roof they rang the new bell for the whole town to hear. And the

Scotch looked on from their stores and their houses, through the windows.

German and Irish melted into one, and the men of this stock formed a church of muscle. They dug their fingers deep into rich soil and pulled up fortunes. They built the banks, they sold the dry goods, their solemn pictures frowned upon the halls of the new parochial school for which they themselves laid the bricks. They spoke succinctly and raised their children with a strap and a rosary. They passed down the secrets of their eight-row white corn to eager sons, keeping some of it aside in secret basement tubs which, within the right circles, did not remain so secret. These men were the stuff of stories passed from generation to generation.

And the women?

The tombstones tell about the women.

The town is full of thick trees whose roots stretch for miles. Thirsty, desperate roots crawl through the mud below the feet of two thousand townspeople, choking in the mud and grasping at unsuspecting ankles. No one will leave, after all. Love is in the leaves of those trees and it spreads down through the sucking roots like a disease.

The hills rise and surround the tacky little plots of asphalt where the tanning beds grow. When people look out their

windows as the evening falls they don't see the Budweiser billboard or their reflections in the broken glass of the abandoned Fotomat; they see hills and deeply rooted trees. The flashing lights of the car-wash sign don't prick at their brains; instead the hills and trees twine about the twinkling beds of asphalt like a quiet blanket and lovingly smother the townspeople to death.

The hills, when the summer sun sets through them and lights a fire in the trees, are beautiful and sinuous and they remind everyone unfailingly of childhood. They are familiar as a mother. They block out the view of the next town but the people love them like they love their mothers, and they know them like they know their own bodies.

Am I? Am I? Am I?

The rain outside is gray on the windowpanes like glass falling on glass. Is it here because I hear it?

You are here and you scare me to death.

Am I here? I feel things as I have never felt them before, things surge into me electrically and I am charged--I feel, therefore I am? There is a lump here in these white sheets that is supposed to be me. It may be me.

I remember it all now. I thought I had shut up every box I had and shoved it away into a corner I was sure I'd forget, but

you shine the light of your tiny eyes into the dark so that I see the webs and the dust--you bring it all back to me, things dug up from old boxes shoved into a corner. Of course you would. I remember and I try not to.

I remember that once when I was in the third grade my teacher made me hold a baby bird, just hatched and gasping like you. My fingers closed around the wet ugliness and the dampened feathers stuck to me and the tiny spasmic heart throbbed hotly under my palm, and it trembled--how could I keep it from trembling when I was shaking myself? I would have begged for it to be taken away if I could have opened my mouth. I looked into its dark, glossy eyeballs, and I saw that it knew I could crush its defenseless body in the vise of my fingers, it trembled violently, it felt my heart pounding a course down to my hands--oh, take it away, take it away, hurry. My eyes were saucers and so Miss Ann pried my fingers off the bird and sent me inside to wash my hands.

That is how I feel now about you, you know. It is awe and fear, not love, because you wrinkle your red little forehead but I know that what lies behind it is smooth as a snowfall before the first child leaps out of doors to make angels in the yard. I don't know what to do. I hear the rain, a ceaseless knell pounding glass on glass, and I cradle you trying to summon that instinct now two hours overdue.

How to give you what I don't have, I don't know how to do that.

Rosemary is coming to visit, and I am glad; I know where I am when she is here. I know how my outline fits against hers, I know what parts of me are too small or too big when she is here, I am not just a lump in a white sheet lost in this quiet maze of rooms.

I cannot remember your father's face. He of the hollow eye and hollow stomach is somewhere downstairs catching a quick coffee and he is a hollow space to me, an empty box. I wonder why that is. I am sorry to keep dropping these tears on your face, you are squinting but you were squinting anyway, shutting tightly the portals to those dark bottomless eyes as you breathe unevenly here so early in the morning.

I remember it all now because you make me. What can I tell you?

I'll tell you this and you listen to me.

You are and that's enough.

Chapter One

I suppose after all that the trees were what I liked most about the place. They were solid, with predictable shapes--if they were asymmetrical or stunted or warped, they grew to be that way over many years so that you absorbed it slowly, while you were doing other things that had nothing to do with the trees. Only what you didn't realize at the time was that everything had to do with the trees. When you woke up in the morning and looked out the window, they were there, solid, with predictable shapes.

How I remember them best is the way they stood over the outfield fence at the city ballpark, because I sat on those bleachers for endless summers and let the trees etch their unfailing shapes onto me. They grew fuller, and taller, but I never noticed. And I never noticed the kudzu, either, slinking through the woods and rolling up off the ground onto the trunks in lusty waves. It came through the chain fence finger by leafy finger to tinker with the corporate sponsorship signs hanging there until the wood began to chip away. I never noticed it as it happened.

All the summers were the same then, back before I left--except, of course, for the last one, and when I try to remember them all I see the same things over and over again, the face of each person vague and without age. For example, I remember my little brother, Michael, as a fixture at home plate, swinging his bat with prodigious accuracy, but I see him now without height or weight or any of the distinguishing marks of a specific year; for

me he is frozen in the summer sun, his bat extended over the plate, the same from kindergarten to sixth grade and somehow melted in with the Michael that I know now. It is all the same to me now, my life before I left one blurry scrapbook of pictures of people and things that don't belong anywhere in time.

I remember the gravel parking lot at the ballfield, full of high school kids with their car doors open, testing the bass in their audio systems; the old two-story concessions building behind home plate, dividing the home and the away bleachers, the upper balcony cracking under the weight of a host of liberated schoolchildren who would volunteer to run the electric scoreboard; boys in the dugout racing frogs and then ripping the legs off the losers. I remember the mud and the dust, and the trees over the outfield fence.

In a Tennessee town of two thousand people, there was no sweeter sound in the summer than the grunt of a sweaty man squatting behind a plate which he swept between innings with a cracked paintbrush. The Little League diamond in Hope Springs was the geographical center of town--if you didn't count Lonnie Davis's pig farm on the west side, and most people, being downwind of his manure lagoon, didn't--and little boys stood out in the ballfield among the bags and the lime and the dirt, small, fidgety, and squinting.

The summers swelled and waned like an accordion. *Will you mind if I spend so much time remembering?* Spring usually died in May, and the slow days of June sat firmly on their haunches and

grew fat. Just when you thought you couldn't stand another moment of the heat, along came the Fourth of July. That was when the Hope Springs Kiwanis Club held its annual carnival in the city park, advertised on flyers stuck under all the windshield wipers in a seventy-mile radius (Nashville was sixty-eight miles to the north, measuring from home plate), during which the top two Little League teams played a final game for the year's championship. There was bingo in the picnic pavilions, and booths where you could throw darts at balloons or pay a couple of quarters for surprise packages, and there were Sno-Kones of all flavors. The Hope Springs City Park could barely hold the influx from all the counties around, and the strange cars parked in the weeds all along the road left ruts in the dirt that filled up in the next rain and remained for weeks. When I remember those carnivals I remember the smell of hot dogs, and I remember gravel dust on my legs. And of course, the people, my friends and family.

Only the last summer I was there, the summer after I graduated from high school, is carved into me with the weight of specific faces and particular events. I lost my virginity that summer, which may sound like a pretty corny thing to have done, but that was about the least important thing that happened. That summer showed its ugly head in the last weeks of May. There was no frost after March and no one could stop anything from growing. I was leaving for college, a thought itself so nebulous and foreign during my last semester of high school that it had

frightened me only as a dream might, primarily upon hearing the alarm clock go off in the morning, and then fading as I ate breakfast and put my shoes on and drove to school--until one day in April.

Rosemary and I had been at our lockers between classes, just getting out our books, nothing out of the ordinary, when she had turned to me and said, "I got my acceptance letter from UT yesterday."

"You didn't apply to UT," I had said, not even turning my head. "You applied to Martin Methodist."

"I applied to UT," she said, laughing, "and I'm going to school with you." She squeezed my arm. "Surprise."

That was when I began to make plans for the Fourth of July.

In the week before we graduated from high school, on one sweltering day at the end of May--on the day Little League baseball season began at the park--I was sitting between Rosemary and Page on the ballpark bleachers, immovable as concrete, separate and separating. It was much too hot for May, the air sticking to my skin with a fervor it usually didn't muster until July.

"My hair looks so gross," said Page.

I looked at my watch. I was timing how long it had been since Page had last shut her mouth. The second hand had barely swept the quarter-minute mark when she spoke. I did not respond to her, and, of course, neither did Rosemary.

We sat on the home side, towards the dugout and away from the concessions stand where the Tee-Ball mothers were grilling burgers. They were having some trouble containing the fire in the grill, and the flames licked up into a small inferno, spitting orange-hot chunks of ash that popped to the ground and died. The ladies could not stop giggling. They seemed to have forgotten that there had been no rain in weeks. One of them squatted down and tipped her paper cup of Sun-drop over the dry ground to try to dot out the sparks, but she ended up spilling it all over her little white canvas shoes, and she and all the other mothers collapsed into giggles.

We could feel the fire from where we were sitting. The heat was everywhere, steaming up off the field as the men hosed it down to squelch the dust, and the smoke from the grill burned our eyes. I had a headache. I sipped Coke from a plastic cup to ease my dry throat.

There was only one field in the Hope Springs City Park that could be used for official baseball games. It was the only one kept limed and mowed and clean so that kids could play ball on it without sliding into broken beer bottles. Tee-Ball, for the five- and six-year-olds, and Little League, whose players were ten to twelve, had to share the field and alternate their games. The group in between them, the Minor Leaguers, were a scant bunch due to some unexplained demographical phenomenon. They had to play with the kids in Middlefield, the next town to the north,

because there weren't enough of them to keep them at home and make more than three teams.

We were watching the fourth of a five-inning Tee-Ball game that afternoon. Tee-Ball was baseball only so far as baseball could be played by children who could still get confused about how many loops went into their shoelaces. The ball sat on top of a fixed tee at home plate instead of being tossed by the pitcher, and this made batting a trifle for some and an embarrassment for the uncoordinated, but mostly everyone ended up on base one way or the other and each team usually scored about a hundred runs before the defense managed three outs. You could get dizzy watching them buzz around the bases like little gnats, hovering, wasting a lot of energy. What was most interesting to me was watching the fathers watch their sons, hunched forward on their seats with their shoulders up to their ears, their mouths open a little.

Page and Rosemary and I were waiting for Tee-Ball to wind down because my brother's Little League game was next. All of the Little League players were hanging out against the fence in left field, taking practice swings too close to each other and kicking up divets out of the dirt with their cleats. I saw my brother among them, putting a choke hold on one of his teammates with a bat.

Page shifted her weight around next to me in order to make noise. She leaned back, propping her elbows up on the level

behind her, stretching her legs out in front like a cat and then letting them drop abruptly. The bleachers shuddered.

I didn't look at her.

"My hair," she moaned. She lifted her hand up to pick at a spike which had fallen from the asymmetrical crest of bangs over her forehead. She had constructed the shelf of hair carefully, peaking it on one side of her forehead and letting the rest come down like a waterfall frozen in hairspray. The lacquer was melting and the whole operation was kind of sliding down to her left. "The hairspray is, like, gone."

"The top is still standing upright," I said.

"Is it?" she said, crossing her eyes upward to see. One eye was closer to her nose than the other. "Thank God."

I looked at the sky, tuning out cheers of the Tee-Ball fans around us. I wondered why spring was over so suddenly--the crystal blue skies were gone, replaced by a haze which seemed to have no true clouds in it, only places where the pale blue seemed to be stretched too thin. I was sweating, and I felt all wilted and sticky.

Page continued to play with the one sweaty curl on her forehead. "God, my hair."

"Page," I sighed, "look at my hair." My own hair was only my own in that it was attached to and growing from my head. It was red, sort of, or some color that was darker than strawberry but not as pretty as auburn, and it hung down between my shoulder blades like a big puddle of molasses--if you can imagine what a

puddle of hair might look like, that was my hair. Some days the curls drooped so wide I could fit my fist through one, but other days they were agitated little ringlets, tight as ticks. That day they were in between, almost frizzy with the heat, but not quite.

"Yours is a frizzball," Page said. She laughed, an awkward chuckle which gained momentum from her determination to be amused, and she did not take her eyes off my hair.

I stared at the sky and thought about my headache. It was right between my eyes and ran up to my scalp.

Rosemary spoke then, for the first time in five minutes and twelve seconds. "Your hair is beautiful," she said to me, reaching up with tapered fingers to tuck a curl behind my ear. "I would kill for your hair."

I felt a rush of relief when she said the words, but I soon resumed having a headache.

"My perm's grown out and what is left is all natural," Page said. "I have some body to my hair, is what Ruby says. If I blow-dry it, *you* know, it don't have no trouble curling under and staying. But the thing is, Sammy likes it long and curly, which, I don't know why he does, but he says I look pretty that way, and so it don't matter really how I like it if he likes it long and curly. Which, I need a new perm."

I stared at her.

"I don't have enough time really to get a new perm before graduation because it'll be all kinky and it'll stink like hell,"

she said, flexing her ankles so that they popped like firecrackers. "Which, like a perm could ever make my hair look good anyway." Her eyes were stuck on mine.

"Your hair is pretty, Page," I said.

"You think so?"

Suddenly there was explosive cheering. The bases were loaded; the old wooden bleachers swayed under us as Tee-Ball fans spurted to their feet. The woman in front of us had a little smudged-up wunderkind leading off second base, and she was trying as best as she could from the stands to prevent his stealing third.

"Cody!" she screamed, gesturing wildly, her boulder of a wedding ring distilling the broad blanket of afternoon sunlight into tiny brilliant points. "Get your butt back *on* that bag, boy!" Everyone in the stands laughed, especially because Cody's mama was hugely, bulgingly pregnant, and her shouting and waving seemed likely to tip her over.

"Watch out, Miz Taylor," one man chuckled through his thick chew of tobacco, "we ain't got the ambulance here yet to haul you off."

Cody's mama laughed gamely as the entire home crowd turned to acknowledge her bigness, but she did not seem disturbed in the least by her own excitement. She stood easily, her legs planted sturdily apart to support her watermelon of a belly, as if she were made to stand just so. Her hair was firmly anchored to her head with spray, and although the heat of the afternoon was

reflected in the harsh pink apples of her cheeks, she was not sweating.

I was. I shivered as drops trickled down from my neck in separate aimless paths, meandering toward the band of my shorts. I knew that my face was red and that I had a white mustache, because that always happened to me when I got too hot. I could feel my cheeks burning.

I glanced at Rosemary. She was sweating, too, but only at the edges. This was typical of her. Her forehead glistened around her hairline but no drops dared to draw lines down the line of her brow, past the wide doe eyes, down to the full lips and beyond to the chin and neck. I watched her twist her long dark hair slowly up off her neck and knot it with lovely fingers at the nape, where damp baby strands curled like grapevine tendrils next to the collar of her T-shirt.

On the field it seemed to be even warmer than in the bleachers. The Tee-Ball kids, playing the first game of the evening, always struggled through the hottest hours of the day. The three on base were coated in dust and sweat, their brand-new cleats filthy, awaiting a ball to send them running.

The next batter, tinier even than his teammates on the bases, stepped up to the plate. "Make it be there!" someone in the stands was shouting to him, and the little boy looked back over his shoulder slowly.

"Cody Taylor!" Cody's mama yelled accusingly, one hand resolutely on her belly, and this time her little boy heard her.

He scooted back to the bag with mincing steps, grinning broadly, and the crowd acknowledged him with a cadence of hoots.

The wee child at the plate stuck his tongue out purposefully as he lined up his bat with the ball on the tee. He reached back slowly, slowly, and brought the wood around--

And missed.

A breeze that smelled deceitfully of rain whipped up under the leaves on the trees, flipping them silver side out, and then was gone before I could get any satisfaction out of it.

The batter's problem was that his helmet was too big. When he swung, the force of the motion knocked the enormous thing down into his eyes and hid the tee from him, but no one offered to get him a smaller helmet. His coaches stood at the top of the dugout, arms crossed, drawing designs in the ground with the dusty toes of their shoes, spitting a little.

"Keep your eyes in it, son," one suggested lamely.

The little boy extended the heavy bat back beyond his shoulder, bending his wrists awkwardly, unable to keep the bat straight. The helmet fell. The swing came round. The tee was felled like an oak, and the ball dropped into the dirt groove around the plate.

"Strike two!" called the umpire.

Page sighed from the top of her vocal range to the very bottom, twisting her limp hair in her hands. Rosemary didn't move; she was studying home plate.

"Watch the ball, son! Get to it, buddy," the coach offered.

The boy jerked his head in the direction of the dugout as if he heard, but the helmet kept him from making eye contact with the coach. He squared up, pulled back the bat, and took a quick and haphazard third swing.

And missed.

Cody did a wild dance of indignation out on second base.

The child removed his helmet from his head as if it were heavy as bricks, and he inched toward the dugout, looking beyond the fence and up to the trees as his coaches patted him encouragingly on the back and said, "Good home run swing, buddy." I thought suddenly that he was the most angelic child I had ever seen, with the hazy sunlight in his blue eyes, wide as saucers, and the blue veins showing through the whiteness of his skin. His blond hair was buzzed off flat as a board. I saw no fawning mother in the stands who might be responsible for that haircut.

"How pathetic," Page said. "He cain't hit a ball off a stupid tee."

"Poor baby," said Rosemary tenderly. "Poor little baby, where's his mama?"

"That's okay, Cody," called his mama. "Jared'll bring you home, baby."

I quit paying attention to Tee-Ball. Over against the fence in left field, where the Little League boys were warming up and where a weedeater had once caught in the metal fence and twisted up the bottom two rows of links, Jamie Pinedweller was leaning on his forearms and poking the toe of his shoe into the warped

metal. Jamie was the umpire's assistant that year. I didn't really know what duties that entailed. He came to all the pre-season practices and stood at the fence, and now for the first day of the season he also was standing at the fence. I did know that if he made better than 80 on his geometry final exam, he would be graduating with us the next week. He was a head taller than me, a baseball player himself who made All-District that year, and he spoke in a slow, soft drawl from a face round and dimpled as a baby's. I didn't think Rosemary had ever been interested in him. He and I didn't move in the same circles ordinarily, although I had seen him speak to Rosemary before, but in the four weeks since my brother had begun baseball practice we had become somewhat conversational. I would say "Hi," when I drove Michael up to the park for practice in the afternoons after school--with my windows rolled down even though late April had been chilly--and he would say, "Hi," back to me.

It was something about the baseball itself that did it. At practices sometimes he would give the boys some informal lessons, and I would watch him hunch his shoulders and pull a bat up into position, waving it near his ear, spitting and telling the boys to watch his stance and dig their feet in tight. There was something about that ballpark, about men congregating and hanging over the fence and spitting into the dirt, that I couldn't explain and didn't care to. Four weeks had not been ample time for my feelings to build to epic proportions, but I was already

developing a twinge in my stomach when I saw him, and that depressed me.

I watched him now from the corners of my eyes as he jabbed at the fence with his toe.

I gulped the last of my Coke from the plastic cup, leaving only ice in the bottom. I shook it around to get at the piece I wanted to crunch on, the perfect piece I spotted hiding under a big crusty glacier of ice. But it was caught in the ring at the bottom and slid around where I couldn't free it no matter how I turned the cup. I put the cup to my lips and turned it up, tapping the bottom with my fingers. The perfect piece clung smugly in place, but the big crusty glacier fell on my face and one pointed floe went straight up my nose.

A very muscular-looking kindergartener stepped up to the plate, one lucky child who had reached his age with all parts not only intact but also athletically harmonious and unusually developed. He would not have looked amiss with a little chest hair. Cody's mama bolted sharply to her feet and bombarded the batter with fierce encouragement.

"Ar-right, Stone! Put some muscle in it, son! Show 'em what you're made of!" she cried. She knew this boy could connect with the ball and bring her lightfooted Cody home, and it gave her purpose.

The motherless angel boy was watching from the dugout, his fingers entwined in the fence.

The batter swung and delivered. The ball soared past a drowsy left-fielder and rolled to the fence, and the three tiny dynamos on base scrambled for home. Cheering shook the bleachers from one end to the other. As the last child crossed the plate, the noise swelled to a climax punctuated by sharp two-fingered whistles.

Rosemary smiled. "These kids are so sweet." She watched Cody leap in circles around his coach, giddy with the filth he had absorbed from an unnecessary slide into home plate.

I watched her watch him. I hated to watch Rosemary but I did it sometimes anyway, especially on days like today when she was unnervingly quiet. Not that she was ever loud. But there was a quietness and then there was a quietness, and today was a bit different. I was sure I knew the reason.

Cody's mama sat back down, one hand on her back. She was a finely tuned factory, a machine aware of its capabilities and limitations. She sent one of the nearby children to the concessions stand to get her a Sun-drop.

Page spoke. "Well, lookie there," she said to me. "Your boyfriend's got here." She remained fanned out like a peacock, her legs spread wide on the bleachers, nodding her head toward the concessions stand.

I turned to look. I saw that Booley Carson was purchasing a Sun-drop at the window. I turned back to Page.

"Bitch," I said.

There was not much to say about Booley Carson, except that the name his mother gave him was Booley, and it wasn't a family name. He drove a very large truck with more than adequate space between the body and the wheels and whose windshield read "My Chevy," in cursive, and which could drive entirely over any car in its way if it wanted to. Booley was proficient at hauling hay, which he did for my father in the summers, and at asking me out, which he did all the time, presumably not for my father.

"Just go out with him." Page chuckled, fanning her fingers conspicuously in front of her face so that Sammy Wellman's class ring on her index finger, wrapped in yellow yarn so it wouldn't fall off, caught the light. "So you can say you been out with somebody."

"She isn't interested in Booley," said Rosemary. She didn't incline her head toward Page, so it appeared that she was speaking to the air.

I tried earnestly not to for about thirty-five seconds--I was looking at my watch--but I found myself glancing at Jamie over by the fence. Whenever I tried not to look at him, he seemed to grow flaming appendages and turn psychedelic colors in the corner of my eye, begging me to look, if only for a second, and so I did. But only for a second, as I pretended to be taking in the entire field left to right, because of course I had not told Page or Rosemary about him. Why would I? My head was pounding.

"My hair, my hair, my hair." Page's bangs were dying on her head. The tower had begun to lean.

I refused to comment. I removed the big crusty glacier of ice from my cup and I pretended to be absorbed in running it up and down the length of my leg, which was a mistake.

"Honest to *God*!" Page said loudly. "Don't you ever go outside?" She propped her leg up next to mine. Hers was bronze and mine was pale, a fact of life that never changed, and it was one of her favorite topics of conversation. She was always brown even in the winter. She liked to say that she couldn't get any darker if you fried her in a skillet, which was a stupid thing to say, but maybe there was some truth to it because she used to spread squeeze margarine all over herself when she lay out in the sun. Page had a strange palette by most standards. Her skin was dark, but her eyes were a dull blue and sat oddly in her face like cold marbles. That summer her hair was a dirty honey color, with accidental brown stripes where Ruby James had messed up her highlights.

"Chocolate and vanilla, that's what we look like," she sang out, more loudly than before, and I wondered briefly if she too had noticed Jamie at the fence, or some other possibility--male, tall or short, thin or fat, beyond diapers but short of retirement, nearby. "You are just ghostly," she roared.

I felt a familiar prickle in my nose and eyes. I thought to myself, *Your hair is striped, Your hair is striped, Your hair is striped.*

"You don't need a tan," Rosemary said to me. "Your skin is like a china doll's."

Rosemary had a boyfriend, as you might expect; some cycle of nature delivered boyfriends to her feet like the morning paper. Her boyfriend's name was Buddy Scurlock, of all things, and he beat her black and blue.

I remember, oh how I remember, what I wanted then, how so badly I wanted someone to beat the tar out of me, how so clearly I could picture holding the hand of some devastatingly handsome young man who would turn the heads and the stomachs of all those around me because they would see fear in my eyes and know. I remember how I could see myself someplace where the lighting was different and strange and where my hair curled like I liked it and the harsher angles of my face disappeared and where everyone knew I thought no one loved me but this devastatingly handsome young man. I remember how when the nights had hold of me by the stomach, that dream took me safely to the morning.

"I want M&Ms," Page said. "I want some M&Ms but I know I shouldn't eat any because I'm already fat as a *hog*." She pinned me to the mat with a glance.

"You're not fat." I had said this so many times that there seemed to be a vacuum in the shape of those words hovering around my mouth, sucking out my voice against my will. Actually, Page was gaining a little extra personality in the hips but I didn't feel required to be honest with her about it. I would know when she knew it because she would quit bringing it up.

"Well, I don't have bird legs like yours," she said.

I rubbed at my knees; the caps jutted sharply up into my pale skin.

I was sure on that day that Rosemary had broken up with Buddy. This was not unusual; it was a punitive measure she took periodically, but this time I thought it might be different.

The heat was suffocating. I sensed the beginnings of a breeze, the kind that touched my hair but not my face and made me wonder if I was dreaming it. It bothered the low-hanging branches of the trees but it did not help to dispel the heat, and so I spoke a silent prayer for rain inside my head. I wanted another Coke but I didn't want to leave Rosemary and Page there together, alone.

I looked over at the concessions stand and saw that Jamie Pinedweller was there, squirting mustard on a burger. I decided to leave Rosemary and Page there together, alone.

"Do you want anything?" I asked no one in particular as I got up.

They both looked at me, two stubborn boulders with their shore suddenly missing.

"Nope," said Page.

"No, thank you," said Rosemary.

I went to the concessions stand and slid my two quarters under the screen for a Coke. Jamie looked up from his condiments and smiled.

"Hey," he said. "I was hoping you'd come over and talk to me."

I stood still as a stone, staring into eyes with lashes thick like a baby's, and my mind suddenly divested itself of all its contents. I pictured a life's worth of information oozing out my ear and onto the ground. "Seriously?" I said. The word seemed to echo back at me, and it was the only word I could think of.

"Yeah," he said, licking mustard from his fingers. "I wanted to make sure you're coming to the graduation party at the river."

Eloquent phrases floated to my lips like eager butterflies. "Your party?" I said.

"Yeah. At the cabin."

I was then acutely aware of a sweat mustache clinging to my upper lip. My stomach shredded up and began braiding itself, and I felt it attach to the bottom of my throat. "Yeah, I'm going."

"Rosemary too?" he said casually, still engrossed in excess mustard on his fingers.

The woman behind the screen handed me my Coke, and some of it spilled over the edges of the plastic cup. My stomach reassembled itself and light flooded my empty mind.

"Yes," I said. "Rosemary too."

"Well," he mumbled, suddenly awkward as he had run out of mustard to lick, "I wanted to ask you if she was really through with Buddy. I heard. . . ." His eyes were shy behind the

lashes, his eyebrows question marks. He smiled stupidly, like a puppy.

The powers of coherence, which I suddenly realized must be located in the stomach, returned to me. "She doesn't want to talk about it right now," I said coldly. "I'd give her some space if I were you."

Jamie's brows wrinkled. "It just makes me so mad to see the way he does her," he said, glancing over my shoulder to the bleachers behind me.

"It makes everyone mad," I said. Something I dreaded was forming in my throat.

"You think. . . ." he began.

I stopped him before the words came out. "No," I said. "I don't think." I pressed the cup to my lips to hide the corners of my mouth, which were quivering toward my chin in small but noticeable spasms.

"You don't?" he asked. "Why not?"

"Because I know who she likes," I said into my cup, "and it's not you."

"Oh." He nodded to his burger, and started shoving it into his mouth. He chewed up the first bite but didn't seem to be able to swallow it. His eyes did not meet mine again. "Well, I'll leave you alone, then." He stepped past me, and I saw where his last look fell. I was sure both our stomachs felt the same way.

I knew then that I had to leave but I didn't know where to go. I didn't want anyone to see me, but I wanted someone to see me. The air was gummy on my face and for one pleasant second--I was looking at my watch--I thought I was being smothered to death. Smoke from the grill drifted up into my nostrils with the smell of cooking meat.

I ducked around the concessions stand and climbed the shallow grade to the parking lot, showers of gravel loosed by my feet skidding toward the bottom of the small hill. I wound around the cars until I came to a smashed-in, rust-eaten pickup I didn't recognize and I crashed against the bumper, where there was a sticker peeling at the edges which read, *We Have It Better In Hope Springs.* No tears were coming.

Heat poured over me like water, and after a while, the edges of me seemed to have blurred into nothing. I was only a mirage.

Even to me, Gabriel Sullivan--named for the archangel, and for my Irish great-great-grandfather, and naturally named by two people without enough sense to add the extra "le" to make it a girl's name, so that when most people I knew pronounced it they elected to omit the last vowels--even to me the picture was not clear. As we were growing up I didn't know why Rosemary and Page wouldn't speak to each other. As often as not, I didn't care. And when I did, I never asked either of them about it.

Page and I had been friends since second grade, when her mama and daddy moved here from Memphis. We were both Catholics in a small Tennessee town whose parish, St. Mary's, had its own elementary school, a tiny eight-grade establishment with seventy students on the average, two grades to a classroom, a school which was routinely crushed in basketball by the county school until 1986, when the principal, Sister Cecilia, decided to abolish the sport out of respect for the Blessed Virgin's holy name. I had been the only girl in my grade for my entire first year of school, which was not a completely desirable position. I had lots of red hair, and there was not a boy in the classroom who was willing to overlook it.

None of us Catholic children was ever blind to the fact that we were stuck under the buckle of the Bible Belt. In 1876 there had been almost nothing on the site where Hope Springs, Tennessee, now stood but a railroad switch, boarding houses, and about two hundred Scot-Irish of the third generation who farmed some of the land north of the trickle called Dumple Branch. There were also two churches, one Baptist and one Methodist, and the hills stood around them on all sides.

But the next year all the land between the creek and the county line, a bit farther south than the Scotch had settled, was purchased by the German Catholic Homestead Association in Ohio and parceled out to Bavarian immigrants still stiff from the train from New York. These immigrants came south then, together with some Irish tagalongs who had already been in Cincinnati for

a year and were grey from the heavy winter, and anxious to come to greener places. Most of my great-great-grandparents, both Irish and German, were in that wagon train coming south, and some of my great-grandparents had already been born. My great-great-grandmother Louisa Bergob, as my grandmother used to tell it, gave birth in the back of a wagon to my great-great-uncle Frederick, with one wagon wheel broken and jerking the whole operation up and down every second, and she didn't even tell her husband it was going on. "I knew he wouldn't stop the wagon," she was supposed to have said, and so her sister Margaretha, who was a nurse, helped her out with some blankets there in the back. When Frederick finally popped out, he didn't so much as squawk, and Margaretha thought there was something wrong with him, but Louisa insisted that she had whispered to the baby as he was kicking inside her stomach that morning to come quietly, because they were in the middle of something important. She knew that the baby had listened to her and understood. Personally, I don't know; I knew my Uncle Frederick back before he died when I was in the fourth grade, and I would tend to side with Margaretha. He mumbled a lot, wouldn't look you straight in the face, and ate inordinate amounts of pinto beans.

In that spring when the Germans and the Irish came to Hope Springs, they built a brick church in a shallow valley filled with trees, so that the steeple rose out of the dell like a finger pointed toward heaven, and they christened the new parish St. Mary's. On the sloping land to the east of the church, the

school was built, a staid frame box that was not replaced with the brick building that I went to school in until after the First World War.

In time, of course, more Protestants flooded into August County; St. Mary's stood bravely in the tide of heresy like a faithful watchdog of the Pope, and although she remained the largest congregation of any single religion around, she was outnumbered by the others as a whole. By the time August County had a school system of its own, and had consolidated all the small towns of the south end of the county--Hope Springs, Pickensville, Torn Switch, Sills, Poole City, Far Creek, Razor Point, and Foxburg--into a single elementary school and a single high school, there weren't enough children at St. Mary's to justify keeping them past the eighth grade, and so all the Catholic students went to Hope Springs High School for the rest of their education.

Then, in the year that my class graduated, we got a new priest, Father Igglemarch--we got a new priest almost every year, actually, which was a blistering turnover rate, but there were reasons why priests wouldn't stay at St. Mary's--and this new fellow was one who was fond of doing his own interior decorating. Within two months of his stay in the rectory, St. Mary's was footing a ten-thousand-dollar stain-resistant-carpet bill, and the men of the Parish Council were installing solid-surface countertops in the kitchen, and we were all the way into second-story wallpaper before someone figured out that the rectory

upkeep fund wasn't even being touched. Father Igglemarch had somehow got his sticky fingers into the portion of the Sunday collection earmarked for the school, and was using it to finance the spanking new upholstery on his living room furniture. When he was confronted with the problem, he cleared his throat and replied that in every other Catholic school in the country, tuition was charged to cover the costs of operation, and it was about time we faced up to reality and did the same. And so the issue was brought up before Parish Council, who fought and spat much as they always did; however, faced with an empty school fund, they passed a resolution to charge tuition to St. Mary's Elementary. (Father Igglemarch was soon recalled by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nashville, just after the downstairs study acquired a lovely set of velvet drapes and the Ladies' Altar Society complained that the flower fund was missing.) But the tuition damage was done--in the one-hundred-twenty years that the school had been operating, no Catholic child had ever before had to pay a penny to attend, and upon passage of the resolution half the parents yanked their kids out because they couldn't afford to pay. Amid bitter arguing in the Parish Council, St. Mary's Elementary School closed for good when I was a junior in high school.

Being in parochial school in rural Tennessee had been like living in a glass jar that the Baptists crowded round and poked at, both curious and suspicious. And although Hope Springs was small, and so we knew a lot of our Protestant counterparts in the

county school three miles to the south, we didn't know them as well as we knew our own, unless they were our neighbors or played baseball with us in the summers. We mostly just kept to ourselves. We wandered into high school pale from the cloister, settling uneasily into the grooves of new friendships and holding on to each other for dear life. But there was room in a school of five hundred for us eventually to separate and to become strangers to each other, which is what we did after a while. Page and I somehow broke off from the seven boys in our St. Mary's class--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, comrades and victims of coincidence who discovered in high school that they really didn't like each other that much after all, and Terry and Joseph and Jason, who had known that they really didn't like each other from the start. We hadn't meant for it to happen that way; it just did.

But it didn't matter anymore, because St. Mary's was gone. The church used the school building for Legion of Mary and Knights of Columbus meetings, and an aerobics class met in the old eighth-grade classroom on Monday and Thursday nights. One-hundred-twenty years in the same place and then it was gone. All the Catholic children went to South August Elementary after it closed, mingling faiths and eating tubs of government Veg-All together as if it had never been different.

The first day Page came to St. Mary's was in second grade, after her family moved here from Memphis. She and I, as I said,

were the only two girls among seven boys, and she sat in front of me that first day and kept turning around to look at my paper.

"Why don't you write `All for Jesus' at the top of your paper?" she asked me finally. "You get bonus points for it at my old school. Plus a gold star on your card. I don't even see no star cards here. At my old school my teacher always makes star cards for if you do good. I don't like it here. You don't do good stuff here. You don't write `All for Jesus' on your paper."

Page lived with her mother, Jane, in a tiny pink brick house beside the turnoff to Highway 181. There was a giant oak tree and a tire swing in the front yard; the gravel parking lot of an apartment building was their back yard. Up until the beginning of our senior year, Page's father had lived there, too, when he wasn't driving his rig for a shirt factory in Florence, Alabama--when he was home, his own shirts hung newly clean on the clothesline stretched between two rusty poles by the back steps. Then, that last September, his shirts disappeared from the back yard one day, as they routinely did, but after that the line remained empty.

I didn't know what happened and I didn't ask. It was the only thing Page didn't ever want to talk about. All I could tell was that Jane was bitter, and her smile became haggard and pointed.

Page's first name was Victoria, and her mother always said that this was in remembrance of the fact that they were descended from a noble family in England. She never could remember

precisely which family. This reminded me of the time Page and I had a tea party in third grade, and we taped champagne labels from my parents' liquor cabinet onto Coca-Cola bottles.

Page's last name was Stubbs, and this of course was her father's fault.

When we were growing up I would go over to her house to watch soap operas after school, since my mama wouldn't let me at home. Page and I would sit there with our homework, drinking pink lemonade, mesmerized by the adulterous sighing onscreen while we pretended to be concentrating on our math, and Jane would drift through the living room in a cloud of cigarette smoke and say something like, "You know, Gabriel, Page is one of a kind. It ain't every girl that can trace her roots back to royalty," her Mississippi accent barreling through every word like a giant wrecking ball. Then she'd take the fuming cigarette out from between her lips and kiss Page lightly on the top of the head. And I'd say, "No, it's not," but she'd have already moved to the window and stopped paying us any attention. She'd stand there and smoke like a chimney for a few minutes, and then--it never failed--she'd turn around and say, "Page, why don't you help Gabriel with her math?" The first time or two she said it Page said, "Mama, Gabriel don't need help with her math," but after that she quit because there was no point. So we'd sit there and do math without saying a word to each other, and Jane would go and sit on the porch until she exhausted her pack of cigarettes.

Page and I were a world all by ourselves, once upon a time.

In the second grade we got identical white purses and veils from the religious-articles catalog for First Communion. We won the three-legged race together every year at Field Day. We swung together open-throttle into that stage of sober third-grade piety in which we believed to the cores of our souls that we were called to be nuns. During that particular period we conducted prayer services in the woods behind the school building--which also happened to be the woods behind the Hope Springs baseball field, which stood on the other side--in the middle of a circle made up of stones we snitched from the rock pile at Springer's Lumber across the road. We placed them far into the woods so that the boys would not find them. We took vows of poverty and chastity which we made up ourselves during the study period after math. But after a year or two we segued back into the realm of the secular, keeping the circle of stones but twisting its purpose: we prayed, but what we prayed for was for boys to notice us. And when we were old enough to have any pertinent information about sex to discuss, such as when Page discovered homosexuality in her mother's *Cosmopolitan*, we brought it to the woods. Finally, in a solemn ceremony among the stones, we each made the other promise to wait to have sex until she was married. We called ourselves the Virgins' Club. We had a secret sign--actually, it was the peace sign, two fingers raised in a "V," but when we flashed it at each other we would whisper, "Hail Mary," which we thought sufficiently cryptic to disguise our purposes.

So it was certainly unimaginative and probably blasphemous but we held on to it like the last keys to the kingdom.

Even when we had grown past elementary school and secret clubs, Page would still give me the sign. We'd be in line at the cafeteria at high school, or passing each other on the highway, or taking a test in class, and she'd raise her fingers in the solemn "V" and smile. It was about the only thing I could count on her for. Despite what other people said about her, I felt that she was keeping her promise to me.

Rosemary Fairwell, on the other hand, did not happen to me until fourth grade.

In fourth grade I found that there were boys. Where they had been before, I had no idea, but suddenly here they were and I was duly fascinated. I sat in the back row of my classroom and developed neck cramps from hanging my head backwards to peek into the fifth-and-sixth-grade room across the hall. What I was watching were the black curls of Chad O'Brien, eleven and a half, who made frequent enough trips to the pencil sharpener to keep my neck bent right as a goalpost for the duration of religion class. I often spent the better part of the hour writing him letters inspired both by his nearness and by the secrecy of my passion, but I never sent them. They just piled up in the Beatitudes section of my religion book and made a big lump that was hard to write over.

As it happened, St. Mary's was just a few blocks up Cherry Street from the high school, and at the beginning of that year

some of the football coaches happened to see Chad tossing the Nerf ball on the playground after school. They began to filter over from the high school football field as the season began, congregating among the monkey bars and spitting into the dirt with their arms folded, and finally they suggested that Chad come out for community youth football so that they could groom him for the high school quarterback position. And so he did. Therefore, in what I hoped was a subtle play for his attention, I signed up for the community youth cheerleading squad.

On the first day of cheerleading practice that September, on the front lawn of Hope Springs High School, stuck in a crowd of girls only a few of whom I knew, I learned how to do two jumps: the herky, with one leg crooked and the other straight, and the spread eagle, where I threw my arms and legs out straight and barely jumped off the ground. Learning these two maneuvers took all of three hours, and then I listened to a speech from the cheerleading sponsors about how expensive uniforms and shoes were. I promptly got saddled with a fundraising order form longer than my arm, stapled to the topmost of eight boxes of generic chocolate bars--and then I was assigned a sales partner whose quiet smile, I noticed, bloomed easily over her face with little provocation. I had noticed her when she had ridden up to practice that day on her bicycle, her long legs pumping and propelling her forward gracefully, and she had stopped with a deft backwards motion of her foot, swinging her legs athletically

over the bar in one fluid gesture before the wheels had even stopped turning.

Quite possibly she had been born on a bicycle; I myself had not learned to ride until I was nine. *I remember the day in our front yard when I first tried to learn, that first day when I rolled down into a ditch quick as a flash of lightning because I couldn't pedal--all the begging that Daddy might not let go of the back of the seat wasted on a father intent on my independence--don't let go, no, don't! He did, and I lay in the rocks for hours and refused to get up even after he had gone inside, disgusted, and I let the afternoon sun beat upon me until the pale skin of my face was burnt, and the blood on my knees was dried.*

When the sponsors paired Rosemary and me off that day, and we sat on the high school steps in the autumn sun, she was the first to speak.

"Your hair is pretty," she said to me.

"Thanks."

"I have a Barbie doll with hair like that, but it's not red."

"Oh." I picked at my shoelaces. "Well, I guess you can take four boxes of this candy, and I'll take four boxes."

"Well," she said, "there's different kinds of candy in there. We have to sort out the caramels and the crispies and the plain ones." She smiled, and her smile reached up into her eyes

and crinkled the skin around them. "I was a cheerleader last year, so I know."

"Oh." I took one of the boxes into my hands and tried to separate the cardboard top, but the tabs were stuck in tight and it wouldn't budge.

"No, wait," Rosemary said. "Why don't you come over to my house, and we'll do it there. My daddy can open the boxes for us."

Rosemary's house was in the subdivision next to the city park, roomy and brick with lace-curtained dormers jutting out from the roof. After her father cut open the candy boxes for us with a pocketknife--I never saw her mother that day, because she was lying in the bedroom with a sick headache, although I heard her grumble in a sleepy voice at Rosemary's father--Rosemary and I sat in her room, which was upstairs, where she had a little windowseat in a dormer whose top lifted up; the inside was lined with cedar and there were quilts and books in it. Her curtains were pink and gauzy and matched the comforter and pillows on her bed. We sat in the floor, where the carpet was shaggy and soft, and we endlessly combed and braided her dolls' hair, using short stacks of candy bars for Barbie-couches and Barbie-beds.

"Do you wish you went to South August instead of St. Mary's?" she asked me finally.

I was shoving the rest of Pretty Curls Barbie's hair up under a mousy Barbie-doll wig, and I didn't look up. "No."

"Why not?"

"I'm Catholic," I said, shrugging. Tendrils of my doll's blond hair kept falling out from under the wig no matter how tightly I twisted it to her head.

"My boyfriend goes there and he hates it." She looked up and smiled. "But I bet it's fun sometimes, or you wouldn't like it." She thought a moment, and then she giggled, a sound like a bubbling brook. "Could you give a note to my boyfriend, if I wrote it right now?"

"I could take it to school tomorrow." I still didn't look up from the Barbie doll, but I was smiling. If I could be her courier, she might want to be friends--well, maybe not, but she would need me. "Who is he?"

"Chad O'Brien."

I sank, my mouth hanging open for only a second or two before I snapped it shut, and I smushed Barbie's demure rubber nose into her face with my thumb.

Rosemary looked at me, confused. "He's in sixth grade."

"I know who he is."

She searched me carefully with her eyes. "Don't you think he's cute?"

"Sort of." I kept my eyes down, staring at my feet until I noticed a hole in the toe of my canvas shoe, and I rubbed the loose threads with my finger to make them fuzzy. "He has nice hair," I said.

Rosemary knelt down by the edge of her bed and reached underneath, digging around until she found a pink plastic bin

full of magic markers and stationery, which she pulled out and dumped into the floor. She sat with her back against the side of the bed, picking up a red marker and scribbling with it on a plain white piece of paper. I couldn't see what she was writing, but as she finished I watched her draw two big fat red hearts at the bottom, and then she capped the marker and started some complex folding system which ended up with the letter looking like a cat's head. She wrote "To: Chad" on the front where the cat's eyes would have been, and she drew little whiskers and a mouth and gave it to me.

"Don't forget to give it to him," she said. "And don't tell him who it's from." She laughed, scooping the markers on the floor up into her hands and dropping them back into the pink bin.

I stared at the letter for a long time before I put it into my pocket.

I remember--are you listening?--that as I left her house that day I became caught up in another dream and stayed there for the better part of a week. I see it clearly now: The wind is sweeping past my face, and I feel bits of sand and dust in it cutting my skin like glass but it doesn't matter. I am coming over the hill, my hands sure and tight on the handlebars, my legs straight as I stand on the pedals until I coast onto level ground, and then I crouch forward and pump the pedals, the muscles in my legs churning and becoming taut. I know there is another girl behind me, but I don't turn to look--I know that she is dark and has doe eyes, but it is I who look like a princess

and whom the neighbors are staring at as they step out on their front porches to pick up their newspapers. I am racing the clock to beat out a world's record with my slender machine, and I have that record by the collar now as I glide into the last stretch where I see people waiting and smiling, my daddy among them, and a curly-headed boy I have seen before but whose name I cannot recall. Music is playing, I think, but it is lost in the cheering of the neighbors, of the newspapermen who have come here, of the children of St. Mary's who ring bells and sing like angels. I breeze past the red line and into the crowd but it is all right because I stop in one fluid motion and my feet are on the ground before the wheels stop turning. All the eyes are on me. That is what the dreams were like at first.

I gave the letter to Chad O'Brien at school the next day. When I handed it to him he looked at me strangely, almost hatefully. "Don't worry, stupid," I said. "It's not from me."

I bore three months' worth of animal-shaped correspondence to and from St. Mary's before Chad O'Brien finally had the decency to move to Atlanta. Rosemary, however, stayed. She stayed and stayed. She abandoned her South August entourage of girls who made reverent, hopeless comparison between her hair and their own, and clung to me instead. I never knew why. She told me once that I made her laugh, and I wrote that comment down in my book with my lists of things, and there were many days when I would read it over and over. But she never said it again. I often wondered if that was the kind of thing you said to somebody

only once, and then it was just understood, or if it was something I should worry about. I didn't know.

There were other things that I didn't understand, like the day I brought Rosemary over to my house to meet Page and play with Barbies. The first thing Page said to Rosemary was, "I know your daddy, he works with my mama at Long's," and Rosemary didn't acknowledge her at all, but instead stood over by the Barbie Town House and reflectively pulled the yellow elevator up and down, up and down, with the cord. I took Superstar Barbie and the shoebox apartment on my bookshelf, and Rosemary took Ballerina Barbie and the third floor of the Town House--and then Rosemary handed Page my mother's old snarly-headed Midge with the hips chipped from where my dog had carried her in his teeth. Page said, "Where do I get to live?" and Rosemary replied that Midge had decided to be a missionary in darkest Africa, over on the other side of my bed in the corner, and that she had to go naked like the natives. Page started crying and went home. Then Rosemary cried, too, but she didn't ever apologize.

"How'd you think of that?" I asked her. "Naked like the natives."

She smiled under her tears but she didn't answer me.

It would have been tidy if things had just snowballed, if the two of them would simply have begun to pull out each other's hair or scream nasty things across the borders of Barbie-doll lands, but it didn't ever happen; some days they would seem to get along, but on others Rosemary would draw some imaginary line

and disappear behind it, and Page would blindly gab her way through it, while I from a distance watched them work out this subtle arrangement that was astonishing in its sophistication. I didn't ask them about it, not once. By the time we reached high school they had comfortably settled themselves at a permanent arm's length, and when we were seniors they hardly spoke to each other at all.

And what did they know of me? They knew that I was Gabriel Sullivan. They thought they knew more than that, but that was really all they knew.

I sat in the flat sunlight with fresh new sweat dribbling over the stale dried old sweat on the back of my neck, and the hair at the base of my skull clung there like wet vines. I rested against the bumper of the rusted truck for only a few minutes before I felt tangible, like I wanted to stand up again, and I got up and shook a couple of pieces of loose gravel out of my shoe.

When I returned to the baseball field, the Tee-Ball game was over and the players were swarming to the concessions stand for free Cokes, while the Little League players had begun spreading out across left field to take warm-up tosses. The bleachers were in flux. Tee-Ball parents were grabbing their cushions and

children to leave as the Little League contingent took over their empty seats, complaints about the heat flying from both camps. My brother's team was the away team that night and so Rosemary and Page had moved to the other set of bleachers, with their backs to the sun. I saw that there was a sizeable space between them. They were watching the left field warm-up with admirable interest.

Booley Carson was sitting on the top row above them, fidgeting with his green mesh farm-equipment cap and wedging the crevices between the soles and the heels of his boots around the edge of the bleacher slat. He peeked out from under the brim of the cap with eyes that darted furtively from his hands, brown and peeling and pudgy and uncomfortable with stillness, to the field and to the people around him. He didn't have a little brother who played in Little League. Who the hell did he think he was fooling?

Before I could decide whether to go and sit on the bleachers in front of him, where Rosemary and Page sat silently with room for one between, somebody tapped me affably on the shoulder with a baseball cap.

I turned around. Wayne Barfield, my brother's head coach along with my father, put his dirty Pirates cap back on his head. He was a tall, skinny man, yellowing at the edges and sagging at the corners. His son Tyler was the shortstop for the Pirates, and Wayne had been his coach since Tyler and my brother had started Tee-Ball together in kindergarten. Wayne and my father

liked to lean against the fence together before the games and construct complex practical and theoretical strategies for Michael's pitching game. "A good man," my daddy once said of him. "You wouldn't know he was Church of Christ."

"You been pinching your brother on the arm too hard, better quit it," Wayne said to me.

"What do you mean?"

"We been warming him up out back of the field but his arm still looks purty bruised."

"Oh--that's his own fault," I said. "He was back on the weights the night after he wrecked, with Daddy helping, before the doctor even said for sure nothing was broken."

Wayne whipped a lighter and a cigarette from his shirt pocket and coughed. "Next year I'm gone tell 'em no bicycles six weeks before the season starts." He lit the cigarette and inhaled, and he grinned at me, punching me on the arm again. "Want a light?"

"No, thanks."

"Didn't figure." He replaced the lighter in his pocket, chuckling from deep in his chest with a shudder. "Got your big speech ready for Friday?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'll come up with it sooner or later."

"Put the fear of the Lord in 'em," he said, grinning. "Scare the hell out of 'em. At's what I'd do." He inhaled deeply, gazing reverently out over the field as the men ran the water hoses between first and second to dampen the dirt. The

heavy smile creases around his eyes eased a bit. "If more of 'em had the fear of the Lord in 'em maybe things wouldn't get so crazy. What's this world a-coming to." The last sentence was more of a statement than a question.

I nodded.

"Wisht I could get more boys into baseball," he said. "There's pride in it." He tapped me on the shoulder again and nodded. "My sister's boy's coming to stay with me for the summer to work with the kids--he plays ball in college and all. I really think he could help, *you* know, Michael, with his technique, especially his curveball, which he ain't got one, and Tyler's swing, too. I think Tyler could level his swing out and get some power there."

"Really?" I said. I turned my head away from him slightly to keep his potent, skinny tendrils of smoke from curling up my nose.

"Yep," Wayne said. "My sister's boy's got a scholarship. Some of these boys wanna grow up to be just like him, bless their hearts. They're gone be just tickled when I tell 'em about it." He tapped an orange-tipped column of cigarette ashes to the ground. A little cough sputtered up and took him by surprise, disturbing the smooth stream of smoke flowing from his face. "Well, Gabriel, I'm gone go see if Mikey's up to taking the mound." He tapped me again with the dirty cap and headed for the away dugout. "We'll see ya."

I dug my hands deep into my pockets for change for a Sun-drop. The heat was still unbearably close on my neck and my sweat mustache seemed to be developing handlebars. I swiped at it with my hand, and the salt stung my lips.

The Little League women were now manning the concessions stand. One of the more sensible of them stifled the flaming burger torch left behind by the Tee-Ball mothers, and she laid a new bed of charcoal in the grill, which she squirted conservatively with lighter fluid. As she went back into the concessions building and let the screen door slam behind her, old green paint from the doorframe flaked off and drifted to the ground.

Mrs. Lo-rene Putman was behind the first of two windows, slamming at flies on the counter with her fist. Her grandson Jared played third base on Michael's team. Lo-rene's daughter had had Jared when she was fourteen and then she left the baby with Lo-rene to run off with a guy who ran the ferris wheel at the August County Fair. Lo-rene had carefully sculpted blond hair and large blue eyeshadow and pink fingernails which were never chipped. The skin underneath her eyes was whiter than the rest of her face, and her deep crow's feet dipped into the puffy flesh as though they had been carved there with a knife. Lo-rene and her husband, Jimmy, both worked shifts at Futures Manufacturing Company in Middlefield. I don't think her name was actually hyphenated, but it should have been, because the "Lo" was a completely different thing from the "rene."

Just then she spotted another fly resting on the window screen, and she raised a fist at it slowly, sneaking up to it from below, and suddenly she struck at it, her knuckles puckering the screen wire. The fly came oozing through the mesh to me on the other side. "Ooh, lookie, Gabriel, I got me one!" she cried. She was one of the people who let the last syllable of my name just dribble out of their mouths whatever way.

"Don't you have a flyswatter in there?" I asked.

"We cain't find it." Lo-rene wiped her hand against the counter. "But did you see me smash the shit out of that thing? I never done that before in my life." She picked what was left of the fly out of the screen with a napkin. "So what do you need, hon?"

"A Sun-drop," I said. "With lots of ice."

"Ain't it nasty out today?" Lo-rene nodded her head, unscrewing the cap off a two-liter bottle of Sun-drop. "If it's done this bad now, I cain't imagine what it's gone be like when summer gets good and going."

"Maybe it'll cool off," I said, leaning my elbows on the concessions window and wiping at my eyes.

"Sweetie, you look like you're about to have a stroke." Lo-rene scooped some ice into a plastic cup. "Maybe you oughta go home, sit inside a while."

"I'm okay."

She shrugged, pouring the Sun-drop over the ice, and then waited for the fizz to settle. "I saw you talking to Wayne Barfield," she said. "What does he know today?"

"Not much."

"He come over here a while ago to sign us up for booths for the Fourth of July. Can you believe it's already time for that again?"

I shook my head.

"I been stuck in the corn dog booth for three years running," she said. "I hate it. Gets worse ever year. Somebody calls and quits at the last minute ever time, and I end up working all night."

"Tell Wayne you don't want to do corn dogs, then."

"Well, bless his heart," said Lo-rene, "he's trying to organize it all himself this time, and I hate to bother him." She paused. "He's a real nice man, don't you think?"

"Sure."

"A little skinny, but real nice."

I laughed.

I remember that I looked around me then and took in what was May and replaced it with July, with a carnival crowd that was connected together with the heat and closeness, a crowd through which a whisper of bad news would pass like a surge of electricity. The crowd would hear the sirens wail and would rush to their cars borne on the black wings of a rumor, drawn by the

music of sirens. They would come to the bridge in tears, all of one mind.

"I always do the balloon dart booth," I told Lo-rene. "It's okay, except little kids can't throw straight. I had to get a tetanus shot one year after I got nailed in the arm."

"You're kidding."

"Nope," I said, "but at least I got to leave the carnival and go home."

Lo-rene folded her arms across her chest, which bulged from beneath a tight T-shirt with a puffy paint print across the front. "Wayne told me that this year they ain't having but one game for the Fourth of July tournament. Just Little League--they ain't even fooling with Tee-Ball."

"Well, good," I said. "All the Tee-Ball kids want to do anyway at the carnival is play ring toss, or the dunking machine."

"Yeah, but there ain't hardly a point in playing the season out," said Lo-rene. "Everybody done knows who the best two Little League teams'll be--us and Jerry Dog Wilson's team. None of the kids moved up to Babe Ruth from our team last year except that Snyder boy, and then, when ain't Jerry Dog Wilson's team been in the championship?" She snorted.

"I guess they could just play to be playing," I said. "Just for the fun of it."

"That's a new one on me," Lo-rene said. "You'll have to talk to the daddies about that."

I laughed. "I better go."

"We'll see ya, hon." Lo-rene waved her manicured hand at me, her large gold wedding band slipping down to her knuckle because it was a shade too big. "Say hey to your mama for me."

I sipped my Sun-drop and turned to face the sun. Rosemary and Page saw me--Page lifted her hand up and gave a whoop, calling, "Hey, over here!"--and the two of them scooted a little farther apart so that I would know to sit back down between them, without even looking at each other to acknowledge that they were doing so.

As I climbed the bleachers to take my seat I was facing Booley, who was staring at me with doleful eyes that took pains to appear nonchalant by darting around under the brim of his cap.

"Hey," I said, my eyes sweeping over the top of his green cap instead of meeting his eyes, my mouth not pointed squarely in his direction.

"Hey, Gabriel," he replied, taking off the cap and twisting it in his hands.

"Where were you?" asked Rosemary as I turned my back on Booley and sat down. "You look miserably hot." She reached up and took my hair in both her hands, twisting it into an uneven rope, and then she held it with one hand while the other fished into her pocket. "I have an extra holder," she said, and she pulled out a thin elastic covered in soft blue fabric, which had a little of her dark brown hair still clinging to it, and she doubled it over between her fingers and wrapped it around my

hair. "Where were you?" she repeated, letting my hair drop onto one shoulder.

"In the parking lot," I said.

She put my hair over on the other shoulder, screwing up her lips into a small wrinkled circle. "Doing what?"

"I was just sitting in the shade for a minute."

Page flexed her feet, rotating them noisily at the ankles. "You have that white mustache thing on your face."

"No kidding."

"Are you sure you want to sit here in the sun?" Rosemary asked me. "It might not be good for you. Sure enough, you look a little sick."

"I'm fine."

"Saw you talking to Jamie Pinedweller," said Page.

The opposing team, the Napa Jays, had moved in to the diamond to take their warm-ups. Jerry Dog Wilson, their head coach, was standing at home plate with the hindcatcher, hitting balls to the infielders, who in turn fired them back home to the catcher. It was amazing, after watching hours of five-year-olds flailing around the bases like brainless homing missiles, to see the strength and precision of Little Leaguers as they hurled balls to the plate. They had no indecision in their faces.

The Napa Jays were the team that no one wanted to play. This was not necessarily because of the players themselves--after all, this was the first game of the season, and although you could hazard a judgment based on the outcomes of the season

before, there was no way to be certain of the net worth of a team until the season was underway. The Napa Jays, however, could be feared simply because they were being coached by Jerry Dog Wilson, who never played to lose. Jerry Dog Wilson, whose first two names were inseparable--Jerry Dog, like hot dog, or bird dog, an appellation which he was rumored to have acquired in high school due to some embarrassing incident after a football game--was the mayor of Pickensville, the only other incorporated town in August County besides Hope Springs and the county seat, Middlefield. Jerry Dog Wilson had coached all his son's teams from the time Abram was in kindergarten, and he had a notoriously ferocious command of the Little League rule book.

"Second base!" Jerry Dog hollered, but the end of his bat caught the ball early and it rolled lazily toward the third baseman instead.

"Just making sure you're paying attention!" he barked. "Git on it, Ferguson!"

The third baseman snapped to attention and charged the near-dead ball. He flung it home but it sailed over the catcher's head and into the fence.

"Watch it, Ferguson!" Jerry Dog hollered. "Play it right or don't play it at all!"

The spectators for the Little League game had begun to fill up the bleachers. There was a couple with a baby sitting on the bottom row in front of us. The girl was skinny everywhere except her stomach, which pooched out from under a T-shirt that did not

quite meet her shorts, and her hair was striped severely blond and spiked into a stiff awning over her forehead. She wore no engagement ring. The only ring she had on her hand was a thin gold wedding band, which slipped around unchecked on her tiny, chewed-up fingers. The boy was skinny everywhere. The hair at the nape of his neck was struggling to grow long; stringy curls of it hung from the edge of his Confederate baseball cap down into his T-shirt collar. His arms were stained black with oil from the elbow to the cuticles of his fingers, and he wore no wedding ring. Their baby was clothed only in a diaper and rubber pants and he played in the gravel between the bleachers and the fence. He kept putting rocks into his muddy mouth, and his mother intermittently and absently slapped his hand.

As I sat and watched them, I felt Booley's eyes on the back of my neck like two little burning holes.

More children had assembled now around the bleachers and in the gravel, because when a foul ball or a home run was hit--a more likely occurrence during a Little League game than in Tee-Ball--they would run after the balls to retrieve them. Whoever returned a baseball to the concessions stand got a sucker, a two-toned tart piece of candy which looked like a little spaceship on a stick. By the end of the night the children would all be sweaty and foaming green at the teeth. They were like a crazed army of orphans, swarming toward stray balls in a single body, running maniacally for the chance to get a fifteen-cent tart candy sucker for free.

Jerry Dog Wilson was loping pop flies to the outer reaches of the infield to test team communication. "Call it!" he cried, tossing a ball into the air and swiping at it with the bat. He missed. The catcher snickered into his mitt, but the infielders had not been paying that much attention anyway.

Jerry Dog tossed the ball again and smacked a little pop softly over the head of the second baseman, who backed up to catch it as the centerfielder moved in. They both stared straight up into the sky at the ball and didn't notice each other until they cracked skulls. They fell to the grass, one moaning softly and the other clutching at his cap in silence, and the ball dropped like a punctuation mark to the ground.

"Call it!" Jerry Dog growled. "Play lazy and you can sit on the bench. Ain't no room for lazy on this field!"

Jerry Dog had three pitching coaches, two on-base coaches, and two assistants. They all had brand-new matching blue T-shirts with their names printed on the back. Wayne Barfield, on the other hand, had only my father to help him. They both had black caps with a plain gold "P" for "Pirates" on the front.

Jamie was now consulting Wayne at the Pirates' dugout, making out the batting roster to give to the scorekeepers in the booth above the concessions stand. I felt him in the corner of my eye, but he had grown miniscule and I didn't feel tempted to look over at him.

Calm was settling over me when Page started in. "I wonder if Sammy will want to go out to eat tonight," she said. "It's

been, like, weeks, since he's took me anywhere. He always just wants to go to his house on the weekends."

A soft, nearly imperceptible laugh escaped from Rosemary's lips.

"Which, this is what will happen," Page continued, squinting as a cloud of dust kicked up by Jerry Dog's crew rolled toward us like a giant barrel. "We'll get out town about seven-thirty, and we'll sit in Sudsies parking lot and I'll go, `I'm hungry,' and he'll go, `What, I didn't hear you,' and I'll go, `I'm hungry,' and he'll go, `What, did you say something,' and I'll go, `I'm hungry,' and he'll go, `What?' Which, I don't know if you've ever heard us do that, but it's like our thing--he always pretends not to hear me."

Dust prickled up my nose and I wanted to gag. Rosemary coughed.

Jerry Dog's boys left the field for their pep talk in the dugout, and Wayne called to my brother and the rest of the Pirates by the left field fence to come in to the infield for warm-ups.

The baby in the gravel was trying to shove a rock into his mouth which was too big to fit. He contented himself with sucking on one corner of it, licking off the dirt with his tiny tongue. He gummed the mud in his mouth with a sour expression on his face.

"`I'm hungry.' `What?' `I'm hungry.' `What?'" Page was still laughing to herself.

Rosemary combed through her hair with her fingers and started sectioning it off to braid. With one hand she gracefully wiped off the delicate beads of sweat on the back of her neck, and I saw Jamie watching her do it. I felt nothing but calm.

"So what are you doing tonight?" Page asked me.

I glared at her, because I didn't have any plans for the night, and I felt Booley's inquisitive presence against my back just as if he were a giant question mark made of hot lead. I could nearly feel where his eyes burned trails across me as he waited for my response.

"She's going to stay with me tonight," Rosemary said quickly. "We're going out town." She was braiding her hair adroitly, making no mistakes except for a little piece on the side which she accidentally left out. In the humid heat it curled up endearingly around her ear.

"There's some party tonight," I said. "Or that's what I heard." This was true, but I had no intention either of remembering where it was or of going.

"Maybe Sammy knows," Page said. "We could all go together."

"If you want to," I said.

My brother had taken the mound and was lofting some slow pitches to the catcher. Michael was twelve and prone to excellence. I had never seen any boy his age with an arm as expert as his, or one who stood in the batter's box with more assurance. Easy and aesthetic movements were just part of the way he moved and breathed. He was blond and was becoming broad-

shouldered, and he had a complexion that welcomed the sun; he looked nothing at all like me.

I could see the entire parking lot from where I was sitting, except for the nearest two rows of cars which were blocked out by the concessions stand. My parents had arrived and had just got out of their car; Mama was carrying two cushioned seats that fastened onto the bleachers with a metal hook, one for herself, and one for my father, who would sometimes sit with her until just before the game started. As they walked toward the ball field together, my father kept one hand on her back. She seemed very small beside him; she was short and pale, although she appeared strong because of the directness of her step, and my father towered over her, ruddy and broad, with the first tiny padding of age peeping over his belt. He was still dressed in slacks and a tie, having only stopped by the house to pick up my mother. Daddy was the president of the First Bank of Hope Springs, which his great-grandfather Gabriel Sullivan had founded, and on Fridays the bank stayed open later in the afternoon than on the other days of the week, so he would come to the Little League games straight from work. Neither he nor my mother had ever missed one of Michael's games, except for once when my mother had had a vicious stomach virus, and then my father had come alone.

Daddy caught sight of Wayne in the infield, and he rolled up his shirt sleeves and nodded to him. My mama saw me as Daddy's hand left her back, and she waved. She put her seat down on the

bottom row of bleachers next to some of the other mothers and fastened the metal hook to the wooden slat, and Daddy strolled over toward the fence, his careful eye on my brother as he tossed pitches to the plate.

"Michael's not throwing very hard," Page observed.

"He's practicing," I said.

"Seems like he would practice throwing hard."

"His arm is bruised," Rosemary said calmly. "He had a bicycle wreck Tuesday."

Page stretched her legs out and began scratching at a freckle on her knee as if it were a speck of dirt that might come off. "Did I tell you what I was wearing for graduation?" she asked me.

"No."

"I found a white embroidered jumper at the mall, but I told you that already." She stopped and touched my arm. "Didn't I tell you that already?"

I watched Michael go through a slow wind-up. "No."

"Oh, God, Gabriel. Did I not tell you that? I thought I already told you that. I can't believe I forgot to tell you."

"Tell me."

Rosemary stood up. "I'm hungry," she said, and she skipped off down the bleachers.

Page's eyes followed Rosemary only so far as her head would allow without turning it, and then she looked back at me. She sat up straight to enhance the visual element of her story,

gesturing animatedly with her hands. "It is so pretty. Not to be vain or anything but it looks *good* on me, you know, even though I ain't dark enough yet to wear white. I have *got* to lay out." She glanced at my legs and rolled her eyes. "So it's, like, straight across here." She ran her hand across her chest. "And it fits, *you* know, *fits*, up here. I might have to have the chest let out. You know how that is." She stopped, her hand still on her breast. "Well, maybe you don't." She laughed and I thought of Booley, right behind us, quiet as a churchmouse. "I have my mother's chest."

My eyes and nose stung. I had actually grown some breasts since Page had got hers in fifth grade, but she had never bothered to notice. Page continued to talk, but I stared out over the ball field, catching only bits and pieces of her soliloquy, like how she was going to lose five pounds in the week we had left before graduation, how she was going to have to give in and get herself a new perm. I picked at the splinters on the edge of my seat.

The father of the baby in the gravel had just noticed that there were rocks in his son's mouth. "No!" he shouted, slapping the baby's upper arms. He scooped the child up violently out of the gravel and onto his lap, sticking two fingers into the baby's mouth to remove the rocks. "Hunter, don't you ever! *Ever!* Ever do that again! No!" He smacked him again. The baby started to wail and slap at its rubber pants with its tiny hand.

Rosemary returned from the concessions stand with a candy bar and a Coke, and at the same time Booley got up and clambered past us down the bleachers, his boots heavy on each step. He said nothing to any of us.

"You've done it now," Page said, watching him stomp off past the concessions stand. "You've pissed Booley off. Why didn't you say something to him?"

"He didn't say anything to me," I retorted. "He just sat back there like a big lump."

"He loves you," Page mused, giggling smugly. "Poor Booley."

Below us the baby continued to wail. The father wrinkled his sparse eyebrows together and curled his lip. "Well, all right, dammit, if you got to have something to suck on." He jammed his oily finger into the baby's mouth and quieted it. The mother watched them placidly.

Rosemary peeled back the wrapper from her candy bar. "Did you see Lo-rene Putman's shirt? At concessions?"

I nodded, smiling.

"My Lord," she said, a smile breaking like a sunrise over her face. She snapped the candy bar in two with her fingers, pinkies up. "I thought she'd bust right out of it."

"I think she has a crush on Wayne," I said. "I saw her looking at his butt."

Rosemary's eyes widened, and she pointed at me with one half of a candy bar. "Wayne's married, Gabriel."

I shrugged. "So is Lo-rene."

"Wayne Barfield does not have a butt," Page said to me. "That man is as skinny as you. And he ain't married anymore--his wife left him."

I turned to her. "So what are you saying?"

"Actually," she replied, "I shouldn't be talking about other men's butts. Sammy don't like that. If I even mention another guy's name, he goes, `You just like his butt.' And I say, `No, I don't.' And he goes, `You don't fool me, it's his ass you want.' And I go--"

"Well, Sammy's ass is cute, too," I said. "Don't neglect that. Let him know you notice."

Rosemary looked away, her eyes crinkling up at the corners, and she shoved a large piece of chocolate into her mouth, clamping her teeth down around it.

"Sammy says my ass is better than his," Page informed us. "Whenever I walk in front of him he always hollers, `Nice ass!' And I'm like, `What, this buffalo thing?'" She paused.

"Your ass is not the size of a buffalo's," I sighed.

She had begun to laugh before I even finished speaking. "Yeah, it is."

"No, it's not."

"Well, I guess other people see it different than what I do," she laughed. "Sammy says I am *fine*, but I'm, like, whatever."

Wayne Barfield and Jerry Dog Wilson were now discussing something at the pitcher's mound, their hands making firm

gestures at each other that were not quite threatening. Michael had stopped throwing and he was listening to them, picking subtly at the scabs on his arm so Mama wouldn't notice he was doing it. Jamie Pinedweller came back out on the field, juggling his green vinyl-covered scorebooks importantly, trying valiantly not to glance over to the side at Rosemary. The rest of the players wandered aimlessly about the field, the infielders picking at their gloves, the outfielders picking at the wooden corporate sponsorship signs rotting on the outfield fence. *Joe's Body Shop Knights of Columbus Lions Club Stillman Used Auto Hope Springs Federal Savings and Loan Brecht Cleaners $10 FOR BALL HIT OVER THIS SIGN Hartford's One Stop The Sandwich Shoppe Cabler's Gift and Boutique Quik Mart Wilson Texaco. . . .*

What had appeared to be a discussion was now obviously an argument.

"We've had the same damn umpires ever year," Wayne was yelling. "Peanut's called the plate since I's playing myself. You know that as well as I do!"

"All I'm saying is we got to go by the books," Jerry Dog said, the back of one open hand slapping into the palm of the other to emphasize each word. "Umpires got to be approved by Little League and got to be from another county. Otherwise they's partial."

"Peanut Springer don't give a flying shit who wins, Mr. Wilson," Wayne snapped. "He never has."

By now all the parents in the stands were listening, and the chatter of concessions business grew hushed. There was muted chuckling.

"Peanut Springer's nephew plays for your team," Jerry Dog pointed out.

"Peanut's got relatives on ever damn team!" hollered Wayne. "There's more Springers in Hope Springs than hairs on your head. Peanut's called the plate ever year and I don't see why this one should be any different."

"Well, my team ain't playing if he's calling," said Jerry Dog with conviction. "Them's the rules."

"Well, fine," Wayne said, taking off his cap and pushing sweaty strands of hair up off his expanding forehead. "Who you gonna get to call it? I don't see nobody here from outta town."

"I got people on the way from Lincoln County. You won't have to do nothing."

Wayne turned red in the face. "Nothing but lose, I reckon," he sputtered. "For all I know they might be your uncles."

"You just wait a minute," Jerry Dog began, getting his finger up in Wayne's face.

"Wait, nothing," Wayne said, turning away from him and stomping toward the dugout. "We ain't playing till I have a word with the board. This is bullshit."

"Are you forfeiting to me, then?" Jerry Dog shouted.

Wayne turned back around. "Like I said, I'm postponing the game until I have a word with the board. I didn't say nothing

about forfeiting. I don't reckon you care, though." He motioned for Jamie to bring him the books.

"You cain't just postpone an official game when we got the umps on the way," said Wilson. "As far as I'm concerned, if you walk off, the Jays is officially one-and-oh."

A roar of protest went up from the Pirates' side. The mothers in the concessions stand poured out the side door and lined up along the fence behind home plate, calling to their friends in the bleachers to ask what was going on. My father strode out to the mound and told Michael to get back in the dugout. Then he faced Jerry Dog Wilson, whose ears barely reached my father's broad shoulders, and his Irish skin grew warm with blood.

"Oh, good Lord," I said. I glanced over at my mother. She was standing up.

"I suppose you got your own rule book now," Daddy said, cocking his head to one side.

"I got the official rule book," said Jerry Dog.

My daddy had no response. The two of them faced off on the mound, hands on hips, the weight of the silence of both sides of the bleachers pushing each from behind.

"Come on, Daddy," I mumbled. "You've got to think quicker than that."

"Well," whispered Rosemary, "all this waiting for nothing."

Peanut Springer, the ousted umpire, sat on his haunches in the dust behind the plate, oddly uninterested in the outcome of

the argument. Peanut was about sixty, and unusually wizened for his age; I would have thought this was from years of heavy work, but the only time I'd ever seen him outside the ballpark was sitting on the bench in front of the town drugstore smoking Camels. Yellow smoke colored the edges of his crooked red beard. He had been the plate umpire since I could remember, predictable as rain while the kids around him grew up, while the high school boys he got to help him call the bases lost their acne and found their wives and had their own children.

My father found his voice. "The way I see it," he said, "until your umpires get here, Peanut's still in charge. He called the Tee-Ball game. He's dressed. He's been hired by this city and he's getting a paycheck for this ballgame."

The mothers on the Pirates' side started whooping in support. The Jays' side was quiet. The boys themselves were gathered together in small groups on the field, watching the drama idly, swinging imaginary bats.

Michael sat on the bench in the dugout, leaning forward expectantly, rubbing his sore arm with slow fingers.

Wayne grinned. "You heard him, Peanut. Call this game on account of . . . something."

Peanut stood slowly. I imagined I heard each vertebra creaking back into place.

"Rain," he drawled. "Looks like rain."

Jerry Dog slung his cap back into the home dugout.

My daddy's shadow was long and weak on the ground as he descended the mound and consulted with Wayne. The hum of the crowd began to surge and the stillness broke, with people laughing and moving around while keeping one eye turned to the field. The concessions staff paraded reluctantly back into the building.

Jerry Dog Wilson returned to the home dugout and brought his boys together into a huddle. He grabbed an aluminum bat hanging from the chicken wire backing and began to pound it into the dirt as he spoke to them in hushed tones.

"Well, girls," I said, "it appears there will be no game this evening."

Page twisted her sweaty hair up into a knot. "You wouldn't know it, but I saw a picture of Jerry Dog Wilson in my next-door neighbor's old high school yearbook, and he used to be cute."

Rosemary stuck out her lower lip and blew her bangs up off her forehead, and then closed her eyes.

Peanut Springer kicked some dust up around the plate, stroked his red-and-yellow beard, and glanced over to where my father and Wayne were standing. He walked out to the mound, stepped up to the rubber, and turned to face the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "due to the thunderstorm I have predicted, tonight's Little League game has been cancelled."

Chapter Two

The signs needed painting. Mildew would crawl up from the ponds beyond the field at night and seep into the cracks with the dew just after dawn, cracks that formed during the day as the centerfield fence baked in the sun. This would go on and on until whole letters were missing, eaten away with alternate bouts of wet and dry, cool and hot. One could only hope that the letters that chipped away would be ones that didn't belong anyway, such as the *t* in *Ed's Seed and Equiptment*. The signs were faded and stripped and ancient and they needed painting, but who would paint them?

Certainly not the boys, the little boys who strode from the dugout to the batter's box with no expressions on their faces, except when they were afraid. And sometimes they were afraid. They were not worried about the condition of the field, they were not worried about getting to first base . . . they were worried about the expressions on the faces of the men.

The men, of course, would not paint the signs either. It took four men just to manage a team of twelve boys: one to stand hunched at first base, either growling and grimacing with his hands on his knees or spluttering and flailing wildly if the ball were hit, and one just like him at third, and two to stand at the dugout and whisper to each other through their tobacco juice, running their fingers along their caps and beside their noses and across their chests while they would look at each other and nod. There were men in the scoring box and men in the dugout and men

in the bleachers and men standing along the fence, all with the same focused glint in their eyes and the same repertoire of cliches gleaned from long nights listening to Skip Caray and the Atlanta Braves. Men planned picnics and uniforms and pictures and rosters while the boys ate ice cream and went to the swimming pool. Men stood quibbling in the fourth inning with their noses in the rule books while the boys torched bugs in the dugout and peeled bubblegum off their faces at third base. Men would yell at each other and boys would look at each other. And then the men would take the boys home with or without the home-run hamburger, and there might be silence or there might be earnest discussion and either way there would probably be a little batting practice once they got home.

And each year the signs got a little harder to read.

Chapter Three

She knew the boy had forgotten. Everyone was upstairs sleeping, all their regular breathing swelling the walls and then letting them relax--creak, creak, she thought she heard; she imagined the walls expanding and contracting under the push of so many sleepers' constant breaths. She was through washing the dishes; the girls had offered to help, but she'd sent them all upstairs to bed. She'd washed each dish and pot meticulously herself, alone, replacing them on the shelves with a precise languor. She needed a reason to be alone in the kitchen as night fell and others slept.

Her husband was in the bed, waiting for her, and so she continued to touch clean, dry dishes together to produce the illusion of business as she paced the moonlit floor. She knew Joseph had forgotten to do what his father had told him. She considered going upstairs, sneaking up the staircase like one of the children, and rousing Joseph from his bed to steal him off to the barn. But what if her husband should hear?

She stood in the window, breathing quietly air that was her own in this late hour, and decided that she could not bring herself to disturb the sleep of a child. She pulled her shawl about her shoulders and opened the door with a slowness that silenced the creaking hinges, and she pulled it to behind her with only the slightest noise.

The horses snorted and puffed calmly when she entered the barn, unable to see her shape but recognizing her smell, and she

moved easily along their backsides, unafraid of being kicked. She moved through the gates, listening for the chatter of mice, and lifted the lid off the iron barrel of sweet feed. She hoisted the heavy garden shovel from where it rested against the wall--it pinched her finger where her wedding band was--and she plunged it into the grain, dipping up a spilling pile of corn kernels, and she moved along the troughs in the dark, lining each horse's bin until she was out of feed. Then she would go back and start again. When all the troughs were full and the horses began nuzzling in them, she closed the barrel, put up the shovel, and climbed up on the wagon cart to pull the pitchfork down from the rafters.

She crept along behind the draft horses' powerful legs with the pitchfork, humming a soft melody and patting their behinds so that they would not start, and when she reached the end of the barn where the hay bales were piled, she stuck the fork into a heavy bale, thrashing it a bit to break up the tight pack. Each trough that was filled with feed had to be padded with hay, and she moved back through the barn, listening for mice, depositing hay into each bin and whispering encouragement to the snorting, puffing horses.

Finally, she climbed back onto the cart and hefted the stout pitchfork back up into the rafters. She pulled down the currycombs from the wooden shelf and the small glass jar of white powder, which she carried with her as she moved back through the length of the barn in the dark, listening for mice. The powder

she sprinkled into the feed of the last horse, Frau Bette, whose lame legs wobbled even when she stood still to eat, whose legs had pulled the wagon from Cincinnati when they were stout. She whispered into Frau Bette's ear, kissing her nose and rubbing her up under the mane.

She moved back to the inner gates with the combs, and stood there in the moonlight and peacefully groomed the coats of the four horses who would make the trip to the sale in Nashville with her husband at dawn. Now Joseph would go to school in the morning without feeling the hand of justice stinging on the seat of his trousers. She breathed air heavy with the smells of grain and sweating coats--it was not her own air, she had to share it with the horses, but somehow she did not mind sharing it with the horses.

Chapter Four

The bleak sun settled into the trees and colored the sky a dull pink. I rode home from the ballpark with my parents and Michael; we left the park in a long exodus of headlights, the black trees of the outfield at our backs, clutching the pink haze in crooked fingers.

It took seven minutes to reach home from the parking lot, counting home as the edge of my great-great-grandfather Sullivan's land, where the dirt drive of our house met Sullivan Road in a dense snarl of honeysuckle and sumac. The gray peaks of our roof were not visible from the road. From the end of the drive it was actually another two full minutes through the thick trees to the house, because my father always drove slowly so as not to ruffle up a coat of dust onto the car.

"You better limber up that arm a little tonight," Daddy said as the tires crackled over the rocks in the drive. The car eased under the tangled canopy of trees.

Michael shrugged the shoulder of his pitching arm up next to his ear and wagged it back and forth. "I don't much want to throw tonight."

"It'll get stiff on you."

"I don't care."

"What do you mean, you don't care?"

Michael turned his cap around on his head so that the hair over his forehead stuck out through the hole over the sizing strap. "I don't mean I don't care, I mean it won't get stiff."

"Charlie," my mama said, "the doctor said to let up a little."

We came up over the wooded rise to the house, shadowed in the span of the trees, and Daddy pulled the car into the garage. The fading pink light shone in through the garage windows and washed in slick squares over the hood of the car as Daddy eased it toward the wall. From our garage windows you could look out over the creek that ran below the house and see the black pile of crumbled stones where my great-great-grandfather's house had stood; it had stood and stood until you could have pushed it over with a finger and so my father and his brothers had burned it several years before, the same year we had built our own house at the top of the hill. The land had been left to my father and all his brothers and sisters when my grandparents died, and Daddy had bought all seventy-four acres from the others so that we could move from town and build our own place.

Michael was the first out of the car. He raced up the steps to the kitchen, opened the door, and let it slam behind him.

"I don't think you should make him toss any tonight," Mama said as she got out of the car.

I went inside and into the living room, where I found Michael sprawled on the floor in front of the television. I sat down at the piano across the room from him and opened the book of music that was resting on the stand.

"Don't even start that," Michael said, his head not turning away from the television. "I was here first."

"I'll play quiet," I said, stroking the keys.

"I don't care how loud you play, I can't hear the TV if you play."

I placed my fingers on the far right end of the keys, up where the notes were so high that they could barely be heard, and held them there.

"I see you doing that," Michael said. "Get away from the piano."

I played one note so softly that even I couldn't hear it. Michael didn't move.

"I just played something," I said. "You didn't hear it."

He turned around to me. "Quit it!" he roared.

I turned pages in my music book until I found an organ fugue whose left-hand part was so heavy that the ink ran together into one formidable black blot. I plunked my hands into position and struck the first chord. The statue of Mary on top of the piano shook, her porcelain eyes blank and her hands outstretched, palms up, waiting to catch stigmata.

Michael got up and stomped out of the room.

I heard clinking as my mother set the plates and the food on the supper table, and I knew that I should get up and help her but instead I kept on playing the fugue, which was giving me trouble. My hands were bony and agile but the span from thumb to

pinky was small, especially for the daughter of a man whose hand could cover the whole top of her head, and it was difficult for me to hold an octave comfortably and run smoothly with it up and down the keyboard. I kept hitting too many notes at once, interrupting the deep fullness of the left-hand part again and again with accidental dissonance. I winced.

"That's pretty, what are you playing?" my mama called to me from the kitchen. Her voice was lost amid the sounds of dishes clinking.

"A fugue." The television was still on behind me, and my sheet music reflected the fast, pressing colors of the advertisements, light and dark, light and dark. From up the stairs there came a soft, flirtatious whistling; my brother's parakeet, Evangeline, always mistook my playing for the call of some invisible feathered lover. I watched my left hand as it continued to pull the heavy octaves downward, grabbing extra notes along the way and dragging them down to the bottom. I tried to concentrate on holding my fingers in a fixed arc exactly the size of an octave, but they cramped and began to shake. All I could hear was the shy call of the bird upstairs.

"Don't bang so hard on the bottom," advised my mama from the kitchen, her voice an echo among the plates. "It's so loud."

I heard the door from the kitchen to the garage slam shut, and the heavy footsteps of my father rumbled into the kitchen. They were overtaken by the lighter ones of my brother, who tromped past him and into the living room, where he plopped down

behind me, in front of the television. I heard the leather of his glove smack the hardwood floor.

"Michael Sullivan, come in here and look what your cleats did to my kitchen floor." My mama's voice was raised slightly. "I *told* you. . . ."

Michael got up and went back into the kitchen, leaving the television on.

"Gabriel," called my daddy, "why aren't you helping Mama with supper?"

I stretched my left pinky away from the thumb ever so slowly, testing my span again and straining for the perfect arc. I banged my hand down on the keys.

"The tea glasses need ice," called my daddy. "Get in here and put some ice in the glasses."

I slid the bench away from the piano with my legs and stood up. I closed my book of sheet music, but the bent pages drifted back open.

"I didn't want to pitch tonight anyway," my brother was saying as I entered the kitchen. He was kneeling in the floor, sliding from one dirty footprint on the linoleum to the next, where tiny packs of dirt were sprinkled in groups of eight, and he pinched each one between his fingers and lifted it gingerly to place it in his palm. "My arm still hurts."

"Wonder why," I said, taking two of the empty tea glasses which Mama had already got down from the cabinet. "It looks like raw meat."

Michael stood up with a palm full of dirt. Some of it spilled through his fingers as he walked over to the trashcan, and he traipsed through what was left on the floor, spreading it across the kitchen with his socks.

Daddy was sitting at the table, sipping from a bottle of beer. He frowned at Michael. "Want to consider a broom, son?"

"I'll get it later," Mama said as she poured a cup of sugar into the pot of tea on the stove. She stirred it with an iced tea spoon, holding the long handle delicately between two bony fingers.

Michael dumped the palmful of dirt into the trashcan and had scarcely dusted his hands together before he began to pick at the fresh pink scabs by his elbow again, studying the stretch and tear of the flesh as he pulled on it ever so slowly.

I opened the freezer, and cold steam rolled out onto my face. "I wish you'd stop that," I said to Michael, "unless you're saving the pieces for me for dessert."

Mama poured the gravy from her iron skillet into a small plastic pitcher. "Is he picking off those scabs again?" She turned to look over her shoulder at Michael. "I told you you'll make scars."

"Scars aren't so bad," Michael said.

"Listen to your mother," said Daddy.

"If you get scars all over the place you will never be able to grow hair on your arms," I said, scooping ice crescents into

the tea glasses. "You have to ask yourself if the risks of picking are worth the benefits."

"Quit trying to be funny," Michael said, scraping his chair across the floor as he sat at the table. "You're not funny."

"Quit mangling your flesh in the room where I eat, then. I'm disgusted."

"All right," said Daddy. "Enough."

"Take this gravy to the table," Mama said to me. "I'll finish the glasses."

"I can finish the glasses."

"No, I don't mind," she said. "Go sit down."

I took the gravy to the table and sat down in my place across from Michael. Our kitchen table was an oval; Mama and Daddy sat at the ends farthest from each other because Daddy's long legs bumped hers too much when they sat the other way. However, Michael was getting taller every day and I had never been short myself, and we were beginning to have the same problem. Of course, Michael was more likely to take offense and kick me if my feet reached his than Daddy was likely to do the same to Mama, but we were already in the habit of sitting the way we sat.

Mama poured hot tea into the glasses and brought them over to us. It took her two trips.

"In the name of the Father," said my daddy, raising his hand to his forehead as Mama hurried to sit down, "and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen."

I folded my hands and bent my head, and I watched a red curl fall from the top of my head into my plate, and it made a perfect reflection in the squeaky clean shine of my mother's plates. Puffs of air from my lips made it bounce against the china.

"Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen."

Michael's socked foot tapped my toes, and I glared at him.

"May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen." Daddy repeated the Sign of the Cross, and we all did the same.

I raised my head and dug into the dish of potatoes.

My father reached for the steak. He stacked two pieces on top of each other on his plate and then poured gravy liberally over the top; then he piled three slotted spoonfuls of green beans on one side, not completely out of the gravy, and he scraped enough new potatoes out of the bowl to fill whatever empty space there was left. He took a slice of bread from the basket and just sort of threw it on top of the pile. Daddy liked his tastes to mingle; he lumped it all together without worrying what was what. While he was eating he would just stick his fork into his plate without looking down and eat whatever came back up on it. "I don't know how," he began, taking a gulp of his tea to get it all started, "we're going to get through an entire season with Jerry Dog coaching the Jays. I got a headache already just thinking about it."

Mama reached for a napkin. "Michael, get your fingers away from that sore. We're eating."

"There's only one way to beat Jerry Dog Wilson," I said, "and that's to make Michael put in twice the time on the weights that he does now." I served myself some steak.

"Shut up," said Michael.

"How many times have I told you I don't like those two words," Daddy said to him. "Sure enough now, you don't need to let up on your pitching, just because you're a little sore."

"It would be a shame," I agreed, "to let all the other twelve-year-olds catch up to you."

I saw Michael's mouth open wide out of the corner of my eye and so I fixed my attention on my potatoes.

"Michael," said Mama, "put those beans back in your mouth."

"We don't have any butter for the bread," I said, pushing my chair away from the table.

"I'll get it," said Mama, getting up before I could stand. Her plate was full of food, and by the end of supper it would be empty, but it always seemed that I never actually saw her eating.

"Michael," I said, settling back into my seat, "do any of your other twelve-year-old friends have such amazing pectoral definition?"

"Do any of his other twelve-year-old friends have a fastball?" Daddy asked me, shaking his fork at me. There was a potato on it, and part of a green bean.

"Unfortunately, no," I conceded. "It might be fun to watch him win if he had some real competition."

Mama returned with the butter and an extra knife. "Do you want me to heat up your bread in the oven? This is Agnes's homemade she sent over."

"It isn't necessary," I said.

"If you want it, I'll do it."

"It's okay cold," I answered.

"Do mine," said Michael.

She took the bread off our plates and went back to turn on the oven.

"You gotta feel sorry for Peanut Springer," my daddy said, shifting his long legs around underneath the table and stacking boiled potatoes two thick onto his fork. "I don't know what he'll do all summer if he doesn't get a paycheck from Little League."

"Sit on the bench downtown and spit on the sidewalk," Michael offered.

"Doesn't pay much," I said.

"He's too old to call anyway," said Michael. "You can hear him breathing hard when you're at bat."

"You'll be doing good to call when you're his age," said Daddy. He bit into a potato.

The last of the pink in the sky outside had died and the night was deep blue; our kitchen was full of broad-paned windows and in the one across from me I now saw my face instead of the

trees outside. I stared at myself over Michael's head until he noticed and began lolling his tongue out of his mouth. Something brown and pasty was on it but I didn't look straight at him.

Mama came back to the table. "It'll take a few minutes for the broiler to get hot enough to toast, but I went ahead and set the bread in there, okay?"

I stabbed at a few green beans with my fork. "That was a fugue I was playing a while ago," I said.

"It *sounded* like a feud," said Michael. "I need some more tea."

Mama got back up for the tea pitcher.

Daddy sliced his steak. "I'm going to have to sit down with the Little League rule book and make sure there's not any holes Wilson can cheat through."

"Of course he's going to cheat," I said. "What do you expect from the mayor of Pickensville?"

Mama brought back the tea pitcher, along with a handful of extra ice for Michael's glass. She poured it slowly so as not to spill it, and the ice crackled and settled to the bottom of the glass.

At nine o'clock Rosemary and I were sitting on the hood of her car in the parking lot of Sudsies Laundromat. We had been

riding around the back roads for half an hour, and so the hood of the car was uncomfortably warm against our rear ends, just as the humid night air was unpleasant on our faces. It was cooler now than it had been in the afternoon, but the stale day had left something of itself behind, clinging around the edges of people and things. When I looked up I could see no stars.

Hope Springs lay between Middlefield and Pickensville, which were the only other incorporated towns in August County, Tennessee, along two-lane Highway 47 running north and south. Rosemary and I were on the south end of town, where the land was flat and speckled with a handful of convenience stores, whose parking lots were where the weekend crowds alternately gathered and dispersed. Sudsies Laundromat was a building the size of a lunchbox owned by the First Baptist preacher and painted by his wife in hot pink with glossy blue bubbles on the side; it was pressed up against the side of the cement-block Quik Mart, where the outdoor lights stayed on all night like unblinking eyes in the dark. Across the street was a building which used to be a meat market and then a restaurant and then a chiropractor's office and then the Church of God's Salvation and then a video store with a tanning bed and a pool hall, but now it was deserted. The sign still had the name of the chiropractor on it--he had moved to a bigger office in Middlefield--but underneath the name, on the electric part of the sign with changeable letters, it read BUDWE SER POOL TOURNMENT FRI NITE. Out to the side of the building, where gas had been sold when it was a meat

market, there were three barren pumps with the glass over their meters long broken. On one side of the deserted building was a dollar store, and on the other a Texaco. The spread of the pavement around these five buildings was an immense expanse of level wasteland, which sucked up cars and people for sustenance in the waning hours of a Saturday night.

As Rosemary and I sat silently in front of the laundromat, a crowd was gathering across the street, drifting together from the highway. Most of them were leaning up against the deserted building or sitting on the platforms where the gas pumps stood like the last three soldiers of a battalion, their useless hoses trailing from their sides into the sparkling pavement.

Rosemary was twisting her rings around on her long fingers, watching the artificial light glint dully off the metal.

"We're sitting ducks," she said.

"We can't keep riding the back roads forever," I replied. "You're about out of gas."

"We're sitting ducks."

"Oh, you big baby." I messed her hair up with my hand, but it fell right back into place. "I haven't seen Buddy anywhere."

"We could get more gas."

"Well, get some, then."

She looked over at the Texaco but she didn't move. "We are the only two people in this parking lot."

"Well, you're the one who parked here."

"You didn't stop me."

"That is no way to think," I said. "You need to start being more independent. I can't boss you around forever."

She laid her head down in her lap.

"Well, let's leave, then," I said. "We can go to your house and watch movies, or something."

"No," she said, her voice muffled by her legs. "Mama and I had a fight anyway."

An old Chevy pickup pulled up directly across the highway near the old gas pumps. You could only tell that the truck was old by the headlights and grill, and by the great wide flanks over the wheels; it had been rejuvenated with brilliant red paint and lowered onto its wheels until it was riding close enough to the road to make sparks fly. It was Jamie Pinedweller's truck. I thought to myself, *You, Gabriel Sullivan, could never have ridden in that vehicle with a straight face.* I began to make the familiar, conscious effort to fill up the newly empty chambers in my mind with other things.

"There's Jamie," Rosemary said. "Who's with him?"

I couldn't see. The windows were tinted; there were two heads dimly visible through the darkened windshield. In the back of the truck, two big orange coolers were shored up against the tailgate, nestled into the corners of the bed with wool blankets, and the blankets were littered with flattened beer cans.

"I guess that means that Jamie knows where the party is," said Rosemary.

"I don't see how we missed it," I said. "We looked everywhere, all up Seven Points Road and everywhere this side of school."

I watched as Jamie got out of the truck, slammed the door behind him, and reached out to the bed of the truck and tripped the lid on an orange cooler. He plunged his hand into the ice and came up with a can of Budweiser, popped it open with a hiss, and put it to his lips.

"I think my parents are splitting up," said Rosemary.

One of the group of kids sitting on the old gas pump platform had a bag of little explosive snaps that pop when they are thrown against the pavement, and several kids were fighting to get a handful. One by one they began to toss their snaps to the ground, and a rash of tiny explosions echoed through the asphalt expanse.

"What makes you think that?" I asked Rosemary.

She sat beside me so still that I would have thought she wasn't there, only I felt the perfect proportions of the outline of her shape glaring at me in the corner of my eye.

Jamie looked over to us for the first time, although I knew that he had seen us when he first pulled up. He raised his can and yelled to me. "Hey, there, Gabriel, want some of this Co-Cola?"

I watched him, letting him hang there uncomfortably for a second with his can in the air before I responded. "That doesn't look like Coke to me."

"Sure it is," he said, pointing to the label. "Cain't you read? Original Recipe."

"Coke Classic, you moron," I said. "Original Recipe is Kentucky Fried Chicken."

Rosemary snorted.

Jamie took another big gulp of his beer, but his eyes remained on us.

"You know what I think?" said Rosemary.

"Nope."

"I think Jamie likes you."

I lay back against the car, staring up into an ugly broken bulb in the laundromat sign. I stared until I could see the imprint of jagged glass against the back of my eyelids.

"Gross," said Rosemary. "Get your hair up off that dirty windshield."

I remember tasting metal. I remember feeling it puncture me through as the water rushed past.

"I think you should go out with him," Rosemary said.

"Actually," I said slowly, slapping at a mosquito on my leg, "he asked me today if you and Buddy were through." I opened my eyes.

The smile slipped from her face like a shadow. "Oh."

"Besides," I continued, "I am branded with the love of Booley. I could belong to no other man."

She took a strand of my hair in her fingers and twisted it lazily into a taut thread.

"Stop it," I said.

A couple of girls from the gas platform--freshmen, I thought--with blond hair frozen in mighty cascades over their foreheads, scurried over to Jamie's truck and nudged their way between him and his cooler. One of them scuttled around to the passenger side and leaned her tall hairdo into the window. Another wrapped her fingers around Jamie's can of beer while it was still aloft at his lips, teasing it away from him. He frowned at her and said something I couldn't hear, and the girl looked out from under her hair at us.

"He's coming over here," I said.

Rosemary hugged her knees. "Things won't be like this once we leave for school."

"What are you talking about?" I said. My voice lay flat in the gully of my throat.

"I mean, when we're roommates, things won't be like this."

"Like what?"

She turned her head toward me and laid it on her kneecaps, her hair falling gracefully over her arms. "You want me to come with you, don't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't rather be alone?"

"No." I sat up. "Look. I can't even think about college right now. I haven't even written my speech for Friday."

"You haven't?"

"No."

"Are you worried?"

"Rosemary," I said, "shut up."

Jamie had got back into his truck. He pulled across the highway to our parking lot, rolling to a stop beside us, and as he leaned out of his window I saw his eyes, sitting dully in his face, red as hot pokers.

"Hey, Gabriel," he said.

"Where's the party?" I asked him. "You're looking a little blurry this evening."

He held his hand up in the air. "Swear to God, I ain't been drinking. I'm just driving."

"Except for that Co-Cola you just poured down your throat," I said.

"That was the first thing I've had all night."

Rosemary rolled her eyes.

He sat up straighter. "I hadn't been drinking. We come over here to see if you wanna go to the party--it's at Christy Springer's, her mom and dad are out of town."

I turned my head to Rosemary. "Do you want to go?"

She leaned over to me and whispered, "Maybe we should get out of this parking lot."

"Well," I whispered back, "I figure we can die one of two ways, either on the highway with these sots, or here at Buddy's bare hands. You call."

"I could drive," she breathed into my ear.

Jamie flicked his side mirror with his thumbnail. "Y'all quit keeping secrets." He grinned, the smile spreading slowly and unevenly over his face, peeling back lazily over his teeth.

"We'll go," I announced, "but Rosemary drives."

"Awww," Jamie whined. He poked at his eye with a slow finger. "Why?"

"Scoot over," I told him.

The other two boys in the truck, whom I didn't know, scooted and maneuvered and complained about having to straddle the stick shift.

"You ain't sitting in my lap, sweet thing," one of them said to Jamie.

Rosemary climbed in on the driver's side and settled in, fumbling for the seat belt and discovering that it had been cut out. She caressed the stick shift with her fingers, lightly moving it through all five gears and stroking the underside of the knob with her thumb, and she moved her left foot to the clutch. Jamie watched her fingers through the blood collecting in the undersides of his eyeballs.

I crawled over the two boys I didn't know, and I didn't introduce myself. I landed in the lap of the one in the middle. The boy on the end slammed the door shut behind me, stuffing us all together like a sausage and fusing my head to the truck ceiling. The radio was crackling, the sound light and piercing as if all the bass had been drained out of it, and a man's slow

lament moaned from the speakers. I smelled a lot of Wild Musk and Big Red.

"I suppose," I said, "that a seat belt would be out of the question."

"Good God," said one of the strange boys. "I cain't even scratch my ass and she wants a seat belt."

"We got to take the old highway to Pickensville," Jamie said. "I don't wanna run into any state troopers with all that shit in the back."

"It's just Coke," I said.

Rosemary rattled the gearshift in her palm. "I don't think I want to drive that way."

"Well, then," said Jamie, "I guess we got to drink two coolers full of Co-Cola right here in the parking lot." He giggled, and I smelled something nauseatingly tangy and sweet.

"Just go," I said to her. "Nothing could be worse than that."

Jamie turned his head, and his mouth was right over my nose. "Thank you," he whispered. I imagined the skin of my face melting off.

Rosemary pulled out onto the main highway, and then after about fifty yards she turned left onto Highway 181. Christy Springer's house was just south of Pickensville, where the old and the main highways met in the center of what was arguably called town. Highway 181 wandered confused through old farms and hills where the fences sagged and split, while Highway 47 was

straight and businesslike and boasted billboards for Middlefield's fast food joints, although they ran roughly parallel routes. Highway 181 was sharply sinuous, the stuff of vague and bloody legends that curled hair around Girl Scout campfires, and you could never see more than a few yards of it at a time.

"Drive as if we had a full cooler of Co-Cola on top of the cab," I said to Rosemary. "Or mine will be the first face to split the windshield."

"I don't like this road," she said. As she spoke Jamie turned his face to her, letting her hair touch his lips, and he shut his eyes.

"Hand me another beer," the boy under me said to his friend. One of my curls ended up in his mouth as he opened it to speak, and he grunted, spitting it back out. The other boy reached back through the sliding window to the bed of the truck, hoisted himself up onto his hips, and fished for a beer in the ice. I wished that they would all hold still. The boy under me took the beer from his friend, reached around me with both arms and popped the tab. He put it to his lips and I felt beer slosh on my elbow.

The moon was a filmy spot in the sky as we wove through the hills. Rosemary was taking the curves slow, letting the truck groan from gear to gear. It was hot in the cab, and dark, and pungent as a fresh shave.

"I hope there's some good-looking girls at this party now," said the boy I was sitting on. "There wasn't a while ago."

I remember that in the cab of that truck I was like a piece of sculpture, molded in place and left alone, but the soul of me eased out through the slit window, through the vents, through the roof and away. I rolled into the ditches and slunk up through the fields, looking for the bridge.

"I got to piss real soon," added the boy under me. "Especially the way she's sitting."

"You could have said something," I retorted. I tried to keep my weight off my backside, flinging my arms across the dashboard for balance.

"That don't look too comfortable," said the boy.

I turned to glare at him, and something in my neck popped.

"I cain't help that I got to piss," he said, putting the beer to his lips.

We arrived at the bridge.

"Stop here and let him drain," I told Rosemary.

The bridge was a narrow slab of concrete with shallow rails that was balanced high over Boone Creek, which cut a deep gorge completely through the highway. Kudzu tangled in the rails and spilled over the cliff down to the edge of the water, where it disappeared into the foamy rapids. We pulled over at the edge of the platform, into the trees, and popped out of the truck like articles from a burst-open suitcase. All three boys scampered into the thick brush. There was a negligible silence before

tense streams rattled the undergrowth, and Rosemary giggled as she leaned against the tailgate.

I walked over the edge of the bridge and peered down into the spattering rush of water. I fingered a leaf of kudzu.

"Get away from that edge," called Rosemary. "You make me nervous."

The night air was so warm and dark and thick. I listened closely to the water. It hissed and spat at me, and I smiled back.

We passed through Pickensville quickly, running the stop signs indiscriminately as Rosemary worked the gears. The town was still. We gladly left it behind, the moon smeared with haze a single blurry point in the darkness over the gully.

I sat on an overstuffed couch in Christy Springer's basement, holding a wine cooler in my hand which I occasionally tipped up so that a little splashed on my tongue. Small circles of people formed in the recesses of the room, moving close under the rim of smoke hovering around the ceiling. The paneled walls of the basement were battered with the roar coming from two three-foot speakers on either end of the couch. I watched puffs of dust fly off the speaker covers as they shook.

Rosemary sat next to me, halfway through a beer. "I hate AC/DC," she said loudly, cupping her hand over her ear to keep a squealing riff out of her eardrum.

Jamie was sprawled in front of Rosemary's legs on the floor, earnestly trying to squeeze his back between them and lean up against the couch, but they were firmly planted together. His movements had become more grandiose, his speech more tangled between his tongue and his lips.

A boy who had graduated from Hope Springs the year before, with whom I had had several classes during high school, had sat down beside me on the arm of the couch. The muscle from his football years was now falling over his belt. He leaned over and whispered something in my ear.

"You're going to have to speak up," I yelled. "We seem to be on the highway to hell."

He raised his voice to a speaking tone, and I understood him: "Rosie and that guy broke up?"

I nodded, kissing the mouth of my bottle, which tasted faintly of cherry.

He leaned over to me again. "You're drinking?"

I shrugged at him.

The boy, whose name was Perry, got up and stepped over Jamie, who wallowed in his beer-fed sluggishness and made no move except to tickle Rosemary's ankle with his index finger. Perry grabbed Rosemary's beer, set it on the floor, and took her by the hands.

She laughed, but her eyelids were low. "Hey, Perry, what are you doing?"

"Dancing with you," he said, pulling her to her feet and away from Jamie.

I stared at the far corners of the room, heavy with smoke and blackness, and took a tiny sip from my bottle.

Jamie looked up at Perry and Rosemary, and pieces of what was happening sloshed around in his wet brain for a moment and then drifted against his panic button.

"Hey, Anderson . . ." he droned.

"Aw, you cain't even stand up," Perry said, his hand on Rosemary's back.

"The hell I cain't." Jamie put one hand on the couch, and pushed upward, and his legs buckled under him, knees apart. I watched him, tapping the neck of my bottle with my finger. For me to think of him the way I had thought of him that morning I would have had to consume my entire beverage in one gulp.

"Get off her, Perry," Jamie insisted through fuzzy lips, rubbing one red eye with his finger.

Rosemary let go of Perry's hands, grabbed her beer, and trotted up the stairs. Perry watched her go.

"I think you and me need to have a little talk," Jamie said to Perry, slowly and without any syllabic emphasis.

"Aw, grow up," Perry said.

"No, let's go out." Jamie pointed to the stairs, watching his own finger. "Up . . . and out." He indicated the directions

slowly with his finger, smiling, licking his teeth. "Up . . . and out." He giggled.

Perry snorted and walked away.

I closed one ear with the index finger on the hand that was not holding a full bottle of alcohol. I pressed my finger in and out, making the music surge and fade. In and out, in and out.

A boy from the class below me came over and sat down.

"Hey, Gabriel," he said.

"Hey."

"You drinking?"

I waved the cooler at him.

"Where'd Rosemary go?"

"Up to the kitchen, I think."

"So . . ." he said casually. "Her and Buddy broke up?"

Jamie slid down into the floor, sound asleep.

After fifteen minutes Rosemary did not return, so I got up off the couch and went upstairs to the kitchen. The kitchen was full of people, twinkling with conversation and with the Christmas tree lights the hostess had strung around the ceiling and above the doorframes. I didn't see Rosemary anywhere, but Page was standing right at the top of the stairs.

"Hey!" she squealed. "I been looking for you."

"Have you seen Rosemary?" I asked her.

"No," she replied, swirling something bluish in a plastic cup. "But I'm glad you're here, I mean, I got Sammy to come out and all."

Sammy Wellman stood beside her, leaning up against a wooden hutch. He was a tall boy, two years older than we were, with no distinguishing accomplishments or features. Just brown hair, brown eyes, and a certain meatiness in the neck and gut. That night he was odoriferously drunk and chewing on Page's hair with furry teeth. She giggled and pushed at him.

I looked past her into the next room. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Oh, wait--I'll come with you," she gushed. She set her cup down on the hutch, and Sammy picked it up, holding it up to the blinking lights and watching the minute reflections.

"No, I'm just going to the bathroom," I said.

She leaned close to me and whispered in my ear. "Oh, please, don't think I'm drunk. This stuff is only something-berry Kool-Aid, I swear, maybe Sammy put a little vodka in as a joke, but I don't even have a *buzz*."

"No, Page, it's just that I'm going to the bathroom, and I think I can manage."

"Well, okay," she said, still whispering conspiratorially. She took her cup back from Sammy, who bit her on the shoulder. "Find me as soon as you come back down here."

"Okay."

I left her and wound my way through a jungle of people until I came to the entrance hall, where a staircase wrapped in white lights led to the second floor. I climbed it in relief because the upstairs was dark and cool and empty. The negligible amount of alcohol in my body was making my nose heavy.

In a strange dark bedroom toward the back I groped for a closet door, opened it, and shut myself inside with someone's stacks of shoes and pillowcases. I embraced a long felt coat with a soft lining, wrapping it around my face and smelling someone else's smells, and I moved a pair of boots so I could sit under the coat without having to pull on it to keep it over my head.

I remember that I dreamed of a party where the corners were shadowy and full of bodies, where someone's mother's carpet was catching the little nips and sloshes spilling over the edges of people's cups. The music was loud but the humming of human voices was louder and thicker. Rosemary was dancing with someone in the hallway, someone who leaned perpetually closer to her to smell her hair and to catch her whispers over the unflagging drone, and someone else flitted by and asked where is the lovely Gabriel this evening--where is she, and they didn't know. They danced, unsure of where the lovely Gabriel had disappeared to, they danced over the marble floor in the darkness where the tiny white lights twinkled over the banisters of the staircase. And then a twisted and melodramatic face appeared in the darkness of the doorway, and so they knew it was Page and thought to ignore

her, but Page spoke no words, and it was the wordlessness that made them stop to listen to her. Listen, she whispered. There are sirens. Twenty minutes, and no one had come to look for me.

The closet door opened.

I jumped. The flaps of the long coat over my head parted to reveal a male face with a crooked nose.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" it said to me, grinning slowly.

"I might ask you the same question," I snapped.

The face considered this genially, and then disappeared. The door closed and it was dark again.

When I returned downstairs to the kitchen Page was putting Sammy into a wooden armchair, easing him down against her hip, careful to hold her blue drink level so that it would not spill.

"I ain't drunk," he said.

She looked up at me. "Where you been for thirty minutes, girl? In the bathroom?"

"I was snooping in the closets," I said.

"Booley's here," she said. "In the basement." She laughed, and ran her finger calmly over the smooth, stiff arc of her bangs.

"Have you seen Rosemary?" I asked her.

"No, you already asked me that," she said. She put her lips next to my ear. "Don't leave. I'm worried about Sammy--God, I don't know, when he drinks, I just get so *worried*. I know I shouldn't worry, but it's just in my nature to care about people, I mean, I get so nervous, I am *so* nervous, tonight, with him drinking, I'm about to have one of my spells." She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath that flared her nostrils wide. When she opened her eyes she did not look at me, but at the opposite wall. "I probly just need to get my blood sugar up."

"You're drinking Kool-Aid," I pointed out.

"I don't think it's enough," she said, putting a hand on my shoulder and closing her eyes again.

"Well, don't faint," I said. "Sit down."

"Baby," Sammy said, "sit down where you don't move so much. I cain't see nothing but your butt."

"Do you want me to get you a cookie or something from the kitchen?" I asked.

"No," she said. She grasped the tiny wooden rail on the top shelf of the hutch. Someone I didn't know, some boy with broad pointed shoulders and a hunk of chew stuffed under his lip, asked her if she was all right, and she closed her eyes and nodded.

"Well, look," I said, "I need to go find Rosemary."

"I'll be okay," she said, placing a hand on her stomach and breathing out slowly. "It's just my nerves." She smiled at the boy with the chew.

I opened the door to the basement stairs and mellow rolls of smoke and noise wafted up to my face. I shut it back.

The twinkling lights of the kitchen wound from the doorway and crept into the dark entrance hall, where dusty, confused footprints were illuminated by the glare every other second as the lights flashed. I left the chatter of the kitchen and followed the lights. The front door was shut, but three tiny windows cut into it shone with the front porch light, and I looked out through them. I saw Rosemary sitting on the steps, alone.

I opened the door and slipped through, leaving no room for the noise and smoke to come out with me before I shut it back.

She turned her head to see who it was, and then turned back around. "Buddy was here," she said, looking only at the flagstone path that wove through the grass from the driveway.

"How do you know?" I sat down beside her.

"I saw his car through the front window," she said, "going back and forth past the driveway."

"How would he find out about a high school party?"

"You sure are stupid for a smart person," Rosemary said to me. "The night shift at Futures."

"He's never down on the line." I picked at some grass. "How would he hear? He sits in an office."

"It doesn't matter where you are at Long's," she said. "You'll hear something."

"There's no way for him to know you're here," I said.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers through the carpet of grass. "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter."

"Are you through with him?"

She smiled, opening her eyes. "If it's possible, I am."

"Is it possible?"

She stared out into the dark sky. "I'm scared of him, Gabriel. I never used to be but I am now."

I listened silently for a few moments to the throbbing of the music through the front door. "Know something?" I said.

"No."

"We have the truck keys," I said. "Jamie's passed out."

"What about his friends?"

"In the pine trees with some sluts from Alabama."

She fished in her pocket until she heard something jangle. "Okay, then," she said. "Let's go home."

That night, in bed after Rosemary dropped me off at home, I reached down under my dust ruffle and pulled out a battered blue five-section notebook with long curly strips of paper embedded in the wire coil. This was my book of lists. I'd kept one since the day I had learned to make letters with a pencil, copying the old contents into a new book each time one wore out. *My life from the time I was small had seemed to lend itself to listmaking.*

Rosemary had her own section in my book, marked off with manila binders. I opened to it and flipped to the end, marking

down the day's date, and I wrote, *Jamie Pinedweller, Perry Anderson.* Then I turned back to a page about two inches from the front and wrote the day's date again, and under it, *Make it be there, thick aftershave, dark closet.* I put the book back under the bed, turned out the light, and went to sleep.

Chapter Five

When Sunday services were over, the masses poured from scattered sets of double doors painted white, those aglow with the holiness of faith crisscrossing the paths of those aglow with the holiness of works, on their way to the convenience stores for the Sunday paper. Fresh from competing sermons, the tensions of the struggle of incompatible means of achieving eternity fading, melting in the sun on the immense pavement but never completely easing, scrubbed holiness would begin to wilt as sleeves came up to fill the gas tanks for a Sunday drive. Papers were purchased from the Quik-Mart racks and papists bled back into the Baptist woodwork, bound by the common ties of the red and black Piggly-Wiggly page, eggs eighty-nine cents, milk a dollar twenty-nine. Ain't it nifty, Harold Walker's fifty.

Chapter Six

The candles were lit and they made shadows on the new paint. In the front pew she knelt with the darkness and solitude falling about her shoulders, a familiar weight in the strange sanctity of the high altar at night. She knelt before the Blessed Mother and begged the heavenward eyes to turn down upon her. She lifted her palms where the precise crosses of blood were still caking, and said, It has come to this, and where are you? Not a blessing budged or trickled down from the highest arch, and in the crooked face of one painted angel, mouth frozen in a grotesque and silent song, she imagined her own hosannas being stifled. She rose and blew out her candle.

Chapter Seven

The next morning at Mass I had a tune stuck in my head and I couldn't get it out. It was one of a million piano pieces I'd learned over four years of lessons--kindergarten to third grade--that lived inside my fingers and twitched there whenever I was frustrated or bored or doubtful, such as when I was at Mass. My family and I were sitting as we always sat, with my brother and me between my parents. At least I was not sitting next to my father, who tended to notice and punish aberrant behavior at Mass, which for him would include drumming one's fingers on the edge of the pew. I was playing a Mozart sonata with just the pads of my fingers, silently, but if Daddy caught me he would say that the noise was not the issue.

It wasn't that I wasn't paying attention to Mass, because I was. Father Dozier was about to fling himself deep into what would probably be one of his last homilies at St. Mary's, and I intended to hear every last unfocused and ethereal moment of it. I simply wasn't so much interested in praying, at least in a conversational way, because I couldn't picture talking to the Lord and bringing up the kinds of dreams I dreamed inside a building as magnificent as this, and if I didn't bring them up, God would surely know I was hiding something. I actually felt more in tune with Mary and her waiting palms, but she didn't seem inclined to hear me. I had begun to feel that I would probably be Catholic until my parents died or became so feeble-minded with age that they couldn't remember they'd had children--because no

true Catholic, no matter how affected his brain, will ever forget which Church he belongs to--and then I would be free.

St. Mary's Church had not changed in a hundred years. The arches were cluttered with gilt, the high altar laden with Latin inscriptions and rosy painted saints, like a fantasy kingdom with Mary crowned the benevolent queen, smiling placidly and distantly from the center of the high arch. I had never quite grown out of the urge to poke around in all the nooks of the side altars, which were tall and complex and nearly sinister, carved out of a mahogany so dark that it was more black than brown--rumors floated around when I was in the early grades of saints' bones, or hair, in the closed drawers or behind the mysterious tiny doors with gold knobs. I had often fantasized about climbing the ladder up to the old bell tower above the choir loft, where the rope still hung down into the church even though the bells were now on electronic timers. The ladder was so high that it seemed an inhuman task to crawl from one rung to the next; since I had never seen anyone else do it, and I was deathly afraid of heights, I had never dared to try. My church was huge and old and mysterious, and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's, preaching its new message of forthrightness and architectural plainness, never quite made it through the front doors--if it had, it might never have found its way out.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen," began Father Dozier. This was the easy part. He was young, with rims of gray only recently forming in the black

hair along his temples and above his ears, and his time here at St. Mary's was done.

I concentrated on my fingers. I was trilling notes with my right hand, trying to keep my fingernails from catching the wood pew and making noise, but I couldn't do it right. I could hear the notes in my head as if I were playing the organ in the front of church and not the pew below my legs, and I heard the notes smashing together, tripping clumsily one into the other and bumping heads.

I liked Father Dozier. His sermons usually floated off somewhere in the stratosphere but he was painfully likeable, steeped in obscure knowledge of things like seventh-century monastic confessional rituals. "The gospel today teaches us that to love one another is the highest command," he was saying. "This ethic is visionary. It leads us to consider the divine as the precipitant of mortal action, of mortal grief and hope."

Damn. I had been hoping to follow him at least halfway. Sometimes I caught myself wondering if Father Dozier was even Catholic. Sometimes I felt something had been slipped me, like a strange pill into my chalice of communion wine, something tasting of other philosophies but looking earnestly like a keen interest in seventh-century monastic confessional rituals. Not that I thought Father Dozier wasn't close to God--he was certainly out there, touching the stars.

I occasionally watched the nuns during his sermons. St. Mary's had three Sisters of Mercy left from the days when they

had taught the parochial school, before it closed, and they sat in the front pew at 10:30 Mass on Sunday. They had short blue habits with black headpieces. The oldest, Sister Bernard, was also the fattest and most likely to drift away during Mass; the youngest, Sister Sheila, was still not young, but could run a respectable set of bases at recess back when she had taught at St. Mary's, and she always kept her eyes firmly on Father Dozier no matter where he floated off to; the other nun, Sister Cecilia, had been principal of St. Mary's before it folded, and was unremarkable in most ways except for her levelheadedness--I always remembered her pointy, rigid handwriting--and generally seemed to pay Father no attention at all. They sat in the front pew as an eternal threesome, with Sister Bernard in the middle so that she could slump all she liked.

Michael was sitting between me and Daddy, watching the motion of my fingers intently. He had never taken piano lessons. He didn't especially like to hear me play; I assumed this was partly because it upset Evangeline, his bird, but he would always shut the piano lid on my fingers whenever I sat down at the bench at home, and even here where my playing fingers were silent he inched his hand toward mine and began to make a fist with which to break up the melody. He knew as well as I did that Daddy would catch him, but I would be the one who had started it and the one who would catch hell--as if I were playing around, as if I could help playing a sonata on the edge of my pew. If I had been playing a hymn then I could have argued that I was being

pious, but since this was a Mozart sonata and it went too fast to have words, I was only misbehaving.

It was too bad that Father Dozier had been sent to St. Mary's by the Diocese of Nashville. He should have been at a university somewhere blowing the minds of theology students, being suspended for his liberal sway. He had no place here.

Back before my mother and father were born, women sat on the left side of church, where a statue of Mary crowned the side altar, and the men sat on the right, where there was a statue of Joseph. Now, however, it was entirely different. Families sat together, and the lines of cleavage in the parish were much deeper than gender, and ran more intricately than a simple line down the middle.

Michael pounded my little finger as it reached for high G. I jumped, but Daddy didn't notice.

"The ethic of love," continued Father Dozier, "was intended to fuse together the community of mortal believers, but in its transcendental form it is what today binds the entire communion of saints." This perhaps was not so hard to understand but it was not moving me to a heated religious experience. Father Dozier spoke with a sort of awe in his voice that might be construed as spaciness by the inexperienced listener; he spoke with a reverent hush that often induced napping in Sister Bernard, and others. But I liked him.

Even though I was playing a pew and not a piano I could tell where my mistakes were.

At St. Mary's we had had four priests in the last two years. It wasn't that they were dropping dead into their dinner plates or anything; they would simply be assigned to St. Mary's, arrive from Nashville, stay awhile, and then find that settling in among so many thorny establishments such as Parish Council or St. Ignatius Prayer League was less than comfortable or, more accurately, impossible. They had all left in short order.

"Love is God," breathed Father Dozier. "Love fuels the axis on which we spin."

The host of angels painted on the arch over the high altar was my favorite part of the church. There were thousands of them crowding to the center, gazing up urgently at their queen, gilt wings entangled in each other's tunics and mouths open in presumable melody, supporting among them a gilt banner reading, "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." I tried to picture them singing my sonata as I played. This would have been easier if I were playing it right, but my soundless trill kept smashing together. There was one little angel left of center whose face was slightly crooked, the eyes by misfortune a bit crossed, and I pretended that his mouth was the one singing the faulty notes.

"Love binds," intoned Father Dozier. "Where there is love, there is no separation."

Those who usually sat on the left side of church were what I thought of as the old guard, because they were all Mearas and O'Briens and Sullivans and Kuehlers and Brechts and Weimanns bred of the original August County melting pot. Their blood ran from

Dublin and Bavaria. Those who sat on the right, on the other hand, were mostly arrivals of the last twenty or so years. They were all Davises and Pratts and Whittingtons and Browns and Newells and Wrights. Their blood ran from Montgomery and Tallahassee, and they thought it would be a grand idea if we started a Sunday-school program just like our Baptist neighbors. Of course there was some mixing, some bleeding of the names one group into the other as lovestruck children sought to mingle distinct lines; some of the hybrid results formed the catch-all section in the back of church. Also for those who slunk petulantly in and out of Mass as they pleased, mostly high school students or the embarrassed returning to the fold, the back was where Page and Jane would sit when they came to church.

"Look at your neighbor." Father Dozier grasped the sides of the lectern as if it were supporting him, a pleading gesture made subtle by his refusal to broach eye contact with the congregation. "Love is the shape of that neighbor, while infinite--we are made infinite by love."

I watched the Davises, who regularly took their places at front and center of the right of church. They had come to St. Mary's from Mobile almost two years before, just as the school had been slipping helplessly through the gaps in parish policy, and upon their arrival they didn't sit still in one place until Percy Davis had himself elected chairman of Parish Council, the parish's governing body. He and his wife Wyvonne were fidgety. They were about fifty, but they moved so fast that you thought

they were younger than that--so fast it was actually hard to get a good long look at them--which was exactly the way they wanted it to be. After he managed to get elected, Percy Davis sat as still as you could wish for, right on top of the parish treasury.

Father Dozier was brandishing his well-oiled vocabulary up behind the lectern. "What we as blind and isolated mortals fail to realize is the fecundity of sharing love with our neighbors and with the divine in our neighbors."

Michael continued to try to crush my fingers with his fist.

Percy Davis did not look nearly so young sitting still, I thought as I watched the Davises from my seat. Wyvonne was also a bit more weathered and lined in the face than she would have liked you to believe; she tried to belie the evidence with liberal use of aquas and watermelons both on her face and in her clothes. Their only daughter, Sharla, was sixteen and unable to settle on a suitable hair color. None of the Davises seemed at that moment to be pondering the fecundity of sharing love with the divine in one's neighbors. Sharla was picking at her eyelashes.

The Davises had become good friends with the Whittingtons, who were until the arrival of the Davises the unofficial heads of the right-side camp, and who had been in Hope Springs about ten years. John Whittington had been chairman of Parish Council when the school closed.

Father Dozier was adopting his finishing-up posture, which was a series of pushes toward and pulls away from the lectern.

I couldn't get my piano piece right no matter how hard I tried.

Daddy reached out, swift as a bolt of divine lightning, and snatched Michael's fist just as it was about to break my fingers.

"In the light of divine love," summed up Father Dozier, "we make our journey toward final unity. We are all on our way to becoming gods ourselves."

I had known it all along. Father Dozier was a Mormon.

As we left church the sun glittered on the sparkling white steps and sidewalk, and shone through the new leaves of the trees. The trees were preparing for another long season in a string of scores of seasons, their roots stretching from thick and knotty trunks deep into the soil, under the church, under the parking lot, under the rectory, under the convent, who knows how far.

After Mass on Sundays we would always go to my mother's mother's house for what we called breakfast, even though by that time it was usually noon, and we ate homemade biscuits and sausage and bacon and eggs and waffles until we were anchored to our chairs by our bellies. Then everyone pushed himself away from the table and sat in the warm sunlight of the dining room,

talking unhurriedly about nothing until twilight descended and the sun rectangles on the shag carpet blurred. Sundays were stagnant and warm, and although the house was full of people, I would always have an empty feeling that I could not shake until the Monday sun cut through the Sunday darkness and brought back the week's routine.

Granny Kuehler was sixty-seven that summer, the only grandparent Michael and I had left, thin as a twig with her blue skin stretched over her fingers like parchment. My mother was her only child, the fifth of twelve pregnancies, the first of two to be born, the only child to live past infancy. Granny's baby boy, Joseph Frederick, born when my mother was five, was too fragile even to breathe on his own, and one morning well into his second month he simply shuddered into silence; now Pappy was dead, too, less quietly, his last days four years before steeped in the fumes of a lifetime of tobacco and shaken with a malignant hacking. But Granny had solace in my mother, and in my mother's marriage, which was the successful preservation of a pure Catholic line in the mixture of the old German and Irish families. More importantly, my father's parents had died young, when I was four, and so his brothers and sisters came over for Sunday breakfast and treated Granny Kuehler as if she were their own mother. Daddy was the oldest of his family; younger than he were his sister Agnes, his twin brothers, Joe and Will, and the baby, Beth. They were all married and had children except for

Beth, who was twenty-six and who was not consistent in the shapes or sizes of the men she occasionally brought home.

On that Sunday when Father Dozier spoke his message of love to the St. Mary's congregation, my aunt Agnes, who usually went to 7:30 a.m. Mass and arrived at Granny's early, was flouring biscuit dough by the sink when we walked through the door. Her two daughters, who were six and eight, were holed up shyly in a corner of the living room, chattering like mice and playing some lonely game between themselves; her husband, Terry, was already asleep in a recliner.

"Good morning," said my aunt Agnes to all of us, and then to my father, "and Charlie, before you settle into a chair and pass out, why don't you run back out to the Quik Mart? We're out of orange juice."

My father swatted her over the head with his rolled-up church bulletin. "Who says we got to have orange juice?"

"All the kids," replied Aunt Agnes, waving him away with a floury hand. She was newly forty, tall and slender except at the hips where childbirth had plumped her up. "We can't have breakfast without orange juice."

"Bet we could." My father pinched a hunk of dough out of the batch Agnes was kneading and popped it into his mouth.

"We've got to have orange juice," Agnes said, and she smacked my father's hand. "There's only Granny's beer in the fridge, and some buttermilk."

"Oh, all right." Daddy laid his bulletin on the counter and went back out through the screen door.

Granny was moving primly around the kitchen cabinets with a damp washcloth, wiping down the counters as she always did before starting to fry the sausage, and my mother kissed her hello. Michael went into the living room to find the Braves on television, and I opened the cabinet by the refrigerator to get plates for setting the table.

"Well, was the sermon as long at ten o'clock as it was at seven-thirty?" Agnes asked us. "I thought he never would shut up today. Love, God, love, more love, angels on the head of a pin, blah, blah, blah."

"It was long," Mama said.

"I've just got to tell you what I heard, though, about him leaving."

"Did you find out when he's going?"

"No, but I found out why," Agnes said, shaking her head. "Laney Brink."

"What about her?" I asked.

"I haven't seen her in church in a while," said Mama.

"Well, you know that her and Tim's divorce is final," said Agnes, "although I guess in this case that wasn't too important anyway."

Mama's mouth dropped open.

Agnes nodded her head.

"Father Dozier and Laney Brink?" I howled. "No way on God's green earth would Father Dozier cheat on the Lord with someone who drives a cherry-red Camaro."

"Speaking of cherries, I can already tell I'm gonna have to put some up this time," said Agnes to my mama. "Have you seen how full our trees are? Just two trees and I'm going to have to put some up."

"We've still got preserves from last time," said Mama. "But our trees are full too. I hate to cut them down but I'm about sick of eating cherries. They lasted all winter."

My aunt Beth came through the door then, on the tail end of my mother's sentence, letting the screen door slam behind her and throwing her keys onto the counter where Granny was wiping up invisible spots. "What lasted all winter?" She got a glass out of the cabinet and ran water into it.

"Cherries," said Aunt Agnes, lining up raw biscuits in the pan.

"No kidding," said Beth. "There was always a jar of somebody's jelly in my apartment this year."

"There'll be even more this summer," said Agnes. "I get sick just thinking about it."

"So don't put them up this time," said Beth, gulping some water. "Let the birds have them." She poured the rest of her glass into the sink.

Granny looked up for the first time from her wiping. She had already made it around the kitchen four times, nipping and

scratching at miniscule spots with her rag, and Aunt Agnes put out an arm to keep her from starting a fifth lap without even looking up from her biscuits. "You can't just not pick your cherries," Granny said.

"Sure you can," said Beth.

"It seems like such a waste," said my mother. She had cracked several eggs into a large bowl and was whisking water into them before she put them in a skillet.

"If I left those damn cherries on the tree," said my aunt Agnes, "and didn't get out there to pick them myself, Memorial Day Terry'd walk in with a bucket full and act like he'd worn himself out doing it, and fall in the floor kicking and screaming if I didn't make a pie and preserves."

"So let him pout," said Beth, shaking her head. "It wouldn't kill him."

"It'd kill me," said Agnes, opening the oven door and wincing as dry heat hit her in the abdomen and rolled up to her face. "Terry's a bigger baby than the two I bore myself."

Beth rolled her eyes. She was a little shorter than Aunt Agnes, but still taller than I was, hair like mine but the color of coffee and skin like cream sprinkled with freckles. "I'd tell him to go to hell."

My mother laughed.

"Well, you might," conceded my aunt Agnes, "but I'm the one who has a husband."

Granny moved from the counter to the refrigerator, easing her thin bones methodically into place with each step. "You girls are so silly," she warbled, opening the refrigerator door and searching for the sausage. "If the men could hear you talk."

"They do hear us talk," said Agnes.

Beth snapped her fingers. "Hey, did you hear what I heard after church today?"

Agnes nodded. "Father Dozier and Laney Brink?"

Beth wrinkled up her nose. "Ewwww! Father Dozier and Laney Brink?"

"Oh," said Agnes. "What did you hear after church?"

"Just that Tracy Wallace is having twins. So what? Father Dozier would *not* touch Laney in a gazillion years. He wouldn't know where to start."

Granny found sliced into the end of a pack of sausage with a knife, and the pink marbled meat puffed out as the gold paper peeled away. She began to patty it out in circles which she repeatedly measured against each other, and placed them in the skillet.

Beth turned to me, tapping her empty glass against her teeth. "*Laney Brink*. Hell's bells. So, kiddo," she said, "what's up with college?"

"I'm going," I said.

"Her orientation session is in June," said Mama. "She gets to go meet the other scholars in her program."

"I don't think I'm going." I opened the refrigerator and pretended to be looking for something.

"Why not?" Beth asked. "Get your head out of the refrigerator."

"She is too going," my mama said. "How else will she learn her way around campus?"

"With a map," I said.

"It's better to go ahead of time and get a feel for it." Beth pulled me out of the fridge and shut the door. I pulled a jar of jelly out as I came. "Meet some people," she said.

"Why should I have to meet people?" I asked. "I'm taking Rosemary."

"Is she going with you to orientation?"

"No, she registered too late. She doesn't have a room reserved."

"They have activities set up for you," Agnes said. "Bowling in the University Center and stuff. I hated orientation when I was there."

"Great," I said.

Aunt Agnes had gone to the University of Tennessee for two years, making what was then a seven-hour trip home every weekend, and then at the end of her second spring she came home to marry my uncle Terry, and she never went back. Although people whispered that she was pregnant, my cousin Ashley did not come along for twelve more years. Agnes was a loan officer in the bank her brothers presided over. Beth, on the other hand, liked

to say that her own academic career peaked at her eighth-grade science fair with a blue ribbon for a report on hog butchering, which included a smelly little bowl of head cheese that made one kid throw up, and high school was all downhill from there. She managed a diploma and didn't fool with college. That had always surprised me, because my aunt Beth seemed to rankle at having to sit still, especially in Hope Springs. She had gone to Nashville once, when she was nineteen, to try to ride into a country music career on the coattails of a high school classmate who was a genius on the guitar, but dubious connections fell apart for both of them and they came back to wait tables in Middlefield. Now she was a clerk at a furniture store.

"You'll have to go in June if you want to sign up for your classes," Mama said. "I would think the pre-engineering courses would go quickest."

"Our baby's going to be an engineer?" Beth patted my head. "Not a concert pianist?"

"Why an engineer?" asked Agnes.

I shrugged. "Numbers are nice."

"You take some piano lessons while you're up there," said Agnes. "Don't waste what God gave you."

"Of course Gabriel's going to school," murmured Granny, out of the blue. "There's no one as smart as she is." The sausage started to sizzle.

"There are a lot of people as smart as I am," I said.

"You can't tell me that there are a lot of people who have their whole school paid for, books and all," said Granny, pressing the sausage into the pan with a spatula. "You're awful special."

"It pays for books, too?" asked Beth. "You're not paying for anything?"

"Pretty much," I said.

"You'll probly have you a fella out there before long," mumbled Granny into the sausage.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know that I want her to find her somebody so far off," Mama said.

"Once you find a boy who's not a hick you'll be okay," said Beth. "Don't worry, it won't always be like high school. They do grow up."

"Don't tell her that." Aunt Agnes was getting jelly and butter out of the refrigerator. "They don't either grow up."

I turned from them and started taking coffee cups and saucers down from the cabinet.

Granny began flipping patties. "There's no boy in his right mind wouldn't have you, Gabriel. I don't know why you have such a hard time."

I placed coffee cups in saucers with martial precision beside the coffeemaker.

"Mama, don't say that to her," said my mother. She lined a basket for the biscuits with a red checkered cloth.

What I had always imagined when I thought of leaving home was a hand that would touch my own in understanding, where rootless trees stretched their tender new branches above my head and sprinkled blossoms in my hair but twined no roots about my ankles.

"Which, Ida Hartfield was telling me," said Granny, "that Booley Carson was sweet on you."

"Oh, Lord," I said.

"Mama," my mama said to hers, "be quiet."

"I'm sorry," said Granny. She started to put the sausage on a plate. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Agnes winked at me. "Booley Carson's not Catholic anyway. You don't need him."

"He's a sweet boy," said Granny. "He hauls hay for your daddy."

"I know that," I said.

"Of course you know that," Granny whispered. She put her hand over her eyes. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"I'm not kidding when I say don't mess with Protestant boys," Agnes said, placing bacon strips in a pan. "You can't get them to church to save your life. Look at mine." Terry was still in the recliner, his mouth hanging slightly slack.

"Are you living in the dorms?" Beth asked me.

I nodded.

"I heard UT's freshman dorms were kind of raunchy."

"I haven't seen them."

"Is Rosemary going to be your roommate?"

"Last I heard."

Beth raised her eyebrows. "Hmmm."

I shrugged. "I'm happy she's going."

"It's nice to know your roommate ahead of time," said Mama. "It makes those first weeks a little easier."

Granny still had not moved from the stove even though all the sausage patties were out of the skillet. Her hand was still over her eyes.

"Granny," said Agnes, "you okay?"

Granny's shoulders shook a little. "I should never have said anything. Now Gabriel's mad at me." She turned her head toward us for a split second, long enough for us to see that there were tears, and then she turned back to the skillet.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not mad."

"Yes, you are," said Granny softly. "I shouldn't have said anything."

My mother put her arms around Granny's shoulders. "Gabriel isn't mad, Mama."

After a little while the screen door opened and my father came in with the orange juice, which he threw cheerfully at my aunt Agnes almost before she could drop what she was doing to catch it. Her turning fork clattered to the floor. "Charlie, you asshole!" she yelled. "I swear!" She glanced at her daughters in the living room, who looked up wide-eyed from their silent games. "And that's a word nobody but me better use!"

My daddy laughed.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Charlie," said my mother. "Grow up."

"I'm telling you," reiterated Aunt Agnes, "they do not grow up."

Daddy made no comment; he saw that there was a Braves game on in the living room and went to sit on the couch with Michael.

Granny sniffed.

"Really, Granny," I said. "It's no big deal."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and took the plate of sausage to the table.

A car door slammed outside. Some muted commotion began in the carport, and then the screen door blasted open and a parade of Uncle Joe's children shot through the kitchen and into the living room, where Michael and Daddy shushed them so they wouldn't miss any of Skip Caray's commentary. Uncle Joe and his wife Ellen, whom he had met during his one brief year at college at a social picnic after Mass, had six children, all under the age of ten, including one set of twins, all with thick black hair and hearty lungs, all girls but one.

Joe and Ellen came through the door then, Ellen with the baby, Margaret, who was wailing like a banshee, on one arm. Granny, who doted on Joe, came over from the table and tried to take the baby from Ellen.

"I don't think so, Granny," said Ellen. "She's a little feisty for you today. I need to change her anyway."

"Oh, well," said Granny. "All right, I shouldn't have. . ."

Joe put his arm around Granny and kissed her on the cheek. "How's my favorite lady today?"

Granny put her hand on his face, forgetting about the baby as Ellen whisked her and the diaper bag to the living room floor, Margaret squalling the whole time. She whispered to him, "I'm all right."

Beth spoke loudly. "Joe, if you bring any more children into this house, you're going to have to start doing the dishes."

"We need a feeding trough as it is," said Aunt Agnes. She winced as bacon grease popped up onto her arm.

"Just wait, Beth," said Joe, his arm still around Granny, who was now smiling. "You'll end up popping more out than Ellen."

"What a nasty thing to say," Beth replied. "Besides, that's not possible, because I'm already getting old."

"Mama had you when she was forty-two," said Agnes. "Don't forget."

"Yeah, and she's dead," laughed Beth.

It got momentarily quiet but for the screaming of the children, and Beth turned red.

"Will's on his way," said Joe then, removing his arm from Granny's shoulder and getting a glass down from the cabinet. Granny watched him move from her with feeble eyes. "He was going to stop at the Quik-Mart for the paper."

"Well, this food's about to be eaten," said Aunt Agnes, stooping to open the oven door to retrieve the biscuits. "I don't care if Will's here or not."

"Amen," said Beth.

Granny's dining room table was big enough to seat the whole family, except for the kids, since Joe's brood was so ample. All the young ones sat in the floor of the living room and made a mess in the shag carpet with their eggs and sausage; they were not allowed to leave the kitchen on the Sundays when there were waffles and syrup. The rest of us spread around the huge table, with Granny at the head of the oval, as she had been even when Pappy was alive.

We were all getting our juice and coffee and sitting down, Agnes and Joe and Ellen putting sparing helpings of breakfast onto plates for the youngest children, when Uncle Will walked through the door with his wife and child. Uncle Will and Aunt June had one child, my cousin Ernie, named after June's father. Ernie was four and spoiled to his brown little core. "What?" cried my uncle Will, who, although he was Joe's twin brother, was not nearly so handsome, and had more gray in his thick black hair. "Can't wait five minutes for us?"

"The gravy train never runs late," said Aunt Agnes. "Hurry up and fix Ernie a plate so we can pray."

Will started towards the table but Agnes had already begun. "In the name of the Father. . . ." Everyone bowed his head and Will tossed the paper onto the table. "Son, Holy Spirit, Amen."

Granny had used to do the praying, but she was so deliberate and tremulous in doing it that Beth would sigh at least twice during the short prayer, and after a few spells of tears Granny had asked Agnes to lead so that Beth wouldn't be upset with her. When Agnes prayed, mostly what you heard was the consonants, on quick and regular beats, but since you knew the prayer yourself you just filled in the blanks.

When the prayer was done and we were settled into eating, all the kids sitting in the living room floor with their plates and stopping their ruckus in order to stuff their food down, Will patted his hand on the paper. "Y'all have a chance to read the *Arrow* this morning?"

"I might have," said Aunt Agnes, pulling apart a biscuit, "if I didn't spend my entire morning scrambling your eggs."

"Gripe, gripe, gripe," said Will.

"I believe my wife did all the scrambling this morning," said my daddy.

Will said, "The rosters are up for Little League." He picked up the paper and unfolded it to the middle, where sports coverage began after the Piggly Wiggly ad. "Looks like Jerry Dog's got himself a bull team."

"We ain't so bad ourselves," said my daddy.

The *August County Arrow* was the only community newspaper we had. It was a ragtag pile of words and punctuation marks that didn't go together quite right, the front page home to news about the new sewer line or the most recent successful Lions Club

fundraiser, with an occasional late-breaking petty theft or school arson. The middle pages were a compendium of wedding announcements and subtly snooty columns by elderly women about their neighborhoods and who'd took the cancer or had sweet grandbabies. There were obituaries, too, and several pages of local sports, and poems and recipes, all divided by the red and black Piggly Wiggly advertisement in the dead center of the layout. The Piggly Wiggly was in Middlefield. We were too small to have a Piggly Wiggly of our own. We shopped at Horner's Bi-Rite at the north end of town.

"You and Wayne are going to have to give in and get yourselves a sponsor," said Will. "Jerry Dog's done got Napa to pay his assistant coaches an advertising fee for wearing their logo on their shirts."

"He can't do that," my daddy said. He stopped spreading jelly on a biscuit.

"Well, that's what I heard," said Will.

"Well, we asked Futures to back us, but they wouldn't, and wouldn't tell us why."

"It was a good idea to ask," said Joe. "When a company first starts here they're usually wanting some cheap advertising." He was spooning baby-food peaches into Margaret's little mouth, which continued to shriek through the steady stream of food. Ellen was watching him protectively, as if after six children he might not have mastered the art of spoon-feeding,

moving her mouth and ghosting Margaret's lapping of the peaches as Joe shoveled them in.

Futures was the biggest factory in the county, up the highway in Middlefield, where they made sponges of all sizes. It used to be Long's Manufacturing, where they produced silver paper for beer packages, but it had been bought out by the Nashville company the year before. There had been a big-to-do about people getting laid off when that happened, and about lots of changes coming (they even thought Hope Springs might get a McDonald's because of all the new people coming from the north--"Your FUTURES in August County!", the *Arrow* headline had read), but all that actually happened was that now they made sponges instead of beer packages.

Most families in Hope Springs, except for mine, ate their meals and slept their nights according to the giant red clock which tolled out the shifts in the dismal industrial park just off the highway. Rosemary's father was an engineer at Futures, her mother a secretary for the day supervisor, her boyfriend the plant manager and the president's nephew. Page's mother worked down on the line, cutting sponge chunks into squares and throwing away the odd edges.

My own family mostly ran independently of Futures. My father and his brothers were on the board of Bank of Hope Springs, a Catholic institution since the days when German and Irish farms locked together and spread over the entire county; Joe was the bank's attorney and Will the loan officer. My mother

had always stayed at home with me and Michael, although now she volunteered at the Hope Springs High School library on Wednesdays and Fridays during the school year. Only Agnes had to set her clocks by the red whistle: Terry oversaw the transfer of huge slabs of sponge from the warehouse to the cutting floor. None of us, meanwhile, ever wanted for warped, strangely colored, or oddly cut sponges.

"I think Michael stands a good chance of getting county MVP this year," said Will, "judging from the list in the paper."

"But you've got to consider that he's got as good a chance of racking up four losses to the Jays as four wins." My daddy shook his head. "A pitcher with four losses probably won't make MVP."

"Four losses in a league like y'all have this time won't hurt him," Will insisted. "Are you going to pitch him every time against the Jays?"

"Well, probably not," Daddy admitted, folding bacon between two halves of a biscuit. "We got to rotate him."

"The Twins and the Astros look average," said Will, "and the Angels just look weak. They don't have anybody coming back--their first pitcher is just a ten-year-old. I wouldn't waste Michael on them." Ernie had finished his eggs and was pulling on Will's pants leg. "No, son," said Will. "Go on and play." Ernie sat in the floor and started beating on his head with his fist, and June picked him up and put him in her lap, stroking his forehead.

Granny, who had been sitting silently at her end of the table and staring at her plate, finally picked up a biscuit and began to spoon jelly onto it. Her fingers trembled and the blob of jelly wiggled off the spoon. Part fell into her plate and part landed on the biscuit, and she sat for a few seconds poking at the jelly on her plate with the bell of her spoon. "I don't know if anybody was going to invite me," she said, frowning at the spoon, "but I want to come to one of Michael's baseball games and see him play."

"Of course you can come," said my mother.

"Michael might get embarrassed with his old granny there," said Granny, barely catching the jelly on the tip of her spoon and lifting it to the biscuit.

Michael, at the end of the table opposite of Granny, had already wolfed down three patties of sausage and was going for the bacon. "Everybody's granny is old," he said.

"How's the arm this year?" Joe asked him.

"Fine," Michael said, lifting his elbow for inspection, "except for my bike wreck."

"We're going to try to get to a game this week or next," said Joe, grinning at Ellen. Margaret began spitting peaches on his sleeve to let him know she was full. "Joseph Junior needs to get a feel for the pitching mound."

"Joseph Junior is two years old," said Beth. "The only thing he's throwing is up."

"He threw Margaret's rattle at me the other day," said Ellen, letting Margaret's tiny fist close around her index finger and wagging it back and forth. "So Joe's convinced we have a Little League ace on our hands."

"It landed square in your lap," Joe said.

"That's what you get, Ellen," sighed Agnes, "for bearing him only one man-child."

"It had a spin on it," Joe insisted.

"Has Wayne still got no coaching help but you?" Will asked. Ernie had wriggled back out of June's lap and was wiping his nose on Will's pants leg, and Will lifted him into his lap. "That man tries to do too much by himself."

"Well," Daddy said, "he's got his sister's son up here this summer to help us."

"Which sister?" Will straightened out Ernie's legs, but Ernie kicked at him and snorted with a loud juicy noise. "Quit it, son. June, honey, could you get him a Kleenex?"

"Her name was Paula, or something. The one that moved away when she married. Her boy plays ball at Vanderbilt."

Will nodded. "That would be great for the boys, to have him help them out a little." June took a wadded-up tissue from her pocket and handed it to him, and he dove swiftly for Ernie's nose with it before Ernie could squirm out of the way.

Granny was taking tiny bites of her biscuit, and breaking off equally tiny bits of bacon and putting them in her mouth. "Gabriel, now if there's a cute little boy going to help on

Michael's baseball team, you don't need to miss any of the games."

"I never miss any of the games," I said.

"She has a crush on Peanut," said Michael, stuffing half a biscuit into his mouth.

"Peanut?" Granny asked. "Gabriel, I never heard you talk about a Peanut."

Joe and Will and my daddy all started laughing at the same time.

"Peanut is your age, Granny," I said. "And he smokes Camels."

She stopped chewing and laughed a little, but her eyes were cloudy.

"Michael was kidding, Granny," said Beth. "Peanut's the home plate umpire."

"I know," she said, swallowing her food.

"*Was* the home plate umpire," said my father.

"What's the verdict on that?" Joe asked.

"It's up to the board. They're meeting Monday."

"It's a shame," said Mama. "Treating him that way. I just don't understand why everything has to be by the book."

"Baseball won't be the same without Peanut's little phlegm wads around home plate," I said.

Will's wife, June, his high school sweetheart, sipped her coffee primly and blotted her lips together. "I don't think phlegm is a good conversation topic for the breakfast table."

"Oh, please," said Beth. "Ernie's nose doesn't seem to bother you."

June replaced her cup in its saucer, pursing her lips and holding her tongue up against the front of her teeth. June was Church of Christ.

"I think Tanner McDonald is as good a second-string pitcher as anybody in the league has got," Will said to Daddy. "And you've got some solid hitters."

"If I could get Corey Taylor to swing right, he could swing for the fence every time." Daddy shook his head. "Corey's got some power."

"Corey's got some gut," I said.

"When's your next game?" Joe asked my father.

"Tomorrow," he said. "There's no games Friday because of high school graduation."

"Which I plan to participate in," I said. "I mean, I'm not the starting pitcher or anything, but I think it'll be a close one."

"It *is* going to be a close one," said my mama, "because you refuse to start writing your speech."

"It's making you nervous, isn't it?" I smiled at her.

Beth stabbed at some sausage with her fork. "That would be such a hoot, if you just made it up once you got up there."

"A real hoot," said Mama, frowning.

"Just make it short," said Joe.

Granny broke off a tiny piece of her biscuit with blue, trembling fingers and looked at me with watery eyes. "Now, Gabriel, you just say what you want to say."

Hours later we all sat like statues in the late sun through the dining-room window, the last streams of conversation trickling out and drying up. The entire Pirate roster had been discussed and deemed worthy. June had left the table to lie down in Granny's bedroom with Ernie, who by that time of the day had no sound left in him that would not pierce a hole through your skull; the rest of the children were playing outside. Agnes and my mama had pushed their chairs away from the table and were contemplating clearing away the dishes, but neither of them had moved.

Beth rubbed at her eyes. "I don't think those biscuits cooked long enough, Agnes."

"I can feel all three of mine in my stomach, here and here and here," said Daddy, poking at his abdomen.

"Well, you can march your happy ass right into the kitchen next Sunday and make them yourself." Agnes stuck out her bottom lip and blew air up into her hair. "They were a little gooey, I reckon. I don't think I had the oven on the right temperature."

Joe had the baby, who was sleeping, nestled against his left arm, and he wormed his wristwatch out from underneath her head to make her more comfortable. "They tasted fine to me." He yawned, and Ellen leaned her head onto his shoulder.

The phone on the dining room wall rang then, and I got up to answer it. No one else at the table moved. "Hello?"

"Gabriel?" It was Rosemary; her voice was hard to hear, even in the listless silence of the dining room.

"Hey there."

"Could you . . ." she began, and then her voice shrunk away to nothing, "could you come to the Quik-Mart?"

"Is that where you are now?"

"No, I'm at home," she said, "but I have to leave now. Come now."

"I'll be there in five minutes," I said, and I hung up the phone.

"Secret plans," said Granny, who had been listening. "These young people running around in their cars, burning gasoline."

"Can I have the keys?" I asked Daddy. "I can be back in half an hour."

"Same old song," he said, but he was too still and settled to argue with me. He handed me the keys, and I heard Granny mumbling under her breath.

Rosemary met Buddy Scurlock at Christmas during our junior year of high school, at the Futures company Christmas party for the administration and employees and their families, held late one December evening so that the day shift could stay over for it if they wanted to, the seconds could drift in on their breaks, and the thirds could swing through on their way to the timecards to grab some eggnog and cookies. Rosemary's parents insisted that she go; she didn't want to go alone and twiddle her thumbs by the punch bowl, and so she asked me to come with her. I had never set foot inside the place before that, and indeed had no idea what went on inside a sponge factory, and so I agreed; Rosemary didn't tell me until I got there that she had seen the new night supervisor when she had brought her daddy his supper one evening when he was working late, that the new night supervisor was an engineer two years out of the University of Virginia and was the nephew of the company president, and that the new night supervisor had, in her opinion, very serious eyes.

I had the opportunity to judge such seriousness for myself as we were standing by the punch bowl in the front offices of Futures that evening with our plastic cups, sniffing the cherry concoction deeply to drown out the acrid smell of pine cleanser, used to drown out the acrid smell of sulfur drifting up from the plant. Single strands of silver tinsel hung down from the low ceiling and jumped at drafts from the heating vents. Rosemary and I were standing quietly, smiling to the people we knew and shuffling our feet, when she cleared her throat at me.

"Where is he?" I asked her, and she held aloft her cherry punch at her left.

Across the room stood a tall young man with broad shoulders from which any sweater would hang in model evenness, hair that caught the fluorescent office light and sent it back in faded waves, and a face perfectly arranged around a particularly arresting mouth. He was speaking to Rosemary's father, indicating something with his hands.

"Where do you get off noticing his serious eyes?" I asked her. "How long did it take you to get to his eyes?"

His eyes seemed serious, I supposed, but clear as a bell, and kind in disposition.

"I told you," she said.

"You have been holding out on me. You have had this information for days and have not bothered to share it."

"He's coming over here," she said.

Rosemary's father had the young man by the elbow and was leading him our way. Rosemary's father was a good three inches shorter than he was, and had a thick brown beard whose double chin tips were beginning to gray but which did not hide the quivering eggnog smile on his lips. When he reached us he kept one hand on the young man's elbow and put the other on Rosemary's shoulder, making a cozy molecule of the three of them, and I had to step out of the way and back into the punch bowl because the young supervisor was too close to me.

"Buddy, this is my daughter Rosemary," Mr. Fairwell said, jostling Rosemary by her shoulder. "She goes over here to the high school--well, not here, but down in Hope Springs . . . I guess it all seems like here to you, though, don't it?" He clapped the back of Buddy's arm. "She seen you the other night up in your office and didn't know your face, so I thought I'd show you each other."

If Rosemary was horrified she didn't show it. "Nice to meet you," she said, and Buddy took her hand and squeezed it.

"You too," he said.

"Well, son," said Mr. Fairwell, "I didn't like the looks of the last batch of stuff come up from the waste tanks . . . I hate to rush you on your cookies, but. . . ."

"I know," said Buddy, shaking his head quickly. "I need to run and have a look at the bugs."

Mr. Fairwell clapped him on the back again. "That'd be good. Won't take you but fifteen minutes--and let me know what you find."

Buddy nodded. "It was nice meeting you," he said, smiling at Rosemary, and his clear hazel gaze bounced off my forehead as he turned to go.

When he was out of earshot Mr. Fairwell eyed Rosemary through his glasses, which had special safety rims on the frames. "He's too old for you, young lady," he chuckled, and he squeezed her with the hand which had never left her shoulder, and then he was gone.

"I'm Gabriel," I said to the air. "Hi, I'm Gabriel."

Rosemary did not hear me. She was sipping punch at an amazing rate. "He was beautiful," she said, coming up for air but leaving her lips close to the rim of her cup so that the words were mush. "Did you see that?"

I crumpled my empty cup between my fingers and a shard of plastic stabbed me underneath my fingernail. "Yes."

"Now what?" she murmured, her eyes flitting over the walls and the waving tinsel, and she chewed the lip of the cup.

"Well, where is he?"

She paused over the act of chewing her cup for a few moments as if she had not heard me, the great calculations behind her eyes reflected in the way they jumped and fretted across the room. She spoke after some time. "He's taking sludge samples."

"From where?"

She did not look at me; she spoke to the air. "Outside. Then he'd be going to the lab."

"Let's go find him, then," I said. "There's no use standing here by the punch bowl if he's out scooping sludge."

"Gabriel," she whispered through her teeth, her cheeks turning pink at the thought, but there was already a fizzy giggle caught behind her eyes, and her lips trembled.

"Let's go."

"No." She pinched the skin of my elbow, her eyes rolling but caught in a smile she could not shake. "We don't have a pass to get into the plant."

"We'll sneak. The guards aren't at the gate anyway. They're at the vending machines."

"Uh," she grunted helplessly, looking at me finally, and I knew I had her. "Well, *you* have to go first. If you get caught I'm running."

"I can't go first. You know where the sludge is. I've never even been here."

She frowned at me with a smile in her eyes. She set down her cup of punch and slipped past me without a word, and I followed her out the door of the break room, past the people jammed into the front office and down the hallway to a metal door. She looked back over her shoulder, past me, as she took the knob in her hand, and she waited until a couple of the secretaries who had been standing in the hallway smoking went into the ladies' room. She opened the door then and pulled me into the darkness with her.

We were standing in a room too dark for me to see anything, but I sensed its hugeness somehow in the weight of many feet of air above my head, and then when Rosemary quietly spoke her voice soared up to the faraway ceiling and made thin echoes off metal.

"We're going to have to jump off the loading docks," she said, "because we can't get out the front way."

"You've been planning this." My voice hung in the vault of the warehouse. "Is this going to hurt? I don't want to hurt myself."

"You're the one who wanted to find Buddy," she said, her words doubled and triped in the immense space, and she was off toward a speck of light in the distance, a small window in a door across the expanse of the room.

"Wait, I can't see," I complained, following her shadowy shape toward the light. My footsteps made expanding echoes; hers made no sound.

We emerged from the warehouse through the small door and came out onto a tiny concrete pier with no steps down to the ground, the first in a row of twenty such piers, although the rest of them were connected to the building by massive metal sliding doors. Rosemary shut the door behind us. The smell of sulphur was faint in the cold air.

I looked out over the edge. "That's six feet down."

"Yeah," she said, squatting. "The others all have steps but there's no way we can get any of their doors open--they're too huge." She put one hand down on the concrete, keeping her knees bent tight, and swung herself down to the ground. She hit the gravel below with a crunch. "Ouch," she said, but she straightened up and dusted off her hands. She held them up to me. "Jump."

"I'm not jumping into your arms, you big dork."

"I meant take my hands and jump down."

"No way."

"Why not?" she demanded, her breath clouding in the air.

"Because." I turned my back on her and squatted down, placing my hands on the dock, and I lowered myself down against the edge, feet first, until I was resting on my forearms with my legs hanging off the side, belly against the concrete. Then I pushed off from the dock, falling and landing on my feet with too much backward force, and they slipped on the gravel and I fell on my rear end.

"Damn *it*," I screeched, feeling sharp gravel stick its points into my butt. Pain stung my tailbone where I had landed.

Rosemary reached a hand down to help me up, but her eyes were on the plant building across the railyard from the loading docks, lit up and steaming in the night. The giddy smile returned to her face, and as soon as I was standing, she let go of me, and her hands flew to her cheeks. "I can't do this," she said.

"Hell, yes, you can." I wiped gravel dust from my pants. "I didn't bust my ass for nothing."

We started tentatively across the yard, sneaking between the fat brown rusted rail cars which squatted in the dark like portly sentinels and blocked the view of the fields beyond the factory. Rosemary stayed ahead of me, leading with a hesitant step, winding toward a set of rickety metal cylinders near the fence.

"These are the sludge vats," she whispered as we drew near to them. A green bulb glowed over a skeletal emergency shower beside the steps that stood with its pull chain drifting in the

cold breeze. Our faces shone green in its light. "You have to climb the ladder to get to the top."

"Is he up there?" I squinted up at the metal cauldrons.

"You couldn't see him from here," she said. "There's a platform and a walkway up there in between."

"Well, let's go up."

"No!" She squeezed my hand. "What would I say I was doing up there?"

"Rosemary," I said, "there can't be too many plausible reasons for you to be climbing up to the top of a giant tub of sludge. You're just going to have to say hi."

"No!" She giggled softly and put a hand over her eyes. "I can't."

"If he comes down here you're still caught," I said, shivering. "You might as well go up to the top."

"Gabriel, let's go back."

I walked around the side of the contraption to the metal ladder, gauging its steepness in the green light, and I began to climb up. Rosemary remained rooted to the ground.

When I reached the top I saw that the platform was empty. I stepped up onto it and gazed down into three full vats of gurgling, pitch-colored liquid. Thick, dirty foam lapped up onto the platform and I moved my feet so that my shoes would not get wet.

"Buddy, Rosemary loves you," I said loudly, and I heard quick steps begin to clamber up the metal stairs. I hung my head

back over the railing and looked down at Rosemary's head as she raced furiously to the top of the ladder. "He's not up here."

She looked up at me and grunted, stopping in her tracks. "I hope you fall in," she said.

I leaned over the largest vat, balancing on one foot.

"Quit that! Those things are deep."

"And completely putrid." I put my foot on the ground and started back down the ladder. "It stinks up here."

Below me, Rosemary eased down the rungs one at a time and hopped onto the ground. "What did you expect? It's sludge."

"So where's Buddy if he's not stoking the vats?"

"Maybe in the lab."

I stepped down to the ground. "Let's go."

"How could we possibly sneak through there?"

"So what if we get caught? They're not going to deport us."

"They haven't had a safety violation in three years," said Rosemary. "I don't want to mess them up."

"How are we a safety violation? I'm not smuggling sponge secrets to the Russians."

"We're unauthorized visitors. We don't have a pass, and we don't have goggles."

"We already climbed the sludge ladder. In theory we have already committed the crime."

"Gabriel."

"What?"

"Let's go back," she said, but she was eyeing the bright factory with half a smile.

"We won't get caught."

She sighed and started for the bright, beckoning door.

The lab was the first room in the factory itself, a scrubbed chamber with hundreds of tubes and solutions spread about a center island, much like the high school chemistry room I remembered, and the pipes and insulation of the ceiling were exposed. The lab was empty, although a smoldering cigarette lay spitting smoke from a metal ashtray beside the sink. Huge glass cylinders had been set in rows on the counter and were filled with a beige oily liquid; a couple of inches of sediment had collected at the bottom of each. I took one in my hand and rocked it back and forth a little, watching the sediment ooze around and smear the sides of the glass.

"Stop it!" Rosemary whispered, pulling me through the lab by my wrist. "You don't know what that stuff is."

"You don't either."

"I didn't say I did."

The open door at the far end of the lab led onto the factory floor, and Rosemary stuck her head through it to look both ways. Over her shoulder I saw monstrous slabs of uncut sponge, pink and

yellow and blue and green and lavender, stacked in ten-foot piles all along the walls.

"I want to touch those," I said.

"Why?" she whispered, still looking both directions.

"To see what it feels like."

"It feels like sponge." She took my hand and led me through the door.

The factory was a huge metal and concrete vault full of dark pipes and vats and stairways, glistening and rusting and churning, dimly lit but made bright at the edges by the pastels of the sponges. The concrete floor was speckled with bits of something crumbly and orange. The movement that I saw was all automated and slow, the grinding of axles and the spinning of wheels; I saw no one.

"Where is everybody?" I asked Rosemary as we ducked behind a vat.

"I don't know."

"Where are we going?"

"Buddy's office is at the other end, in the cutting room."

We slipped around the curved surface of the giant tank to a set of steep metal stairs, the edges of whose steps were painted a cautionary yellow, leading to a platform of more vats and gadgets. Another green bulb glowed over an emergency shower by the metal railing.

"Maybe if we climb to the top we can see him, if he's out on the floor," I said.

"I don't know what's up there," she said.

"Tanks, vats, chemicals would be my guess."

"Let's don't."

I rolled my eyes and started up the stairs, and Rosemary fell in behind me; we each tried not to clang as we ascended but it didn't really matter because the noise and echo of the grinding, steaming machines was deafening.

A fat gurgle came from the inside of the tank at the top of the stairs; its top appeared to be open but rubber flaps hung down from a metal framework and hid the top. I peeled away one of the flaps to look. A jet of water sprayed down into the vat from a spigot overhead. Inside was a huge, juicy, quivering orange mass that was being sloshed and shuffled by some unseen blades in the bottom. I leaned into the vat to get a better look.

"Get out of there!" Rosemary pulled me up by the collar. "There are people coming."

I heard the warning bell of a loading cart as it approached, and Rosemary and I ducked behind the tank and sat huddled on the platform, in the dark shadows, faintly green.

"This is stupid," she said into my ear. I could barely see her face.

I sat facing the wall, straining to focus in the dark. I was up high enough to gaze down into the sponge stacks, all the colors of spring muted in the dark corners of the factory, and as

I looked, something sparkled up at me, a tiny glint in between the pink and the green stacks.

"Do you see that?" I elbowed Rosemary. I tried to point at the dull periodic flash among the sponges, but it was fleeting and seemed to change distance.

She narrowed her eyes and got up on her knees to peer down through the metal bars at the sponge stacks. "I saw something."

My eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark, and I watched the area around the sparkle materialize; as it flashed intermittently I realized that something small was catching the dull green light from the emergency shower bulb. I kept watching, and I saw movement; I saw the whiteness of a shirt; I saw two heads duck into each other and back out again; I saw a hand spread its fingers wide against a broad back and move down until a diamond caught dull green light and carelessly flung it back to me.

"Oh, my God," I said to Rosemary. "Have you focused yet?"

She was still hunched forward, her lips parted and her eyebrows furrowed. "I can't. . . ."

The bell from the cart continued to sound. I saw tall blonde hair being pressed into a wall of sponge, and I saw a blouse shoved up past the bra as a dark head moved in close. "You better hurry up if you don't want to miss anything."

Rosemary's eyes remained narrowed, and then they opened wide.

"I suppose we should hold still," I said, "because I imagine their eyes are adjusted to the dark by now."

"They're supposed to be packaging *sponges*," Rosemary gasped.

"Well, honestly, which would you rather be doing?" I couldn't keep my eyes off the shadowy heads.

Rosemary spun around and sat down, giggling. "Well, quit looking, why don't you?"

I turned around slowly, frowning.

"We have to get out of here," she said. "I mean, they're screwing. I don't want to be sitting up here."

"We can't go down," I said. "I still hear the cart. And I'm sure they're making love, not screwing."

Rosemary put her face in her hands and started to laugh. Her shoulders shook.

"Well, don't start that," I said. I was feeling the urge to laugh myself, and I rubbed my eyes.

Rosemary crawled around to the edge to scope out a possible course. "We'll never get all the way to the cutting room. Let's just climb down and go back through the lab. This time I mean it."

"Hell, no! Let's go to the cutting room and see who's missing from their shift and bust these two deserters."

"Can you see their faces?" she asked me. "I won't look."

I hung my head down through the railing and stared, but all I could really see was hair.

"Don't gawk," Rosemary said. "All it's gonna take is for one of them to open their eyes."

"I can't see anything. Let's just go."

We stood up--I looked back down into the stacks, Rosemary did not--and edged down the ladder, watching for carts, then sprang around the back of the vats and into the lab through the open door.

Leaning over a microscope, right there beside the door, was Buddy.

He straightened up and stared us down through his plastic goggles, and I stepped back through the door, but Rosemary grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

"What are you two doing in here?"

Rosemary was blushing, in two soft streaks under her luminous eyes. "I was looking for my dad. . . ."

"You don't have permission to be in the lab," Buddy said. He was looking at Rosemary and not at me; he had a cup of hot chocolate with Christmas sprinkles beside his microscope. "Your dad's still in the front office. And you can't be in here without eye protection."

Rosemary shut her eyes. "Safety violations."

"Who's patrolling the sponges tonight?" I piped up. "There's something you might want to check out in the pink section."

Buddy looked at me for a second, and then back at Rosemary. He rolled his eyes. "I have to write this up."

"I'm sorry," she said.

Buddy seemed to be tapping his tongue against the back of his teeth, and he sighed, and he looked Rosemary in the eyes. There was a faint smile in his expression. "I still have to write it up."

Rosemary ran one finger across the clean black marble of the island countertop. "Gabriel wasn't kidding--there's somebody in the stacks."

Buddy looked out through the door and then back at Rosemary. "You'll have to come to my office. The forms are up there."

"We didn't do anything," I protested. "I mean, I don't have goggles on, but there are people out there having sex, for God's sake, and the goggles were probably the first things to come off."

"You don't have to come," Buddy said to me. "I just need one of you to sign at the bottom, to take responsibility."

"What do you mean?" I cried. "I was doing more than she was! I even looked into a vat I wasn't supposed to!" I looked to Rosemary for support, but the color of her cheeks was deepening to a sweet crimson, and the look she returned to me was unreadable.

"Fine," I said, "I'm going."

That was how Rosemary began her year-and-a-half-long tenure with Buddy Scurlock--as an official threat to the safety of Futures Sponge Enterprises, a form filed away neatly in the office of a shift supervisor. He did not hit her until April.

When I pulled into the gravel lot behind the Quik-Mart, Rosemary's car was already there. I turned off the motor and got out of my car and went over to the driver's side window. Rosemary, who was sitting with her forehead against the steering wheel, cracked her window just a slit without moving her head and said, "Come around and sit in the car."

I did as I was told, and when I shut the door behind me Rosemary turned to look at me.

"Oh, crap," I said.

"No kidding, crap." She had a pink welt under her eye the size of the tip of her finger, and her eyeball was red as a beet. "I told you he'd find out about the party."

"Don't say `I told you' to me," I said, touching the welt gingerly with one thumb, examining it to see if there was a knot.

"That hurts," she said, recoiling. "There's no knot."

"Well, at least it doesn't look like you got into a fight," I offered. "You could say you just walked into a door."

"Sideways?" she snorted.

"Well?"

"My parents are pissed off." A silver glimmer was forming in her eyes. "They're so mad. They were already fighting and I was trying to sneak out but they saw me."

"What were they fighting about?"

"I wasn't paying attention," she said dully.

"So they know Buddy did this?"

"Of course they know Buddy did this," she said. "They're not stupid." She paused a moment. "Yes, they are. They're stupid."

"Did he do it today?" A tear ran out onto her welt and I brushed it off.

Rosemary sucked her mouth into a tiny wad and bit her lips. "He was waiting for me when I got home last night from taking you back--which, think about that for a minute."

"You were in Jamie Pinedweller's truck."

"Exactly."

"Well, was he just sitting in your driveway? I know your parents wouldn't let him in the house."

She sniffed. "His truck was parked down the road, and he was sitting on the porch in the shadows where I wouldn't see him."

"He's getting mighty sophisticated," I observed.

"Well, he didn't hit me last night," she said. "I explained to him about how I ended up with the truck and he believed me, and I promised him I'd see him today if he'd just go away."

I threw up my hands.

"Don't preach at me," she snapped.

"I didn't say a word."

"You would have done the same thing."

"I'm sorry to have to point this out," I said, "but if you don't cut the cord he's never going to go away."

She sucked in her lips again. "Jamie's mama brought him by to get his truck this morning on their way to church. She looked pretty mad."

"So you saw Buddy today?" I asked her.

"I went to his house after church--oh, I told Mom I was at your grandmaw's, if she asks--and he was just in a bad mood. He said he had to fire a couple of people at work last night who never made quota. And then, so, I, I don't know, he started asking me about the party all over again, only this time he didn't believe me, that I wasn't there with Jamie."

I fiddled with my hair. "So when did he do it?"

She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know, somewhere in there."

"Somewhere in there."

"Well, it was almost like he didn't even mean it, he just kind of had me by the arm, and then it just happened--it wasn't like any of the other times."

"Well," I said, "you realize that you are not going to see him anymore."

"Yeah," she said, her eyes roving out over the highway.

"But you told him. . . ."

"I told him," she said, "that we'd work it out later."

I slunk down in my seat. "*Rosemary*."

"Shut up," she said.

"Shut up yourself."

She laid her head on my shoulder then, and began to cry in earnest, and I put my arm around her as she shook but I turned my head away.

Some guys in our grade at school that were hanging out in front of the Quik-Mart, flipping quarters and drinking Sun-drop, wandered around to the gravel lot to throw some empty bottles in the trash dumpster, and they saw us sitting in Rosemary's car. One of them came over to Rosemary's side and tapped on the glass.

She straightened up and dabbed at her tears with her long fingers, and rolled down the window. "Hey," she said to him.

"What happened to you?" he asked. He did not say anything to me or even look at me, and the other boys crowded around behind him.

Rosemary shrugged.

He made a mock fist and popped it into his other palm, shaking his head, posturing for Rosemary and for the others. "If he so much as shows his face around here, I'll kick the shit out of him."

Rosemary looked uncomfortable, but she smiled and looked down at her knees.

"I mean it," he said, and the other boys behind him struggled to look mature.

"Okay," she said.

"Do you want us to stay here while you're here?" he asked her.

"Buddy's not hiding in the bushes," I said. The boy looked over at me for the first time. "It's all under control."

"Well, we're here if you need us," he said to Rosemary.

"Okay," she said, and she rolled up her window.

In my next world where the trees would have no roots I would not be alone. How could I not have thought that she would always be there, lingering over my shoulder, floating in my mouth like the taste of blood?

"You need to go home," I said.

"I know."

I twirled my keys around my finger, listening to them clink against each other. She inclined her head to watch me, patiently. "I have to get the car back," I said.

"Okay."

"Call me later or something," I said. "Especially if your parents throw a fit."

"All right."

I got out of the car and shut the door.

I drove the mile and a half to the ballpark with my eye on the sky, which was darkening in the south. I parked in the gravel lot next to the woods, where the pine tops poked their pointy heads into the low corners of the sky--I saw the lightning sparking there, lighting up the heavy black bowels of the storm

clouds and chasing itself along the rims of the thunderheads, and I whispered a short prayer for rain into the sticky air.

The gate beside the dugout squeaked when I opened it. The ballfield was empty because formal practice was not allowed on Sunday, and as the wind swooped down into the diamond I smelled the ingredients of lightning coming together. Home plate was barely dusty and so I sat down right on top of it.

I saw the bridge in my mind as clearly as if I had been the first one to fashion it on paper and map its supports--it was the shape of me, waiting for me beyond the keenest curve of the old highway. The kudzu rolled over and over, down into the water and up again into the trees, a collective soldier on the quiet march, one eternal tortuous path of thirst, a green sea drowning out the sounds of fire and of metal twisting. The thick green silence could only be cut by the roar of sirens which would wake the carnival crowd from their revery of Sno-Kones, and then they would come. Young and old borne on the wind of gossip, they would appear at the rails unable to cope with what they had been told; I heard the thin, echoing voices of little girls playing jump-rope: Poor little Gabriel, never been kissed, Number one hundred on Johnny's list, Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-six. . . .

I lay back into the dirt as the rain began to come down and the mumblings of remote thunder became the voice of an overhead storm. The wind picked restively at the dark tops of the pines. I didn't move. The rain spattered around me at first, making

separate sounds in the dirt, but quickly soaked everything through as it began to pour. When I was completely wet, I got up and got back into the car. I got mud on my father's seat.

When I reached my house the rain was torrential. Streams were pouring from the peaks of the eaves down the roof to the porch on all sides of the house. I stayed in the garage and cleaned the mud out of the driver's seat. As I scrubbed it out, the rain came harder, in sheets that spilled over the rooftop and slapped against the walls in a slow and regular rhythm. Thunder growled from a very great distance away, and I watched through the window, from the inside.

Chapter Eight

The beauty shop has a new floor. It's green-and-white-checked, with sparkly glue in the cracks, and quite pretty to look at--but, Lord, was it expensive, and now the hairdresser wonders if she'll ever get it paid off. It's cheaper to cut hair in the back of her house, like she does, instead of paying rent along the highway, but there were too many cherries last summer, and peaches, and apples in September, and so everybody keeps trying to pay her with preserves. She has her own cherries and apples and peaches and pears and nectarines and grapes, out back, cain't people see that? But every week it's a whole new shelf full of jelly, with gingham-covered lids and bright labels, and her new floor already has black marks from where the grandkids pulled their red wagon under the cutting chair and through the sitting area. She raised the price of a haircut from five to eight, and a perm from twenty to twenty-five, and even put a sign up so people would know, but still it's jelly and juice out her ears. After five o'clock, when she closes up the shop, she smudges at the black marks with her toe and tells herself she's going to have to be more assertive.

Chapter Nine

She pitted the cherries and thought of him. He was gone to Nashville again with the four best horses; the children were all out in the fields and in the barn, gathering and tidying, and the kitchen was her own space. She thought of the breakfast they'd had before the sun came up and brought the children downstairs, the smell and bigness of him looming just across the table as if she could just reach out and touch him. She couldn't, of course.

The night before, when she'd crept back into the bed, there were no words, only a certain softness about his hard edges which she pretended to ignore, and a gruff and ragged breathiness as the ultimate closeness approached. Then there was the moment she wanted to hold still for, to keep as a souvenir--but it would drain away, the closeness bleeding away into separateness with each increasingly regular breath as silence fell and he moved away from her, looking for sleep. Then in the morning he had left for Nashville, her thoughts following him like marionette strings she could not pull, and he never so much as looked back over his shoulder.

Only this morning, pitting cherries, there was the unmistakable feeling of fullness, of unwelcome culmination. She would not know for weeks but she knew now. This was the sixth time, the sixth bead on an endless string, oh Mother Mary. In her mind she traveled back to that moment, back to where she had asked for one thing and got another, combing it for the missing pieces.

She looked out the window at the green sea of wheat rolling in the wind. Suddenly all the world seemed to be an endless cycle of green and gold, of budding and shriveling fruit, her house and her self swallowed up in an ocean of wheat and the blood-red juice of the cherry staining her white hands. Tears rained into her bowl, until she told herself to quit being silly and start thinking about having pies ready for the evening. She heard the children calling gladly from the fields to each other, over the wind.

Chapter Ten

I didn't have to go to school the next morning--seniors were out the entire week before graduation. It was the last day of sixth grade for Michael, who had to go and pick up his report card. It was a strange feeling to wake up with weak sun on my face and the smells of leftover rain drifting through the screen, knowing high school was now only photo albums and that these smells meant new things. The trees outside my window stood nested in new growth, the same shapes I always remembered, throwing the same shadows onto the driveway and roof and lawn, and I was not going back to high school. I smelled the heaviness of fruit coming in the cherry trees outside, and in the orchard behind the house. Our land, ours since the first Sullivan drew up his portion in August County, spread out all around the house, newly green. For a while after I awoke I lay beneath the quilt whose smell I knew like my own--it was my own--and was unable to get out of the bed, until I heard the sounds of late morning beginning downstairs--my mother picking up what was left of Daddy's and Michael's breakfasts, running water in the sink, pulling a load of hot, sweet-smelling towels out of the dryer. It was a long time before I actually got up to get dressed.

I had an appointment at Ruby James's beauty shop to have my hair trimmed at eleven o'clock. Ruby was a large woman with a headful of tight gray curls which looked like she had never bothered to lift a comb to her permanent. She did my mama's hair, and Granny's, and always had, as far back as I could

remember. She lived on the far side of Pickensville, but I didn't really mind driving through there in the daytime, on the main highway.

As I was driving to Ruby's, I passed Hope Springs High on the highway south, where large sections of the gravel parking lot were now vacant, the front row where the seniors parked their cars and big trucks and postured in the early mornings now occupied with the vehicles of rising juniors anxious to fill their spaces. It was all over. I could have gone in and hung around the halls, pestering the teachers and taunting the juniors like most of the seniors would do, but I didn't want to.

I passed through the southern city limit on the straight main highway, where the land sloped gradually back into hills again and the trees wound all about and blocked out most of the sky. Pickensville lay between the hills, its ragged, peeling wood and junk metal stark in the sunlight after the rain. I passed through it without being afraid. Whoever fell through the cracks in Hope Springs landed in Pickensville, amid the gray clusters of trailers in the holler or the ancient and sagging frame houses in the center of town. Most of the three hundred people in Pickensville were on welfare; the ones who worked mostly put in time at Futures when hiring was up, or turned dusty white working in the stone quarries outside of town. At night Pickensville erupted sometimes in the sounds of gunfire, or the dull smack of flesh on flesh--but sometimes it didn't erupt at

all, it just sat there in the dark, and those were the nights when you least wanted to be there.

Guys used to take their girlfriends parking out near the gully that Pickensville was built into, milking the fear in order to get themselves at least partially laid, until one spring a couple was shot at in the middle of doing springtime bird-and-bee-type things. It was a farmer from Alabama that did it, drinking in Pickensville with some quarry workers, and he didn't hit anything but the car tires, but nobody went parking there anymore anyway.

Jerry Dog Wilson lived in a house on the main highway, one of the only nice, two-story brick houses in the vicinity, his green striped lawn running smack into the weed-swallowed field next to the tiny building that was the city hall. Jerry Dog was also an electrician, made more money than anyone in Pickensville, and as mayor never turned his energy toward so much as hiring someone to mow the yard in front of the Pickensville post office.

Ruby lived on a dirt road about a mile east of Pickensville. Her house was old, one of those with a concrete porch and asbestos shingles built just after the first World War; she'd had the shingles replaced with blue vinyl siding that was a much brighter blue on an entire house than it had been as a swatch in a sample book. An old mattress frame rusted in Ruby's yard, tall grass spilling out the center of it where Pickensville kids threw their beer cans at night, but for some reason I liked the looks

of it. It had always been there, skinny cats twining in and out of the rusty coils and depositing kittens there each spring.

The beauty shop itself was a converted tool shed in the back yard, with the word "Ruby's" and a gaggle of bow-clad geese stenciled on the wooden door. Inside, the walls were covered with the country pictures Ruby collected. Most of them featured cows or pigs or sheep with bows or bonnets, or sayings that rhymed, or didn't. The one that I remember had a teddy bear with a blue bow sitting on the toilet with a clothespin on its nose, and it said, "BEAR bottoms welcome here, but don't leave things unBEARable for your neighbor." There was no bathroom in Ruby's beauty shop but she thought the picture was so precious that she hung it up anyway, on the wall by the phone.

When I turned into Ruby's driveway there was only one car there besides Ruby's, which was a good sign because a simple haircut at Ruby's was something that could take all day. The car belonged to Annie Davidson, a woman with brown wrinkled skin and a generous blond puff of hair who worked at the post office and made appliqued T-shirts for the gift shop in Hope Springs. She had her hair done at Ruby's at least twice a week.

I got out of the car and slammed the door, and two cats sprang from the mattress frame and shot into the far corner of Ruby's porch. I heard the thin mew of kittens.

When I opened the door of the shop, Annie was perched on the swivel seat in front of the mirror, her curlers just removed, with Ruby poking a long pink comb into the topmost curl. Pearl

Watkins was hunched forward on the loveseat in the corner. Pearl was Ruby's neighbor from across the road and she stayed in the beauty shop all day even when she wasn't having her hair done.

"Well, hey, Gabriel," Ruby said, waving her comb at me. "Sit down. Pearl, scoot over."

"That's okay, stay where you are," I said, sitting down in one of the dryer chairs and throwing the plastic bubble over the back.

"It's just as well I don't move," said Pearl, shaking her head. She had a set of curls identical to Ruby's, uncombed so you could see the scalp between, but they were more blue-silver than gray. "I been down in my back ever sincet I moved them blocks off my porch."

"Well, what on earth did you do that for?" asked Ruby, stretching Ann's curl as far out as it would go and ratting it down with the pink comb. "Ain't Harold good for nothing?"

"That's exactly it," said Pearl Lou. "He ain't good for a single thing. I been telling him I want them blocks off my porch for two months straight, cause you cain't swing in the swing cause they's in your way, but he won't get up out of his chair."

"And you been sick," said Annie. "You don't need to be lifting stuff off of your porch when you been sick."

"Amen," said Pearl Lou. "Just two weeks sincet I was a-coughing and a-gagging, a-coughing and a-gagging, one *foot* and a knee in the grave, and Harold *still* won't move blocks off my porch."

"Gabriel," said Ruby, "is the shirt Annie's got on not the sweetest thing you ever saw?" She wheeled Annie around to face me, ratting deftly with the comb the entire time without stopping. Annie's T-shirt had giant pink buttons sewn around the collar, with gingham flower petals around each one. Annie smiled at me with her lips closed. She fingered the petals slowly.

"That's pretty," I said. "Did you make it?"

"Oh, yeah," Annie said, waving her hand, her head jerking to the side sharply as Ruby got into a strong rhythm of snarling. "It didn't take but maybe five minutes."

"And I wisht," sighed Ruby, "I could get out in the sun and get as dark as you, Annie. You have the prettiest coloring I ever saw. Course, that dark a brown with this gray hair--yuck." She started to laugh.

"Color it," said Annie. "I ain't still blond as a gift of God, you know."

"Well, Law," said Ruby. "If I got me some blond hair then I'd have to start getting rid of this gut, too. That's just too much for me to think about."

Pearl turned to me stiffly, careful of her back. "Gabriel," she said, casting a wary eye to Ruby, who nodded solemnly, "we heard something."

I raised my eyebrows.

"About that Fairwell girl you run around with," said Annie.

"Rosemary?" I asked.

Pearl nodded. "Is it true that her boyfriend ain't no good?"

"We heard he hit her yesterday," said Annie. "I mean, that he hit her yesterday--we heard it this morning, from Lila Sharp, when she come in for a dye, but of course she's told stuff before that was just air."

"Well, the other day she did tell that about Sheila Farmer having a baby," offered Ruby, "and that was true."

"Sheila Farmer is having a *baby*?" Annie's eyes grew wide.

"Did I not tell you? They was getting a divorce," said Ruby, "but Bruce, he found out she was expecting and he bought her a house so she'd stay."

"That is true," said Pearl, nodding her head slowly. "I talked to Sheila about it."

"Which," said Ruby, "what is he gone do next time she gets the itch to leave?"

"I'd be picking me out a car I wanted," said Annie. "If I was Sheila."

"That is heinous," said Pearl. "Marriage has gone downhill because people don't feel like they got to work for nothing, and I think it's just sad."

"I didn't say it wasn't sad," sniffed Annie.

"Times now is the worst," said Pearl, closing her eyes. "I been reading Isaiah, read it twicet last week, and I believe it's telling me times now is the worst and we ought to be looking for the reign of God."

"I think every generation thinks theirs is the worst," I said.

Pearl snorted with great fervor but her eyes remained closed. "Sex everywhere, now. It's all they talks about on TV." She sat up suddenly and opened her eyes, imbued with the fire of inspiration, and she pointed a finger at me. "The way I see it, God give you your sex, you can choose whether to be a lady or a slut."

I watched her ease back into her seat and close her eyes.

"Pearl, you should be a preacher," said Ruby, nodding with conviction.

"I don't know nothing about that," said Pearl quietly, "but I believe we was talking about the little Fairwell girl."

"Did he hit her?" Annie asked me, her head bobbing.

"Well. . . ."

"Oh," said Pearl, letting her jaw drop, "is she not telling people about it?"

"Well, not yet," I said.

Pearl leaned forward, stroking her chin with her hand. She spoke tightly, matter-of-factly. "I don't see why she don't call the police on him. It ain't the first time, is it?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well, who is the boy?" asked Annie. "Buddy something, is all I heard."

"Scurlock," I said. "He's from Nashville--he came down here when Futures took over."

"Well, I believe it," said Pearl. "I didn't reckon he was from around here."

"No telling what might come out of the city," agreed Ruby, pulling Annie's rat's nest out in wide swaths. "She needs to find her somebody here that'll treat her right. I mean, she's a real cute little girl."

"Lord, yes," said Annie. "She's one you stop and look at."

"In my eyes," said Pearl, "the city ain't good for much of nothing. There's just stuff that goes on there that shouldn't. And I don't trust nobody--really, you know--who growed up there."

"Well, now, I don't know about that," said Annie.

"I said, in my eyes," Pearl repeated. "I mean, for one thing, that crazy music they listen to, that--what is it, that stuff the blacks do?"

"Rap music," said Annie. "My youngest kind of likes it, but I tell him he better not have it on when I'm in the house."

"That's just dangerous," said Pearl. "It ain't Christian."

"God's truth," Ruby said, emphasizing each word with a jab of the pink comb into Annie's hair. "I'm telling you, Gabriel, you better be careful when you go off to school. Ain't no telling what kind of mess goes on there."

"Yes, ma'am," Pearl said. "You know, I would of gone to school myself, but I don't like to go so far, never did, and a girl can get into all kinds of trouble. And I figure, God put me here, you know, not in the city, and so. . . ." She put her

hands up in the air to suggest the unassailability of the point, easing back into the loveseat.

"It's like the same thing with the moon," said Ruby. "I don't think we ought to be messing with what God didn't mean for us to see--I mean, people riding rockets to the moon! Good Lord! If God had meant for us to see the dern moon, he would of put it down here."

"Exactly," said Pearl.

"Oh, we almost forgot!" breathed Annie, her head wiggling under the bobbing comb. "Tell Gabriel where we're going, Ruby."

"Oh, oh, oh," Ruby said, casting her eyes to the ceiling, and then looking at me. "The three of us is going to see the Atlanta Braves!"

"No kidding," I said.

"Well, not till the end of June," said Pearl.

"We're spending five days," said Annie. "Going to Six Flags, too."

"I cain't wait," said Ruby. "Red's done been to a game oncet, and he says it ain't what I think from watching on TV, but I told him, I says, I don't care what you think I like or don't, I been watching them Braves ever night they's on Channel 11 since I don't know when, and if he thinks Annie and Pearl are going and I ain't, he's crazy." She rolled her eyes. "Now, Annie, do you want to fix this yourself, or do you want me to spray it and everything for you?" She was picking out the last curl as she spoke.

"You do it," replied Annie. "You got the touch."

"Oh, Lordy," said Ruby. "That reminds me. I got to show y'all this." She put the pink comb down and opened the closet door behind her. She reached in with both hands and took out a mammoth aerosol can, and when she set it down on her marbled countertop it made a heavy echo. "Cain't hardly get one hand around it."

"What on earth?" Ann looked skeptically at the can.

"It is hairspray," replied Ruby, nodding her head gravely as Annie stared in disbelief, "it is hairspray."

"That," said Annie, "is the biggest blame can of anything I ever saw in my whole life."

"Cain't hardly pick it up to spray it," admitted Ruby. "But I's going through a can every three customers as it was, so I ordered the jumbo size from the book, and help me if they didn't send me a dern *tub* of hairspray."

"It looks like varnish," said Annie. "I expect it's varnish and I hope you ain't spraying it on my head."

"Well, I am, Annie Davidson," said Ruby. "I done used some on Lila and Pearl so I know it ain't varnish." She took up the comb again and used the skinny end to tease the curls into a single smooth unit around Annie's head.

"So, Gabriel," said Ruby as she worked, "we been hearing that Michael's the best pitcher in Little League this year."

"He thinks he is," I said. "But Jerry Dog's kid is okay, too."

Annie turned sharply in her swivel seat. "You don't say."

"That man is a character," said Ruby. She manned the giant can of spray and began to apply the contents to Annie's head in a generous cloud.

"That man cheats at baseball," said Annie, wincing and reaching out from under her plastic barber's smock to scratch her nose. "My youngest played his last year when Abram had just come up out of the minors, and I swear, there was all kind of trouble."

"He's already got Peanut fired this year," I said, "or he's trying to."

Annie threw up her hands underneath the smock. "And who's going to call the plate, then?"

"Umps that Nashville sends down," I said, "I guess."

"I feel sorry for Peanut, then," Annie said. "That's all that man has to do in the summer, and his wife's dead, and all, and those kids are all the kids he's got."

"Jerry Dog said Peanut would be partial," I said, "because there's a Springer on our team."

"Good God," said Pearl. "Whose team don't have a Springer?"

"Somebody ought to do something," said Annie.

Ruby set down the can of hairspray awkwardly and worked her fingers lightly in Annie's wet hair. "Pearl, would you wash Gabriel's hair for me?"

"I declare," Annie said. "You're finished with me?"

"No, crazy woman," said Ruby. "If you went out now your hair'd fly right off your head. I hadn't finished spraying."

"Well, I thought."

I got up out of my seat and went to the sink chair with Pearl at my heels. As I sat down and leaned back, I remembered how when I was younger I dreaded having my hair washed at Ruby's. It had hurt my neck because I was too short to fit comfortably into the groove in the sink designed to accommodate the person being washed. Now that I was older and taller, the only painful part was Pearl's fingernails in my scalp.

Pearl started the water and ran the sprayer through my hair. "Well, Gabriel, guess who I talked to at the Bi-Rite Friday?"

"Who?"

"Doris Carson. And let me say that she is just tickled about you and her boy."

Spray was getting into my eyes and I winced. "There is no me and her boy."

Pearl squeezed a hefty dollop of apple shampoo into her open palm and slapped it onto the top of my head. "Doris says he sent you flowers. Now, Gabriel, Booley is a sweet boy and you better treat him nice. He goes to church every Sunday, out here at Mount Horeb."

"Well, she's Catholic, Pearl." Annie's voice was blurred by the spray of water in my ears.

"Now when did y'all go out?" I heard Ruby call to me. "I heard he took you to the movies."

"Where did you hear that?" I asked. I strained to see Ruby as Pearl began to work up a lather. "I didn't go out with him."

"Well, if Glenda didn't tell me that I'm crazy," said Ruby.

"I wouldn't believe anything Glenda told me," said Annie. "And don't tell her I said that."

"I'm not going out with him," I said.

"Y'all make a sweet couple," said Pearl. "Doris just thinks you're so smart."

"Lord help, Pearl," said Annie. "She said they ain't going out."

My neck was aching suddenly like it used to. Pearl planted the sprayer in my scalp and turned it on high, blasting away the shampoo in a fraction of a second. She slid a towel underneath my hair and eased me to a sitting position, twisting the towel tightly into a turban so that my skin turned pink at the hairline.

The air was misty with the remnants of a hairspray cloud which floated about the arms of the swivel chair. Annie was already up and by the door, dusting off the neck of her appliqued T-shirt with her hands.

"Thank you so much, Ruby," she said. "I'll bring the check by tomorrow after Kenneth gets paid." She stopped a moment. "Or it might be Wednesday. See y'all." She let the door slam behind her.

"Sure," Ruby said to the empty room, sweeping the curlers she'd used in Annie's hair into the top drawer of the vanity table.

I got up and sat in the swivel chair and looked in the mirror. I hated having my head wrapped up in a towel because there was nothing but my naked face there in the mirror. I tried to watch Ruby instead.

She pumped up the chair with her foot and removed the towel from my hair, wrapping it around my neck and fastening it with a clip before she slipped the plastic robe over my head. "Well, Gabriel, there's this girl at work who has the cutest hair. She has a crimpy perm, *you* know, and she blow-dries it upside down, and then she just teases her bangs, like, from one side, you know? And it's ready to go. Five minutes. I could cut yours like hers."

"Well. . . ." I paused. "I really just wanted a trim. I can't blow-dry my hair anyway, or use much hairspray."

"You do have the derndest hair," Ruby said, drawing the pink comb with some difficulty across my crown. "I got a good straightener that would fix it easy."

"No, thanks."

She began partitioning my hair off into sections and securing them with clips of different colors. As she dipped her scissors and comb into the jar of blue fluid, it occurred to me that it was a good thing that Annie had left and Pearl was winding down, because Ruby had a tendency to cut with abandon

when she was gossiping. That was how Page had ended up striped, after all.

She ran her fingers through my hair, frowning.

"Yours is just not quite as curly as they're wearing it," she mused, beginning to snip the ends from each section, "but it's too curly to be straight, you cain't blow-dry it, and it won't take spray. Child, I'm glad I ain't you."

When my mama and I arrived at the ballpark later that day, Tee-Ball was just over and the kids were filing off the field, tromping through the mud from last night's rain, their cleats already heavy with the red muck between the bases. Dizzy blossoms were falling from the poplar trees. It was cooler than it had been before, and although it was sunny after the storm, the light was strange. The sky was white and filmy and tangled in the trees. The Tee-Ball players crowded into the narrow area between the home plate fence and the concessions stand, belligerently demanding their free Cokes. Cody's mama was working the stand today, shouting orders for more burgers, stoutly positioned behind her stomach.

We saw Lo-rene Putman sitting on the Pirates' side, and so we went to sit behind her. She was dressed in shorts that barely covered her rear end, spiders of blue creeping along her exposed

joints, her hair pulled back into an electric blue banana clip. She was browner than when I'd last seen her.

"Hey, y'all," she said. "Storm got the scoreboard, they cain't make it work."

The board, positioned high over left field, was flashing on and off in the spaces where the balls, strikes, outs, innings, and scores were supposed to be. The only part of the sign that remained still was the somber painted placard at the top which read, "Casey Black Memorial Field," in honor of a Hope Springs Little League right-fielder once killed by a drunk driver while riding his bicycle home from ball practice.

"How you been, Clare?" said Lo-rene to my mother.

"Fine," said my mama. "You look like you've lost some weight."

Lo-rene smiled and demurely pulled at the edges of her short shorts. "Does it look it? I tell you, I been walking like a crazy woman."

Two of the other mothers turned around to look. "Lo-rene, you use any of that Slim-Fast?" one of them asked.

"Lord, no," she said. "I heard that stuff's just like a fart in a can."

The mothers giggled.

"It'll blow your insides up like a balloon," the woman agreed. "I tried it."

"It says on the TV commercial there ain't no drugs in it, anyway," the other woman said. "I need to do something myself, but I don't know what's good and what's not."

"I tell you what." Another woman who had been listening spoke up. "If I had a thousand dollars, I'd just let 'em cut it off of me." They all laughed. "That's the only way my stomach would leave me. It's been with me longer than my husband," she said.

"I'm telling you, go walking," said Lo-rene. "It feels good, and my legs look young, if I do say so myself."

That was the last moment, you see, if you divide my life into what came before and what came after, as I inevitably do--the first phase of my life ended on a bit of dietary advice. Are you awake? Are you listening?

The Pirates were taking first warm-ups, and as they came out onto the field, someone came with them that I had never seen before.

No, I *had* seen him before.

He took one of the aluminum bats, not one of the wooden ones, and a baseball, and stepped to the plate to hit practice balls for the fielders. He was tall, and skinny, with a crooked mouth and a nose that on first glance seemed too big but grew smaller with each passing second as I stared. The bat grew from his hands and moved only with the muscles of his forearms and shoulders.

Lo-rene tapped me on the knee with her hand. Her giant wedding ring slipped around on her finger, and the stone setting poked my skin.

"Get a gander at that boy, Gabriel," she said.

"Who is he?" I pulled at my hair and kept my eyes on Lo-rene.

"Wayne's nephew," she said. "Look at them *arms*." She toyed with the edges of her shorts again, running her hands across the tops of her thighs as if to smooth them.

I nodded.

My brother was taking first base that night; Tanner McDonald was pitching. My daddy and Wayne were saving Michael for the Jays' game on Thursday. Michael stood off the bag, crouched forward and primed to field, his cleats dug into the mud. The boy that I did not know called to him.

"First base!" he yelled, in a low and clear voice without a Tennessee accent. He tossed the baseball up, never taking his eye off the ball, and cracked it between the bags with the bat. I watched the ball draw a connection from him to my brother.

Michael lunged to his right, slammed a glove on the ball, and fired it back home.

"There you go, Michael!" the boy called, and lofted the ball up again. "Second base!"

Wayne Barfield was standing by the dugout, arms folded, nodding his head and spitting occasional brown rockets into the dirt. "Way to be there, Michael!"

"I swear, watch them arms," breathed Lo-rene. "That boy is all muscle."

"Lo-rene," chided one of the mothers. "Jimmy'd spank you if he heard you talk."

"Well, if Jimmy'd spank me I wouldn't talk." Lo-rene tucked a stiffly sprayed strand of hair that had fallen out of the banana clip behind her ear.

The mothers tittered.

"What's his name?" asked one of them.

"I don't know," said Lo-rene, taking in the warm-up ounce by ounce with her eyes. "Wayne's sister married a Crawford, from Boliver, but I don't even know where they moved to."

My mama nudged me. "He is cute," she whispered into my ear.

I shrugged. My nose was prickling and I started to braid the ends of my hair.

Lo-rene's grandson Jared was in right field, a skinny mite of a ballplayer with a blond rattail curling down almost to the number on the back of his uniform. Wayne's nephew tapped a lazy pop short of where the boy stood. "Jared, it's yours!"

Jared started forward, then stopped, then backed up, then stopped, gloved arm outstretched, and the ball fell to the ground three feet in front of him.

"Aw, Jared!" Lo-rene stood up, pulling the cuffs of her shorts down behind her. "Pay attention!"

The mothers giggled.

"That's okay, Jared," the boy called. "Keep your eye on the ball."

Over by the concessions stand, Peanut Springer had brought himself a lawn chair and was sitting over by the burger grill, forward in his seat and elbows on his knees, much as he would sit on his bench downtown to smoke with the other old men. He was watching the warm-up with blank eyes. Some of the Little League fathers were standing around him, discussing practice times and rosters with arms folded and fingers stroking their chins.

"I guess this means we have official umps tonight," I said.

Mama looked over at Peanut. "I can't believe Jerry Wilson."

"I heard Nashville was getting nasty about having to send umps down here," Lo-rene said, "until they was told we'd give 'em gas money."

"I'd like to know where we're getting gas money," said my mama. "And I'm sure the new umps aren't getting paid Peanut's salary, either, or else they wouldn't bother."

"Peanuts," I said.

"The scoreboard hadn't worked right in four years," Lo-rene agreed. "We ain't had money to fix it."

The numbers blinked over the left field fence.

"Double play!" Wayne's nephew called out on the field, tapping the ball to short. The shortstop, Justin Wright, the high school football coach's son, waited for the ball to roll to him, his glove on the ground. Michael jogged back toward first.

"Justin!" the boy called. "Runner's already on first!"

The shortstop shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted toward home. The ball rolled past him into left field.

"It's okay, your glove's good," Wayne's nephew said, "down where it oughta be, but you can't wait for the ball to come to you. You gotta go to it."

The little boy nodded. The left fielder moved in to retrieve the ball.

"Watch him work with those little boys," said Lo-rene.

"They ain't so little," one of the mothers pointed out.

"He plays ball for some college, you know," said Lo-rene, twisting her wedding band on her finger.

"Where's Page?" my mama said into my ear. "She'll be sorry she's missing this."

"I didn't tell her there was a game today," I said. "Not that she won't show up. She might."

But what was of course important was not that Page was there or somewhere else--that didn't matter at all. What mattered was that Rosemary was at home, nursing the yellowing spot under her eye and avoiding bleachers full of idle people looking for trash to take with them to work the next day.

Once the umpires arrived--two middle-aged men with Little League Association T-shirts and athletic shorts who spoke only to each other--the game began. Peanut Springer watched from his lawn chair, and as best I could make out, he paid no attention to the man squatting behind home plate with the mask and chest guard. He drawled encouragement to each batter that came to the

plate, on both teams. We were playing the Astros, a harmless team with a harmless coach, and mothers benign as our own on the opposite set of bleachers.

As soon as the first pitch was thrown, Wayne's nephew took the Pirates' scoring books and came through the fence to sit on the first row of the bleachers. Jamie Pinedweller was there, too, over by the Pirates' dugout, leaning into the fence. At first I was afraid my eyes would be confused as to where to want to stare, but after a few minutes there was no struggle. I watched a new pair of hands, wide and tanned with wiry veins running from the backs up along the sides of the knuckles, as they moved a pencil in the shorthand of strikes and outs. Over and over, the fingers moved to make thick lead circles or slanted lines or letters in the boxes as the home plate counts dragged on and on.

By the time the third inning rolled around, the Pirates were on top fourteen to nothing, partly because Michael was two for two with bases loaded and had sent the ball straight between two outfielders both times, and partly because the Astros' shortstop couldn't lick the cutoff; at any rate, the Pirates' mothers' attention was lagging, and the fathers were already discussing whether or not to have Wednesday night practice. Normally there was no Wednesday night practice because of church, but since high school graduation was Friday night and there were no games scheduled, the boys might not get in enough time swinging the bat

if they didn't bring them in for just a little while on Wednesday.

"Gabriel," Mama said, "have you written your speech yet?"

"No," I said.

"You have four days. Can you do it in four days?"

"I can do it in an hour."

"Well, pick an hour that comes sometime before Friday, or I'll be a nervous wreck."

"I can be nervous enough for myself," I told her. "I don't need your help."

"I'll always be nervous for you," Mama said.

Lo-rene turned around. "Did you say you hadn't wrote your speech yet?"

I nodded.

"Girl--if I had to give a big speech like that I'd die."

"Thanks," I said.

She laughed and patted me on the knee, her long fingernails clicking against each other. "You'll be fine, you're so smart. If I was you though I'd write it now, you know, and then memorize it. Otherwise I couldn't sleep at night." She stopped and looked beyond my shoulder. "Hey--is that not that boy that Rosemary Blair dates over there?"

I turned around. Buddy Scurlock was leaned up against a tree, wearing a jacket even though it was warm and tucking his hands into the pockets. His eyes were roving over the far set of bleachers. My stomach jumped.

"Yeah, that's him," I said.

"Well, you know I heard something . . ." Lo-rene began, but Buddy had already spotted me and was coming my way.

I stood up and stepped past Lo-rene and started down the bleachers as Buddy came around and stood by the side, and to get off I had to step down to the level just behind Wayne's nephew's back, and when I did that the toe of my shoe touched his T-shirt.

"Sorry," I said to him.

He hadn't even noticed. He didn't turn around.

I jumped off the bleachers and faced Buddy. He was much taller than I was, and had features that were dark and perfectly sculpted, with clear hazel eyes that would not hold still and would not look at me. He batted his hands against his sides, still in the pockets of his jacket, and watched an Astros batter take a swipe at a wide ball.

"So where's Rosemary?" he said to me.

"Hello," I said.

He kicked at the dirt for a second, and his face softened, his lips twitching. "Hi," he said. "Where is she?"

"Home," I told him. "She's a little sore from where a giant blood-sucking bat stuck its fangs into her eyeball."

He would not look at me. He waved his hand at a fly buzzing around his shoulders, his eyes the whole while running the length of the outfield fence. "You know," he said, "you really don't know what you're talking about."

I shrugged.

"And," he went on quickly, "if you don't know what you're talking about, you might want to quit talking about it in public."

"Or else I might have a run-in with a giant blood-sucking bat?" I said. "I get it."

"No, you don't." He was nearly whispering, and there was no expression in his voice, and he still was not looking at me; his body was not even turned toward mine as if we were carrying on a conversation.

"What you don't know," I said, "is that people are already talking about you, and I find it amazing that you would show up here looking for Rosemary."

"I wish you'd shut up," he said. There was no menace in his voice.

"Why?"

He stood still for several seconds, kicking at the dirt. "I need to see her."

"You wish I'd shut up because you need to see her."

He shook his head and shut his eyes. "What I'm trying to say is . . . ." His words were becoming stuck between his lips and it was hard to understand him, but this I heard clearly: "I know I don't deserve her, but no one really does. Not even you." He turned his back on me, a very subtle move since he was not really facing me to begin with, and he left.

I felt a thick pain in my throat. I turned to the fence because I did not want my mother to see me, and as I did I felt

the eyes of Wayne's nephew on me, as if I heard his pencil stop scratching against the paper.

With Buddy walking away from me with his hands in pockets, draining the last colors from my face, the courses of the planets changed and I saw the land around me as equal on all sides--it stretched in equal and infinite pieces around me in four directions, the universe whirled around me, I was no longer a tiny appendage to the fence around the diamond. The distant hum of the whirl of creation grew louder in my ears, and the strange light in the trees picked itself out of the branches, descended to me, and offered itself at my feet.

Someone touched my elbow.

I turned my head, and I saw a pair of blue eyes set above a unique nose and a crooked mouth.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said, but the contact of his eyes with mine forced me to turn back to the fence; a breeze blew my hair up against the side of my face and hid him from me, and I folded my arms because my hands were just hanging there with nothing to do.

"Don't move," he said.

I was now afraid to turn around to look at him.

"There's a bumblebee in your hair," he continued. "I'll get it out if you hold still."

I heard the hum of wings now, just below my ear. I did not move. "Please," I said. I winced as the noise crawled closer to my ear. "I don't like bees."

He reached into my cloud of hair--I felt his warm fingers brush past my ear--and the hum of the bee grew insistent. "Don't panic," he said. "I think I can get it to crawl on my finger."

"Don't get stung," I said. I was speaking to him easily, the words coming, I think, from my stomach instead of my brain.

"Okay," he said then, and he laughed. "Turn around."

I turned to him, and his finger was extended, and the bee was walking along it, carefully probing the territory on its furry, curious legs. "See," he said, "if you're careful they won't sting."

"I would never do that," I breathed, watching the bee from a closer range than I had ever watched a bee from before.

"Do you want me to put him on your finger?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

I looked him full in the face. "No. I just said I would never do that." I leaned down to the bee and blew gently on its wings.

Just then the bee drummed its wings together and dropped its hind end down swiftly. "Shit!" the boy cried, shaking his finger and sending the bee flying off into the trees.

I covered my face with my hands. "I'm sorry," I said, "I'm so sorry. I did it."

"Yeah, you did," he said, sucking on the sting. Then his face relaxed, except for some tension around his eyes, and he sighed. "Do you usually catch bees in all that hair?"

I stared at his finger, where a pale red splotch was coming up through the brown of his skin. "Bees, birds, sometimes small goats and children," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"It's okay," he said. "Hey, look at me."

I did, and I suddenly knew what he was about to say.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said, "the last time I saw you, you had someone else's coat on your head."

"Did not."

"Did too. That was you."

I chewed my lip. "You can't prove it."

"I don't have to." He smiled, looking off into the trees over my head as if he were considering something he shouldn't be. "And I won't ask you right now what you were doing in there, but I certainly intend to later."

"Oh," I said. "I'll be thinking of an answer not to give you."

"Hmmm," he said, still looking beyond me, "could you do me a favor?"

"Well, I don't like to be beholden to anybody."

He looked at me then, right into my eyes, and he laughed. "Stand over there by the fence."

"What, you don't want to talk anymore? I can take a hint."

"No, I mean stand by the fence, and I'm going to draw you."

I smiled. "That seems a little severe."

"Not draw and quarter you. Draw you."

"You're going to draw a picture of me," I said.

"Yeah." He picked up his clipboard off the bleacher seat and slid his pencil out of the clip.

"You're going to draw a picture of me on a Little League roster," I said. "I'm sure Wayne will love that."

"I'm not going to draw you on the roster," he said, rolling his eyes. "Look."

He showed me the clipboard. He lifted the page where he had been recording double plays and dropped third strikes, and there was plain paper underneath. The first sheet was covered with trees, all the trees along the outfield fence sketched in a sharp hand, with dark and ragged edges and branches like grasping arms.

"Wow," I said.

"Do you like it?"

"Sure," I said, "but how are you going to fit me into the landscape there? Are you going to draw me as a tree?"

He twisted his crooked mouth into a smile. "Actually I thought I'd give you wings and a stinger," he said. He leaned forward into my face. "I'll start on a new page."

"Well, okay," I said. I started toward the fence, and he sat back down on the edge of the bleachers. "Do I just put my fingers through, like this? Like I'm watching the game?"

"Yeah," he said. "Like that."

I sensed that people were watching us. I glanced up over my shoulder at Lo-rene, who was repeatedly shouting at Jared on the field but keeping her eyes on this boy with his pencil.

"Shouldn't you be watching the game?" I asked him. "You have to turn the play books in."

"I can do both," he said, not looking up, his wrist flicking the pencil sharply.

There was subdued cheering and clapping going on behind me as the Pirates managed a cleverly turned double play, but the sound of a pencil on paper seemed infinitely louder to me.

"How long do I have to stand here like this?" I asked.

"Not very long."

"I don't know your name."

"I know yours."

"You don't either," I said.

"Do so."

"How?"

"You have a little brother with a big arm and a big mouth." He wrinkled up his lips at whatever he was drawing on the paper.

"That's a fib," I said. "My brother doesn't know my name. He hasn't even been home for supper in years."

"He did tell me to tell you to get him a hamburger after the first inning."

"That's how you know my name?"

"That's how I know your name."

Some cheering went up from the Astros' side. "Error on the second baseman," I said.

"Thanks," he replied. He turned the first page on his clipboard back down and marked the box, and then resumed his drawing.

"My fingers are getting tired," I said.

"You've been there all of two minutes."

"So why didn't you tell me to get Michael a hamburger?"

"He doesn't need a burger in the middle of a game. I don't care how much we're winning by." He was looking up, not at me, but out to the fence, and his pencil stopped for a moment. Then he snapped back to attention. "Okay, I'm done." He pressed down on the metal clip to remove the sheet of paper.

"You're going to give it to me?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. He turned it face down as it came loose from the clip and extended it to me.

"That was fast," I said, and as I reached out my hand to take the piece of paper, all the stops between my tongue and my brain suddenly became plugged again, and I forgot where my stomach was. I was afraid to turn the paper over. I could see dark, serrated lines through the back of the sheet and I stared at them without moving my fingers to grasp the paper.

"Are you going to look at it, or not?" He looked down at the ground, tapping his pencil rapidly against the clip with the hand the bee had stung, the other hand with the paper in it still proffered.

I took the paper between my fingers and turned it over.

On the page, in dark, rough lines, was a girl, twisted away from the viewer, hair cascading down her back like willful vines, her arms extended to the sky and sprouting leaves from the fingertips, her legs bound together and feet disappearing into roots that spread all through the ground, to the edges of the page. It was only a few lines, rough and quick and angry-looking.

I swallowed. "Are you still mad at me about the bee?"

"Mad?" He looked up. "Mad at you? Don't you like it?"

I nodded. I couldn't take my eyes off the feet, snarled and stuck in the ground, and I couldn't stop thinking that this girl had no face.

"Keep it," he said, turning back toward the ballgame. He marked the count at the plate on the first page.

"I really do like it," I faltered. "It's . . . amazing."

He smiled down at the paper he was marking on. "Okay."

"Well. . . ." I climbed onto the bleachers behind him and started back up toward my mother and Lo-rene. "Thanks."

He just shook his head and laughed.

When I reached the top and sat down, my mother said to me, "I saw that."

"*All* that," said Lo-rene, bobbing her head. "Hand it over."

"Absolutely not," I said, folding the paper quickly down the center and clutching it in my lap.

"Oh, come on," said my mother, tickling me a little under the ribs, but I only held the paper tighter. My nerves were

tingling and my stomach hurt, sitting there above him and holding that paper in my hand, and all I could think about was someone sitting at home in front of a mirror, running two careful fingers below her eyeball, waiting for purple to turn to yellow and then fade away.

The Pirates beat the Astros handily, the game pronounced over in the fifth inning because of the fifteen-run lead, and my brother went four for four on the day. When it was over, the umpires from Nashville bought Cokes at the concessions stand, and but for that spoke to no one but themselves, and then they were gone. Peanut had left as soon as the final run came across the plate.

When the umpire called, "Game!", Wayne's nephew, still nameless to me, got up and didn't look back over his shoulder, and he took the playbooks over to the concessions stand, up to the scorekeepers in the balcony. When he came back down the stairs, Wayne was waiting for him with a couple of Pirates' fathers, and they both shook hands with him. I watched how he stood, how he drew designs in the dust with the toe of his shoe and ran his fingers through his hair as he talked, and he never looked over at me, not once.

The kids drifted off the field in leisurely pairs, the Astros having assumed the demeanor of defeat innings ago, and Michael was one of the last to come through the gate.

"No peppy post-game speech from Wayne tonight?" I asked him when he came over to the bleachers.

"We got it in the third inning," he said, holding up his glove for Mama to take. "Daddy said to get money for a hamburger from you."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Mama took his glove from him, and then opened her purse and unclasped the coin pouch, poking around for quarters.

"He didn't want to break a twenty," Michael said. His white pants were barely dirty, and there was no mud caked on the stirrups. "I'm riding home with Daddy."

Mama reached down and handed him several quarters, and he was off to the concessions stand, where several of his teammates were fighting over the ketchup squirt bottle.

Lo-rene stood up and stretched. "I swear, if Jared gets ketchup all over them white pants, I don't know what I'll do."

"Wash them," I said.

Under the pale purple sky Mama and I drove from the field around the park to the exit, passing the older ballfields where the grass was going to pastureland, covering a minefield of

broken bottles. The park itself was like an aging man, sucking some parts in while others sagged: some picnic tables were new, some old; the senior citizens' center still smelled of fresh concrete, while the metal-sided civic center was crumpling on one end; the tennis courts on the hill beyond the good ballpark were cracked with the efforts of the roots of nearby trees, but the courts by the highway exit were less than ten years old, and fairly nice to play on. As soon as one thing was fixed, another fell apart.

My mother spoke. "I guess you're not going to let me see your drawing."

"I guess not." I had it folded in fourths, and had not let go of it at any point during the game.

My mama was smiling. "He liked you."

"He didn't tell me his name," I said.

"I'm sure he'll get around to that."

We turned onto the highway and drove south, toward St. Mary's and toward home. The lights of the gas stations twinkled above the stream of cars leaving the park, carting loads of little uniformed boys away to their suppers. Past the bank and the drugstore we turned onto Cherry Street, the old steeple of St. Mary's black in the purple starry sky, towering over the squat brick rectory in its shadow. The church property itself was a sprawling stretch of land around which had gathered frame houses and brick houses, first of the original German and Irish farmers who had had retired and moved back to town, to a place

where they could walk to daily Mass in the mornings, and then gradually of their descendants, who remained there but generally did not go to daily Mass until they grew old themselves. There was the gravel parking lot where trees managed to flourish, turning fierce reds and oranges when autumn came; the brick rectory where the priests lived as they came and went, once all Germans and Irishmen who had grown up here, now transient assignments from the Bishop of the Diocese of Nashville; the one-story brick ranch house which was home to the nuns and came to be known as the convent, even though it wasn't one in strict terms, and which had more rooms than appeared possible from the outside--this appeared to primary graders who were led inside once a year for a service in the tiny chapel as nothing less than a miracle, and although the smell inside was certainly that of air freshener, we thought it a holy smell peculiar to our own nuns; the 1940s brick school building which stood on the very spot where the original frame one-room house had been built upon the arrival of our forefathers and mothers, the homesteaders; the gymnasium, built in the 1960s, connected to the school building with a sidewalk covered by a corrugated tin awning that roared in the rain; the playgrounds so big that kickball and baseball and football games could go on simultaneously without overlap while the little girls sat atop the monkey bars and gossiped; the pine woods behind the school building that ran all the way to the lumber company and to the city park on the other side; and the church itself, a brick marvel with saints of priceless stained

glass along the sides and two great bells in the steeple that rang before Mass and tolled when parishioners died.

"Look, Mama," I said. "There's a U-Haul at the rectory."

The backside of the building was all lit up, every window, and the orange moving truck was pulled up to the back door.

"Well, gracious," Mama said, slowing the car. "Is Father Dozier leaving already? We haven't even given him a farewell dinner."

"He didn't say he was leaving at Mass yesterday," I said. "You'd think he would."

Mama brought the car to a stop. She turned in her seat to look at me. "Do you think we should go tell him goodbye?"

I shrugged. I didn't see anyone milling about the back door, or moving boxes. "Maybe we ought to."

"You know," Mama said, squinting in the direction of the rectory's back door, "I wouldn't have thought that a Jesuit priest who takes a vow of poverty would need a U-Haul to move out of a previously furnished rectory."

"Okay," I replied. "Let's go say goodbye then, just to see if he's pilfering."

"Oh, Gabriel, watch your mouth."

"I was just kidding," I said. "I guess he would have a lot of books."

Mama backed up the car and turned into the driveway of the rectory, pulling around the back of the building and into the pool of light pouring from the back windows. "I wonder why he's

leaving at night," she said, her eyebrows raised in puzzlement, "like he doesn't want us to know he's going. This is so strange--we haven't given him a farewell dinner."

She stopped the car and we got out, looking for signs of life around the moving truck, when the parish secretary appeared in the open doorway. Elaine Brink was still black-haired, although she was a grandmother, and thin as a stick, although she had wizarded famously complex meals three times a day for thirty years for the St. Mary's parish priests. She was also a sort of organizational demon, shadowing her charges, picking up receipts and papers and pocket lint and sweeping them into alphabetical file nearly before they'd even been let go. She was old German blood. I always liked to look at the smile lines around her eyes.

"Elaine?" my mama called to her.

Moths fluttered about the bulb on the back porch, lured by the dampness in the air, and Elaine waved them away from her face. "Clare, is that you?" she asked. "Come here, you're not going to believe this."

"Is Father Dozier leaving *now*?" Mama asked. "We saw the U-Haul and decided we ought to stop and tell him goodbye . . . we didn't know what was going on."

"Well, you're too late," said Elaine. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He left last night."

"Last night?" Mama was incredulous.

Elaine nodded. "Can you believe it? Nobody knows, except a few people, and I expect that'll change once a couple more drive by and see this big orange truck out here." She inclined her head slightly back over her shoulder, and we heard the sounds of shuffling and scooting coming from inside the rectory. Elaine leaned forward and enunciated slowly. "The new priest is here."

I leaned past Elaine and looked into the hallway, but I saw nothing.

Mama said, "You are kidding me."

Elaine folded her arms and shook her head.

Mama was whispering now. "I thought we were supposed to talk to the bishop before we got another one."

Elaine was nodding before my mother even finished her sentence. "I know it, and I swear, this one's just out of the blue."

"The bishop promised he'd hear us out before he sent a new priest," my mama breathed.

"He did," affirmed Elaine, "but there's a priest in the living room right now. Go look if you don't believe me."

"Is he nice?" Mama mouthed these words rather than saying them, and she peeked over Elaine's shoulder.

"Seems that way," said Elaine, "but who can tell?"

"What's his name?" I asked.

She shook her head, and laughed. "Father John Patrick . . . Smiley."

"Smiley?" I said.

"Well . . ." my mama said, shrugging, "John Patrick is Irish, at least."

I looked at her. "Well, Smiley ain't."

Elaine batted another moth out of her face. "He's not a Jesuit or a Benedictine or anything like that. He doesn't even wear a Roman collar. In fact . . . he's wearing shorts and houseshoes right now."

"Oh, gross," I said.

"Actually, he's kind of young," she whispered. "And you should see all the stuff he brought with him--all kinds of computer mess. I can't believe a priest would have this much junk. And I told him we already had him a computer upstairs, and he said no, he needed this kind of software, or whatever, so I don't know--Lord knows what he's doing."

"I just don't understand why Father Dozier had to leave without even telling any of us," Mama said.

Elaine looked back into the hallway. "All he really had was a few crates of books. He just took 'em and left--he called me at quarter of ten, got me over here to thank me personally for all my help, and then he just got in his car and left."

"Did he go back to Nashville?" Mama asked.

"I guess," said Elaine. "I don't think he has a new assignment yet."

The shifting and bumping sounds from inside the rectory stopped. Elaine raised her eyebrows.

From the living room into the hallway there emerged a tall man carrying a box in well-muscled arms; his hair was totally gray, even white in spots, but it was obvious from the relative subtlety of the lines on his face that the gray was premature. He was deeply tanned, wearing shorts and houseshoes. He set the box in the floor.

"Well, hello," he said heartily, coming toward us with his hand extended. He spoke with resonance, but with the extended vowels of the Deep South. "My first parishioners, I assume?"

"Nice to meet you, Father," my mother said, as he took her hand and pumped it so hard that her shoulder shook. "I'm Clare Sullivan, and this is my daughter Gabriel."

"Ah, Gabriel, the herald of the Messiah," he beamed, taking my hand right around the knuckles and compressing them painfully together. "I'm Father Smiley."

"Hi," I said.

"You should call some of the Parish Council men to come and help you get moved in," my mother said to him. He still had hold of my hand. "There's no sense in you doing this all by yourself. Nobody knew you were coming. . . ." She looked to Elaine helplessly.

"I'm sure your first impression of us isn't too cozy," Elaine said to him. "I wish we had known this was happening, we could have had the ladies at least dust for you . . . I could have had supper on."

Father Smiley finally dropped my hand, and I flexed my fingers. He laid his hand on Elaine's shoulder.

"You've already apologized," he said. "Don't worry--I'd rather not have a fuss made on my first night."

"Well, I guess we'd better get home and get the boys fed," Mama said, more to Elaine than to Father Smiley. "We just wanted to stop by and. . . ." She stopped, caught in the truth. "Say hello."

"Little League tonight?" Elaine asked.

Mama nodded. "The first game of the season." She sighed.

"Oh, you have a son?" Father Smiley asked. "In Little League?"

"Perpetually," my mother said.

Michael was in the kitchen when we got home, rooting around in the medicine cabinet by the refrigerator for Band-Aids. "It's about time you got home," he said. "I'm starving. Mama, my arm is bleeding again."

Mama looked at his arm, taking his elbow between her fingers and probing the torn flesh, and then she leaned down to the cabinet by the stove for a skillet, which she placed on the burner, and then she got lettuce and carrots out of the refrigerator.

"Oh, yeah," Michael said to me, taking diarrhea pills and gauze and ancient cough prescriptions out of the shelves one by one. "Call Page." He mimicked a high, insistent voice. "It's an emergency."

I lifted the receiver off the hook and dialed the number. "How can you be starving? You already had a hamburger at the park, and you barely lifted a finger through the whole game anyway."

"Two singles, a double, and a triple," he said. "Besides, I want spaghetti."

Mama went to the freezer and rummaged around until she found hamburger meat. She stuck it in the microwave.

"Hello, Page?" I reached into my pocket and fiddled with my folded piece of paper, running my finger over the dark lines that were so heavy they made bumps on the reverse side. "It's me."

"Where have you been?"

"Uh . . . meeting the new priest, actually."

"The new priest? Father Dozier's gone?"

"He left last night."

"Hold on." Page smothered the mouthpiece with her hand and spoke to someone on the other end. "Okay, I'm back," she said to me. "Mama said she's glad he's gone. She don't like his sermons."

"So what's the emergency?"

"Oh. . . ." She paused, adjusting her voice and breathing. "Why didn't you tell me about Rosemary?"

Michael found the Band-Aids in a far corner of the cabinet, and he got two out of the box and took them to Mama, who dropped the lettuce she was cutting into a Pyrex bowl for a salad to unwrap the Band-Aids and re-examine Michael's elbow.

"What about her?"

"That Buddy hit her," Page said. "Ruby James told me in the grocery store, and I swear to *God*, I almost had one of my spells right there. I mean, I started to get *dizzy*." She stopped for a moment. "And I came home and told my mama, and she said, I don't believe it, cause Gabriel would've told you if it happened, and I said, Well Mama, Ruby said Gabriel told her, and Mama said, No, that cain't be right, cause Gabriel would tell you if something important like that happened, and I said, Well, you go talk to Ruby then."

"Page," I said, "the beauty shop already knew about it before I got there. They know before anyone gets there."

"Well, I'm just saying."

"Rosemary didn't want anybody to make a fuss."

"No telling what Ruby thinks I am, thinks I don't know nothing that goes on with my friends."

My mother was licking her finger and swabbing at Michael's arm with it, and he stuck his tongue out at me.

"The new priest has already moved into the rectory," I said to Page. "We drove by after the ballgame and there was a U-Haul out back."

"There was a game tonight?"

I swallowed, watching Mama lay a Band-Aid carefully across Michael's cut and smooth down the adhesive. "Yeah. We won."

"If you'd have called I would have come with you," she said. "I didn't have anything to do tonight."

"Where's Sammy?"

"I don't know."

"Well, it's Monday," I said. "I mean, if you didn't have anything to do, you should have called--there's always a game."

Mama rinsed her hands under the sink and went back to cutting lettuce, and Michael came over, flexing his elbow, and started wrapping the phone cord around my neck. I stuck the piece of paper in my pocket.

"Cut it out," I said to him. "Page, are you there?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'm just, you know, thinking about Rosemary and what she goes through, I mean, sometimes I think I have it bad, me being with a guy who don't care. . . ."

"Sammy cares."

"And me not being pretty like she is, and stuff, but I guess she has problems too--I just kind of feel sad for her . . . *God*."

"Page," I said, "I'm not trying to cut you off but we're about to eat supper."

"Oh, okay. Well, call me sometime--I mean, you never call me, and I feel like you don't want to talk to me or something, or like I'm bothering you. . . ."

"I just called you."

"But I called you first."

"That's stupid," I said. "I don't even think about that kind of stuff."

"Well, okay, then," she said. "I'll let you go."

"Bye." I pressed down the carriage with one hand, removed the cord from my neck with the other, and then released the carriage and dialed another number.

Rosemary answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey," I said. "Bruise patrol."

She sighed into the receiver. "Oh, sure, *now*."

"Are your parents there?"

"No," she said. "And now, neither is Buddy."

"He came over there?"

"Right after you saw him."

"He told you."

"Well, you pissed him off," she said.

"I'm sorry." I paused. "He didn't . . . ?"

"Come over here and beat me up? No."

"I'm really sorry." I spoke softly into the phone so that my mother's sizzling skillet would drown out my words. "I wasn't thinking about where he might be going after."

"Maybe you did me a favor," she said. "He came over to apologize, and he said I was right, and that it's over, and he accepts it."

"Well, see there," I said. "I knew what I was doing."

"Yeah, I'm real glad."

"You sound it."

She cleared her throat. "So there was a ballgame tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Who won?"

"We did," I said. "I really don't see any way we can lose this year--we've got really good kids."

"So I didn't miss anything?"

I watched my mama chop onions effortlessly into the skillet along with the browning meat, her fingers moving alongside the knife in the ease of old companionship. "No, you didn't miss anything."

"Hmm."

"Well, I'm sorry to bother you," I said. "I was just checking up on you, wondering how were the bruises."

"Pale, today," she said. "I might go out in public tomorrow."

"Well . . . ." I fingered the telephone cord. "Supper's on."

"Okay," she said, "but one more thing--are people talking about me? Buddy said you said so."

"Oh, good grief," I said. "The beauty shop is talking about you. You and the free world. Does that really bother you?"

Rosemary was still for a moment, and the only sound was of meat crackling as it cooked.

"How would they hear?"

"How wouldn't they hear?" I said. "They're the beauty shop. There were witnesses at the Quik Mart."

She laughed a little. "Okay."

"Good."

"Go eat supper, then."

"Okay," I said. I felt my pocket with one hand, and touched the paper inside. "Bye."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone as Mama was scooping tomato paste into the skillet. "I saw you put that into your pocket a while ago," she said. "Don't think for a second I've forgotten about it."

Michael was getting out the plates and silverware and stuffing a piece of bread into his mouth. "What's in her pocket?"

"Why are you eating all that bread--I'm making spaghetti for you," Mama said. "Who is the boy helping you with practice?"

"Who? Hemphmmm?" Michael's enunciation was lost in a slur of chewed-up bread.

"Oh, swallow that," I said.

"Well, you asked," said Michael. He gulped down the lump of bread.

"What's his name?" I asked.

Mama stirred her meat sauce, and laughed.

"Why, you think he's cute?" Michael danced around me with an armful of plates.

"I think he's cute," Mama said. "I'm the one that asked."

"What's in Gabriel's pocket?" Michael pretended he was about to start juggling the plates. "I'm the one that asked that, and nobody ever answered me."

"And nobody's going to," I said.

"Oh, come on, Gabriel," said Mama. "Let's see it."

"Why?" I put my hand in my pocket. "It's just a drawing."

"A drawing?" Michael took a dish into one hand and flicked his wrist as if he were about to loft a Frisbee at me. "*Awww*--did he draw a picture for you? I guess that makes you his girlfriend."

"What's his name?" Mama repeated.

"He draws cool pictures," Michael said. "He can do cartoons."

I took the paper out of my pocket and handed it to Mama. "Here," I said. "This is going nowhere."

I took over the spatula for her and she wiped off her hands, and took the paper from me and unfolded it. Michael peered over her shoulder.

"Well, gee," Mama said, "you're a tree."

"So I see."

"This is really good, Gabriel," she said.

Michael batted me on the back of the head with a plate. "His name is Hershey."

"It's what?"

"Hershey."

I blinked. "Like the chocolate?"

Michael nodded, twirling a plate on his finger. "Hershey."

Mama put out her hand and grabbed the plate. "You're going to break my dishes--Gabriel, you should have got him to sign his work."

"He might get famous," Michael said, batting his eyelashes.

"He might want to forget he drew that," I said.

"He might want to draw you naked," Michael said.

"I might want to spank your behind," Mama said to him. "Set the table and hush."

"I was only kidding," said Michael. "Who'd want to draw her naked?"

Later that night, as I lay in the bed, the covers off and the window cracked to let cool air drift in off the grass, I kept my drawing with me, though I no longer needed its physical presence to be able to see the ragged roots that were my feet or the leaves issuing sharply from my fingertips. I was trying to conjure up my usual dream, to wrap myself up in fire and sirens and smoke, but somehow it wouldn't come to me. I reached down under my bed for my book of lists; I unhooked the pen from the wire coil and wrote the day's date on a blank page. But I had nothing to write. I shoved it back under the bed and just lay there against my pillow with the drawing in my hand until I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The holler was quiet in Pickensville, in the collection of stone houses packed in the gully between the river and the vacant quarries. The holler was quiet in Pickensville except for the reedy whistle of crickets when the full moon gleamed down over the valley. The holler was quiet except for crickets and snapping twigs, twigs snapping under raccoons and deer and perhaps other things. The old fire watchtower rose from the bluff beside the river and shone whitish-green by the light of the moon, and the broken rungs from its ladder hung like broken legs, batting and clapping against each other when the wind eased up off the river late at night.

All the lights were off in the stone houses, except for the single bulbs on the porch which always seemed to swing slowly even when there was no breeze, cutting through thick clouds of moths and mosquitoes and cutting sharp shadows on the lawns. In some of the stone houses the windows were broken like hollow black eyes along the front. They were covered with sagging black tarp from the inside, tarp spotted brown from the last rains, and the moonlight gleamed along the jagged edges of the glass.

The only grocery store sat silent in the throat of the gully, a blackened and roofless shell lit up at night along the empty window casings and glowing momentarily with each passing headlight, each headlight passing through on the highway north to Middlefield and then to Hope Springs and never stopping.

But sometimes on a Friday or Saturday night a car would stop on its way south and pull into the glen across the main street from the houses and turn off its lights. *David, I don't like this. For God's sake, this is Pickensville. What if the car won't start back.*

Shhh . . . we're just gonna listen.

No, we're not. You start that engine and get back on the highway.

I heard somebody say Dottie Warner was gonna call the cops on her husband tonight.

Well we're not gonna be here to see it.

We'll only stay a few minutes.

Well turn that radio off before the battery quits. My God I'd rather be on the Haunted Bridge than here.

Look at R.D.'s. Look at how the moon shines in.

I don't want to look. Let's leave.

The storeroom's almost completely burnt away from the building. Look. That's where they found R.D. . . .

Would you stop.

I'm here. Nothing's gonna happen.

David. . . .

Let's go in and have a look.

At R.D.'s? David, start the motor.

I'm here.

I don't care.

Come over here closer to me. You'll feel better.

It would be about an hour and the headlights would come on and the car would pull out of the woods onto Main Street and then hit the highway north.

And the crickets would whistle in Pickensville all through the night, echoing down through the quarry and across the river.

Chapter Twelve

She had heard he was coming; after church the parishioners would stand near the steps and talk about it, just as they talked about everything else. Most everyone was thrilled that a new doctor was setting up practice in the rooms above the Brechts' market--Doctor Bailey, after all, was becoming consumed with a cough that turned him blue in the face and was surely rooted deep in his lungs, although no one liked to admit it--and the most popular stories had the new man educated at Vanderbilt, since he was due on the train south from Nashville.

She had heard he was coming, and she was glad, if the stories were true; all the same, she was frightened to see him in a way that she understood but could not have explained to anyone else. Nashville was the dim light she kept sheltered within her, the place inside her that called her by her first name instead of her husband's--what if it came here, and did not recognize her? She had never considered that it might come to her instead of her going to it, and she didn't know how to prepare; she felt as if the stories she had written down and hidden from her husband were printed indelibly upon her face. She would have preferred that the new doctor were not educated at Vanderbilt after all. That was too rigorous a test.

So she had heard he was coming. But she was not ready. She was in the Brechts' market one morning--her husband had brought her, and he had gone to the mill in the meantime to get feed for the horses--there to buy sugar and flour, because the cherries

were picked and pitted and ready for pies, when over the candy barrels appeared a new face whose clear eyes confirmed her fears.

The look of him was slightly off-center, a sort of willowy asymmetry that allowed for something else to come and fill in the uneven parts. He was a man built around his eyes, and when his met hers over the candy barrel, introductions slipped comfortably off his tongue. He gave her his name--Doctor Edward Blair--and she gave him hers, after that half-second of complete freedom in which she could have changed the course of her world and given false excuses for the lines around her eyes and the roughness of her hands; but she became who she was again.

Time for pies, I take it, he said.

Yes, it is, she replied, *and I'll see that you get one.*

You are too kind.

No, you do us all a kindness by coming here.

She lingered by that last statement as his eyes were still on her, and then she gave Mrs. Brecht behind the counter the money for the flour and the sugar. Shortly her husband pulled up in the buggy, and she took her parcels to her chest, bid the doctor goodbye, and was gone.

Later that night, thinking of the way the doctor had looked at her--for all the meaning was unfortunately wrapped up in the first meeting, which could nver be changed now--she wondered if he had registered enough dismay at her going home to bake pies, to lose her hands in a fog of flour and sugar. She couldn't be sure. She knew just how silly she was being, but she couldn't

shake the fear that a ponderously important moment had passed into her history that day without giving her her due, and she cried into her pillow as her husband snored beside her.

Chapter Thirteen

The cool air from the open window was damp by morning, and it seeped down my neck and into the blankets with me; I awoke with it sticking to my face. I rolled over and looked out the window down to the driveway. A green Oldsmobile whose surface was matte with age--although, miraculously, nearly free of dents--was parked underneath the basketball goal, a little too close to the pole. The smell of chocolate was floating up the stairs and into my bedroom.

The Oldsmobile belonged to Granny. She still insisted on driving herself wherever she wanted to go, but she would call us first and say, "I'm getting on the road, say a Hail Mary," and we would, immediately, because Granny always drove forty-five--on the highway, in parking lots, through stop signs. Mama didn't like for her to drive at all, and Daddy wouldn't let any of us ride with her, but when they told Granny they thought she ought to surrender the keys, her face turned all blank and blue and fragile and she started to spill tears everywhere, so the subject was dropped altogether. Mama and Daddy ended up getting her a crystal rosary the next Christmas so that she could hang her old plastic one on the rearview mirror, and I guess they felt that was all they could do. Let Mother Mary take care of the rest.

I rolled out of bed and went out into the hall, following the baking smells I was smelling. I passed the door to Michael's room and stuck my head inside. He was sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes on his first day of summer vacation. Evangeline was

chirping serenely in the morning sun, her cage a shadow in the flood of light through the window.

"Granny's here," I said.

"I know," he mumbled. "I can smell."

I winced. "All you can smell in here is your bird."

He scratched his head. "I'm going to clean her cage out today, smartass."

"It's a wonder she's not dead of the fumes."

"It's her own shit," he said. "She can't complain."

"What do you know if she's complaining?" I said. "Nobody's making you sleep and poop and eat all in the same hole every day."

"So open the door and let her out. She won't come."

It was true. Evangeline was an unusually pretty bird, a fluffy peach-colored parakeet with frosty white wings and tailfeathers, and a delicate singer, but her disposition was such that she refused to come out of her cage. On the rare occasions when Michael would venture to clean the perch and floor, he had to reach in and pull her out with his hands, and then put her cage in his closet where she wouldn't see it, or else she'd fly right back in. He would sit in the closet floor and clean the cage; Evangeline would sit on the bed, nervous and twitching, hopping from one dainty foot to the other, until she noticed the empty hook where her cage had hung. Then she'd go crazy and whip around the room like a dervish until she either got tired or flew into something; once she slammed into Michael's trophy case,

plunged to the floor like a rock, and gave us all a good scare. Somehow she managed not to hurt herself but she lost feathers on her head and some of her high notes. Daddy teased Michael for weeks that he had too much gold in that trophy case and he was lucky the stupid bird didn't break her neck.

Mama was up to her elbows in suds when I came into the kitchen, her wedding silver lying separated into piles to the left of the sink. Granny stood beside her, an old towel in her blue hands, catching each utensil as Mama ran it under a stream of warm water; a can of silver polish was lying open on the kitchen table. The chocolate I smelled was a batch of cookies baking in the oven. A mixing bowl still half full of batter was on the stove.

"Baking cookies and polishing the silver," I said, getting orange juice out of the refrigerator. "At eight in the morning. On a Tuesday."

"Good morning," Mama said.

"The cookies just lack five minutes," said Granny. "You can have some for breakfast." She patted a spoon dry with her trembling hands. "I made them myself."

Michael wandered in behind me, sniffing the air. "Something smells good, something doesn't."

"The doesn't is the polish," I said to him. I poured some juice into a glass. "Why on earth are you polishing silver this morning?"

"It needs it," she said, "and we'll be using it Friday night."

"Friday night?"

Mama rolled her eyes. "Still planning to graduate?"

"Oh, Friday night." I sat down at the table and sniffed the open can of greenish-gray gunk. I smelled the Christmases and weddings that were accumulated in my past, smelled assembly lines of women queued from the sink to the polish can, wiping away clouds of tarnish which began again undetectably to condense before the forks were even back in their lined velvet drawer.

"Have you not started that valedictory yet?" My mama took a pair of knives into her soapy dishcloth.

"There's no need."

"Gabriel could write that speech in ten minutes," said Granny, fixing her brittle stare on me. "She's so smart."

"Five minutes," I said. There was mail on the table--Granny would pick it up at the end of the driveway when she came in the early mornings--and I started to thumb through it. "There's something here from Little League, Mama."

"Oh, I know," Mama said. "Go ahead and open it--I think it's a sign-up sheet for the Fourth of July carnival."

"Let me see." Michael sat down and took the envelope from me, ripping through the seal.

"I'll fill it out later," said Mama. "You don't have to worry about it--just tell me what you want to sign up for."

"I could fill it out," I said.

"Oh, I'll just do it," she said. "Balloon darts again for you?"

"I suppose."

"What time of day do you want?"

I thought a moment, poking the tip of my finger gently into some gray polish oozing over the rim of its container. "I'd want to be done by six."

"Oh, that's probably a good idea," Mama said. "The championship game'll start by seven or so."

I wanted to reach out and touch my mama, to feel her bones underneath my hand.

"There's a list of all the players in here," Michael said. "Everybody's parents are supposed to work a shift at the chicken supper."

Mama shook soap from her hands disgustedly. "Let me see that." She took the list from him with her wet fingers and sighed, and then handed it to me and shrugged. "Oh, well--I guess it's the chicken supper, *and* the carousel, *and* the dunking machine--if there are enough hours in the day for all three, then I suppose I'll be there."

The names of all the Little Leaguers and Tee-Ball players in Hope Springs ran down the left-hand side of the paper, alphabetical and neat. "Cope Anderson," I read. "Is that the librarian's kid?"

"Yes," Mama said.

"I didn't know she named her baby Cope."

"Well, Gabriel, he's not her baby now," said Mama. "He's six."

"What sort of a name is Coke?" Granny asked, clutching forks in her hand.

"Not Coke, Granny," I said, "Cope. Puh, puh."

"Not much difference," said Michael.

The buzzer on the stove began its slow warm-up into a ring, and Granny dropped her forks onto the towel laid out by the sink and wiped her hands on her apron. "I made you cookies," she said, "do you want cookies for breakfast?" The buzzer went off loudly and Granny fumbled for the knob with blue, uncertain fingers. "Michael," she said tightly, "Michael, help me turn this off."

Both Mama and I had started for the knob ourselves, but Michael reached over and twisted it until the noise stopped.

Granny took a potholder into each hand and leaned slowly over, opening the oven door and drawing out the sheet of cookies. They were fairly brown around the edges.

"Pecan chocolate chip," she said, setting them on the stove burners and scooping them onto wax paper with a spatula. They budged easily because they were so firm. "Ohhh . . . they're a little black on the bottom." She stopped for a second, her hand worrying with her brow.

"It's okay," I said, getting up from the table to take a cookie. Bits of the edges crumbled off and fell to the floor

when I picked it up. "You didn't have to bake cookies, you know."

"Well, if you don't want them you don't have to eat them," she said quietly. "Taste them and see if they're all right."

I blew on the cookie and on my fingers because it was still hot. It crunched loudly when I bit into it and I felt black crackly crumbs on my bottom lip.

"They're too hard," Granny said, and she put her face in her blue-veined hands.

"No, Granny, they're fine," I said, cupping my hand under my chin to catch the crumbs. "Michael, take one."

He shook his head. "I don't like pecans."

"No . . . ." Granny put both hands to the sides of her head, and her voice grew thin. "I baked them too long . . . I wasn't paying any attention," she said, and the corners of her mouth quivered in her white papery skin. She stared at the kitchen curtains.

"Mama, don't start that," my mama said. She plunged a fistful of spoons into the hot soapy water.

"And Michael doesn't like pecans," Granny whispered. Her voice broke like glass in her throat. "How could I forget he doesn't like pecans? I only remembered it just now."

I pinched Michael on his pitching arm.

"Well, I don't like pecans," he said, grabbing my hand and twisting my fingers until they popped at the knuckles.

"That's enough," Granny said, turning her face away from us, and she picked up the strip of wax paper by its edges and took it to the garbage can beside the kitchen door, turning one end up. Two dozen pecan chocolate chip cookies slid down the white plastic liner into the bottom of the can.

Mama said, "Michael, why don't you go upstairs to your room? Right now?"

He rolled his eyes, took an apple out of the fruit bowl, and left the room.

I got the pitcher of juice back out of the refrigerator. "You didn't have to do that," I said to Granny. "I was going to eat those." I refilled my glass.

She was standing at the garbage can, looking down into it with her hand outstretched as if she could call the cookies back onto the paper.

"You were hungry?" She turned to me, her eyes frantic. "Maybe the ones on top didn't touch the trashcan." She knelt and peered into the liner, sticking one hand down into the can.

My mother looked up from her suds. "Mama."

"For God's sake, Granny," I said, gulping down some juice, "I'm not going to eat cookies out of the trashcan."

"Gabriel," said my mama.

"Don't use the Lord's name like that," Granny said to me, and her mouth was still quivering. She stood up and shook the crumbs off her hand and wiped it with a dishcloth.

"Why don't you start a new batch?" my mama said to her. The half-full bowl of dough was still waiting by the stove.

Granny stood still for a minute; then she moved to the bowl of batter and took the spoon in her hand, tapping idly at the dough, and she started slowly to spoon out new rounds onto the cookie sheet. She seemed to be muttering, barely touching her lips together, and each time she dropped a spoonful of dough onto the sheet, she tapped it with the spoon three times, once on each side and then on the top.

After a few minutes in which the only sounds were the rhythmic splashes of Mama's suds and the plop of cookie dough onto the sheet, Mama spoke. "Well, Gabriel," she said, "why don't you take your brother to practice today?"

"He has practice today?"

"Mm-hmm." She smiled at me. "Maybe you should haul him back and forth from now on."

Granny seemed to perk up. "What's this?"

I sat back down at the table and put my head in my hands, letting my frazzled hair fall over my eyes.

"Michael's coach has a nephew staying with him this summer, remember?" said Mama. "He's real cute."

Granny stood straighter, lifting her chin a little. "Now what about that little Carson boy that's so sweet on her?"

I stared up at her through my hair. "*Granny*."

She resumed measuring out her dough. "He is a sweet little boy."

"Booley is not a boy," I said. "Booley is a wart."

Granny smiled at my mother. "They hate to admit it, don't they?" Her face warmed over. "Don't try to tell your Granny that you don't have a feller. I won't listen."

"I know you won't."

"Actually, Mama," my mother said, "I think you ought to ask her about Wayne's nephew."

I poked my finger into the can of polish. "I don't think you ought to ask me about anything."

Granny looked at me. Her gaze was bleak and watery and her eyes were not focused on my eyes but on some other part of my face. I could always tell when she was looking at the bridge of my nose instead of at me. "You have just grown into your looks so nice," she said. "No reason for you not to have a feller." She turned back to her cookies, and I noticed her bony shoulders and her crinkled papery cheeks. "You'll have to bring him home to Sunday breakfast sometime."

With the next batch of cookies safely in the oven and the timer set to just eight minutes--Mama explained to Granny that our oven cooked fast, and you just had to be careful--I left them to their kitchen things and went upstairs to Michael's room. The door was shut, so I knocked.

"What?" The voice was muffled.

"I want in."

"Come on then." The voice sharpened, as if it were coming out from behind a wall. "But hurry up and shut the door behind you."

I opened the door and stepped into the room. "What are you doing?"

"Shut the door!" Michael hollered. He was sitting on the floor inside his closet, now with the louvered doors open. "I told you I was going to clean Evangeline's cage."

I pushed the door shut behind me. "Well, I didn't think you had the stomach to do it so close to breakfast."

"I got kicked out, stupid," he said. "I didn't have any breakfast." He reached up and pulled the closet door shut.

I saw Evangeline perched on the headboard of Michael's bed, her head set jauntily on its side, taking in the sounds of my arrival. She was just noticing that something was amiss, and she started chirping urgently, in fast, short whistles.

"Hurry up," I called through the closet door. "She's figuring it out."

"Get down low," Michael said.

I sat down next to the empty cage stand on the floor, where the carpet was littered with white feathers and empty birdseed shells.

"I'm almost through," Michael said, his voice muffled. "I just have to put gravel paper on the perch."

I heard the thick whirr of wings and I ducked. "It's too late."

Evangeline was skitting around the room, stopping to hop on the bed and the desk, and then taking off again, zooming down over the dresser and up to the windowtop. She paused only for a moment with her claws sunk into the curtains before she started whipping in circles around the ceiling, until all I could make out was a sort of fuzzy peach flash.

"I hear her," Michael said. "I wouldn't stand up if I were you."

The bird stopped abruptly at the window, clutching the curtain, her tiny chest pounding.

"She's quit," I said. "Come on out."

Michael opened the door and stood up, replacing the cage on its stand and whistling two harsh, clipped tones. Evangeline cocked her head.

"Watch this," he said. He clucked softly with his tongue.

Evangeline immediately sprung forward in a flurry of feathers, swooping in a precise arc from the window through the door of her cage and onto her perch. Michael latched the door behind her.

"I don't understand that," I said. "Maybe you should take that little mirror out of her cage. She probably thinks she's got a boyfriend in there with her."

"I tried that already," he said. "It didn't work." He reached into the closet for the plastic bag filled with dirty gravel paper and caked birdseed and he squatted in the floor,

scraping the carpet with his fingers to clean up the seed husks and feathers.

I sat on the bed and picked up little traces of feathery stuff that Evangeline had left on Michael's pillow, rolling it into thread between my fingers. "You didn't have to say that about the pecans, you dope. You can't even taste pecans in cookies."

"Yes, you can."

"No, you can't."

Michael started to scrub Evangeline's water trough with a metal scraper. "Did she cry?"

"No."

He flicked a tuft of feathers off his fingers and into the plastic sack, and he shrugged. Evangeline sat on her perch, cooing happily at her reflection in the mirror.

Granny's second and third batches of cookies came out okay, although they were still pretty crispy, and we did our best to eat as many as we could while she was still at the house. She and Mama put the newly sparkling silverware back into the lined drawers of the china cabinet before she left. I watched the Oldsmobile lean on its front left tire as it pulled slowly down the driveway, gave up six or seven clear opportunities to pull

out, and finally rolled out, rusty and squeaking, onto the road. Mama watched it too.

I drove Michael to baseball practice later in the afternoon, at Mama's suggestion; there were, of course, games going on in the regular field at the park, so the Pirates were holding their practice in a weedy lot behind one of the tennis courts. I pulled up beside the court to drop Michael off. Most of the boys were already there.

Michael opened the car door, already laughing at some scuffle going on between Jared Putman and Tyler Barfield over the best bat. "Don't sit and stare too long," he snickered at me, getting out and slamming the door behind him.

Wayne Barfield's nephew--*Hershey*, I thought--was crouched over a big tuft of grass near the tennis court fence, catching for Tanner McDonald, a small boy with thick glasses who was the Pirates' first baseman and second-string pitcher behind Michael. Wayne himself was marking off bases on the makeshift field by striking the heel of his cowboy boot into the mud.

I didn't turn off the motor, but I stayed there for just a few minutes with the windows down, watching the ball pop back and forth between him and Tanner. The rest of the kids in the field, blowing gum bubbles and pushing each other down into the grass, drifted toward them, even though they seemed to be concerned only with imposing pain upon each other. A couple of them pushed on Hershey's shoulder as he squatted there taking Tanner's pitches with patience and advice, and all of their eyes fell on him now

and again. Some of them piped up that they wanted to be the next to pitch. One pulled up a handful of grass and sprinkled it into Hershey's hair just as the ball smacked into his mitt, and he turned around and grabbed the boy's ankles and wrestled him to the ground, both of them laughing; from there all the boys fell into an easy jumble, their raucous laughter wholly male and young. Wayne just paced around with his arms folded, kicking up divets.

I didn't think he had seen me. I wasn't sure, but I didn't think he had seen me at all. I pulled out of the gravel and headed home.

I spent the rest of the day in my room with a blank sheet of paper, trying to summon a valedictory from my blank brain. Rosemary and Page both called, but when I heard the phone ring I sprawled out across the bed on my stomach and pretended to be asleep when Mama came upstairs to get me. She didn't try to wake me up.

Chapter Fourteen

Summer was a sludge of dirt and sno-cone juice spread upon shirts and thin faces. Eyes gleamed out from under the darkness below the bleachers, and there was scuttling there in the gravel, and children would crawl out and scurry away like rats dripping with rainbow-colored juices. In their wake lay trails of discarded tart-sucker sticks, chewed to pulp.

Some were barely out of diapers. Over the age of four they were mostly girls, or boys whose teams were not scheduled for the night. Some were chubby, but mostly they looked hollow, colorless but for the muck of candy colors mottled on their cheeks and chins. There were parents in the seats, absorbed in their seat cushions and in the size of the leadoff at second, who could surely account for the existence of most of these children beneath them, but connection was never broached, except for the occasional passing along of pocket change when one child would venture from the pack to dart briefly into the stands and then out again.

The children roved as a unit. They were urchins for a night, dusty with gravel. They separated only to fight over foul balls, but reconnected to throng the concessions stand, to mill at the entrance to the scorekeeping balcony and beg to be allowed upstairs. They were sticky and thin and colored with cheap candy.

Chapter Fifteen

He rode out to the farm on his horse for the first visit. She saw him coming when he was just a brown dot in the sea of tender green beyond the stack fence, moving steadily closer and growing. Her husband had all the children in the barn working leather or sweeping hay since the doctor was coming; it was a sweet thing for him to do for her, and she smiled thinking of it.

It had been two weeks since she had brought the doctor cherry pies to the Brechts' market. She would have waited longer, but the headaches were lasting well beyond breakfast now--she couldn't describe it to herself except to think that the fullness within her was not growing outward, but was hemmed in and separated, and she felt it even in her muscles as she sat or walked or got out of bed in the morning.

He arrived with his bags and his hands, his eyes inquisitive and clear, and as he placed his hands on her stomach she tried to explain how it felt to him but she found she couldn't. With his hands on her stomach, warm and probing, she began to think of what was inside her as a consciousness, with a name, a consciousness that was witness to what was going on inside her heart and--could it be?--down beyond. She envisioned a tiny pair of eyes and became uncomfortable under their stare.

All her papers lay under the dresser in the next room. They made a triangle with her and the doctor. She wanted them to be apparent somehow, for him to touch her stomach and say, But surely you have something here that you've written, instead of

complimenting her on her admirable cherry pies or the fresh faces of her children. She knew the idea was ludicrous, and even more ludicrous was the possibility that she could go into the next room and get the stories herself and bring them to him. The reality was that he would look at her as if she were affected by all this headache and this wrenching in her gut. And maybe she had been.

And all while she wished that she could in some way reach this man--or better yet, that he could reach out to her simply from intuition--she felt the tiny presence that monitored all her thoughts and feelings from its vantage point underneath her heart, and she was ashamed. She felt like lashing out at it.

Really, the doctor was saying, his kind, aloof hands probing her abdomen, I don't think there's anything physically wrong at all.

He gathered his things with a smile and then he rode away through the waving green wheat, pulling the triangle hopelessly more acute with each clop of his horse's hoof.

She sat alone in the kitchen for a while, kneading her stomach with her own hands and knowing she could not get at that tiny pair of eyes. But then she smiled. She suddenly had a name for those eyes, a name that would shut the tiny lids from the sheer force of it. She would call this baby Edward.

She heard a parade of children marching haphazardly back from the barn, calling to each other over the wind and through the wheat, and she sighed.

Chapter Sixteen

"Do you realize I haven't seen you in three days?" Rosemary asked.

"Yes," I replied, cradling a blank sheet of paper against a notebook, squeezing the phone receiver between my shoulder and my ear. I drew little apples in the corner where the pink line crossed the blue, next to the binder hole.

"Have not laid eyes on you in three days."

"I know."

"You haven't even come to school," she said. "You missed the picnic on the football field. You missed Ross Bailey mooning Coach Hatcher. You missed the mashed potato fight."

"School's over," I said.

"Ross Bailey has a fatter butt than what I would have thought."

"How could you not have thought he would have a fat butt?"

"Everybody was asking me about you, where you were."

"Did they ask you about your face?"

"Some of the guys did," she said, "but just because they heard about it. The bruise is gone. It's not even yellow now."

"Have you heard from Buddy?"

"No. I told you he said he'd leave me alone."

"Well, then."

"Have you written your speech?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, putting tiny serrated leaves on the stem of an apple. "I have written and memorized my entire speech."

"So let's hear it."

"It's a surprise."

"You are such a liar," she said. "You haven't written anything."

"I have so," I said, penciling in a sliver of light on the plump upper bulge of my apple.

"Is there a ballgame tonight?" she asked. "I could go with you."

"Well, yeah." I pressed the cap of the pen against my lip. "I guess there is."

"Who do you play?"

"The Jays."

"Oh, good," she said. "There'll probably be a fight."

"I don't know," I said. "I might not go."

"Oh--guess what I heard. And it better not be true or you're in big trouble."

"What's that?"

"Tina Fisher's little brother plays for the Astros, and she was at y'all's last game, and she said some guy was helping Wayne that was cute."

I chewed on the end of my pen.

"You're holding out," she accused me.

"It's just his nephew," I said.

"How old is he?"

"In college, I don't know."

"Where's he from?"

"I have no idea."

"How tall is he?"

"I don't know."

"You are holding out on me," she repeated. "I don't believe you."

"He's not that cute," I said.

"I'm coming with you to the park tonight," she said. "I don't care what you say."

"Well, you can go sit by yourself. I'm not going."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Oh, come on, Gabriel."

"No." I sighed into the phone. "I mean, we graduate tomorrow--everybody'll probably be out town tonight, we could ride around. . . ."

Rosemary was silent. "Well, whatever," she said finally. "I did hear Matt and them say they might run around town and screw up all the signs on the highway tonight."

"We shouldn't miss that," I said.

"I guess not . . . well, look--are you coming over to school today, or not? Tim Brady's going to read Laura's diary over the PA at break."

"Sounds fabulous," I said, "but I think I'll just stay home." By the time I hung up the phone the margins of my paper were lined with fat apples. I drew a long line through them, continuous from the top of the page to the bottom, and in the

center of the paper I began to sketch the arch of a bridge. *The arch was my imagination, of course, because my own real bridge was flat and dull as the concrete it was made of. I pictured an arch in my mind and on my paper, stretched like a woman's body over the water, kudzu clinging to and billowing from her rails like wild locks of hair, and my breathing came from deep in my chest as I saw fire swallow her whole.*

The sun was bright and white in the late afternoon when Mama and I brought Michael to the park for his game. Heat was creeping back into the air, wet and dense, where the rain had washed it out before. Michael's uniform was bothering him; the shirt was black polyester with gold cuffs and numbers, and it was heavy and hot on his shoulders.

Tee-Ball was not over yet. The scoreboard had allegedly been fixed since the last ballgame, and it read 15-14, fifth inning. The team with the Cody whose mama was pregnant was on the away side, down by one run, and the bleachers were nearly full, the crowd buzzing. Michael left to go toss pitches by the left field fence with his teammates, and Mama and I went to sit down.

There was a huge man anchoring down the bottom level of the bleachers whom I had never seen before, and we climbed past him to sit nearer the top. He was over sixty, with an impossible gut

and a measly web of black hair combed over the top of his head, which shone from between the strands as the sun struck it. Two of his fingernails that I could see were missing; the rest were outlined heavily in black. He wore Wranglers and a work shirt with the buttons popping off and black leather house slippers with white socks. In his mouth was a peeling cigar, unlit, damp from constant chewing.

Beside him sat a girl whose age was difficult to determine. She had short black greasy hair and a mustache, and she kept wiping her nose with her hand. She was smoking a cigarette; several butts lay quashed on the seat beside her in a little puddle of Sun-drop. She sat hunched over like an old woman, but she rocked back and forth a little, giggling even as no one was speaking to her.

The home team was coming up to bat for their last chance. Cody was popping in and out of the dugout like a jack-in-the-box, pumping his little fists and screaming bloody murder at the batter. I looked down at his mama, sitting two rows below us, and she seemed barely aware that he was making so much noise, her hand resting serenely on her sweet, full pumpkin of a belly. Her big wedding ring slipped to the side of her left ring finger so that the setting lay against her tummy, as if listening for a heartbeat.

The batter at the plate was tall and broad-shouldered for the age of five, and the firmness of his practice swings--the bat did not quiver in his grip--ensured that he would get on base.

"Come on, Steele, keep your eye on it!" the boy's daddy called to him, and then the stands joined in.

The huge man at the bottom of the bleachers hollered at him, his voice rolling from his impossible gut like thunder. "Be a hitter there!"

The boy was a hitter. He reached back and brought the bat around with a snap, cracking the ball over the toes of the third baseman and into left field. The entire outfield scrambled for the ball, and their coach started jumping up and down, yelling, "No! No! Let Blake get it!"

The batter rounded first and was bearing down on second before anyone had reached the ball. The next batter took up his helmet and his bat and dragged himself slowly toward the plate--it was the tiny blond boy, looking once again thin and distracted and angelic, his mouth drawn as he chewed on his bottom lip.

The boy on base ended up at third in a splat of dirt, belly first and with relish even though he was not in much danger of the ball reaching the base in time. The crowd was screaming and clapping.

"Luther Cordell!" the huge man growled, over the noise of the crowd.

The little angel boy looked over at him. He plodded over to the fence and put his fingers through.

The old man took his cigar between his fingers, and little wet bits of the casing fell through the bleachers to the ground. "Look here, son," he boomed, "I'll get you a hamburger if you

knock the daylights outta that ball." The stands rippled with laughter, all the way over to the sweating mothers in the concessions stand who were well within earshot of the man's powerful voice, and they cackled from behind their screen.

The girl beside him wiped her nose and giggled. "You better mind your paw," she said to the boy, the cigarette wagging between her lips until the hand coming down from her nose removed it.

"Ain't no free rides here!" the man hollered. "Gotta work for your supper!" He looked around to the mothers and fathers seated around him, and they laughed.

The little boy dragged his bat over to the plate.

"His name is Luther?" my mama whispered to me. There was a sorrowful, motherly look on her face.

In left field, where the Pirates were warming up, Wayne was standing with his arms folded, supervising Michael's practice pitches, nodding, spitting into the dirt. I looked up and down the fence in spite of myself--and there was Wayne's nephew, Hershey, draped over the links just beyond the dugout, studying home plate.

"Let's go, Luther!" the mothers in the heart of the right set of bleachers were calling. "You can do it!"

Little Luther lifted his bat, arching his back to compensate for its heaviness, and pulled it up over his shoulder. He stuck his tongue out as he brought the bat around slowly for a practice line-up. The bat jerked as it came to meet the top of the tee.

Then he brought the bat back again for the real swing. He stuck out his tongue again, lifted the bat off his shoulder, and yanked it around. His helmet fell into his eyes, and he missed.

Steele put his hands on his hips at third base. "Come on, Luther!"

"Watch your helmet, son," one of the coaches called to him, spitting out the side of his mouth.

"Hold it a minute!" someone yelled.

Hershey swung himself over the fence and trotted out onto the field. He had a small aluminum bat in his hand.

"Time out!" called the plate umpire, standing up.

"He needs a smaller bat," said Hershey plainly as if the umpire might not understand him, "and a smaller helmet."

Luther's coach didn't say anything. He spit a big brown wad into the gravel by the dugout.

Hershey walked over to little Luther and knelt down beside him. He took the wooden bat out of his hands and gave him the tiny aluminum one. "How's that?" he asked Luther, gesturing for him to hoist it up to his shoulder. Luther's tiny white arms lifted the bat up easily, and he smiled.

"We ain't got no smaller helmets," said Luther's coach, shaking his head.

Hershey stood up. "Well, let him at least try with the new bat. This other one's longer than he is." He adjusted Luther's helmet on his head, and said something to him so softly that none of us in the bleachers could hear.

"All right--play ball," said the umpire, pulling his mask back down over his face. Hershey jogged back over toward the fence.

Luther raised his bat up off his shoulders, and even tried shaking it a bit back and forth, as he had seen Little Leaguers do as they got primed to hit a pitch. He stuck out his tongue and swung the bat. It only grazed the top of the ball, but it made contact, and the ball rolled off the tee, beyond the dirt and into the grass toward the pitcher's mound.

"Go, Luther, go!" cried the mothers.

Luther dropped his bat and threw off his helmet, dashing for first base, his skinny little limbs flapping all around.

The pitcher, a pudgy boy who stood firmly planted in the dirt, leaned over halfheartedly at the ball, which trickled toward him so slowly that you could see the stitches on the seams. His coach leaped up and down. "Ethan! Ethan! Move to the ball, son!"

Wayne's nephew cupped his hands to his mouth. "Run, Luther!"

Luther slowed into first, as he was taught never to do, and he jumped onto the bag with both knees. He jerked his head back to look at his father in the bleachers, his eyes bright. The pitcher still hadn't picked up the ball.

Mr. Cordell reached into his back pocket for his wallet, drew out a faded five-dollar bill, and sent the greasy-haired girl to the concession stand.

The umpire at second base was shaking his head. "He's out," he said, waving his thumb. "He threw his helmet."

"Aw!" screamed the mothers from the heart of the bleachers.

"Oh, come on," yelled Hershey.

One of the mothers stood and shouted to the umpire. "He cain't see with the helmet on! You been listening for the past ten minutes?"

The umpire shook his head, keeping his thumb up, and turned his back on the mothers in the stands. Luther was still kneeling at the bag, his eyes on the old greasy man in the bleachers, his grin unfettered and missing two front teeth.

Luther's coach spit into the dirt. "Well, come on, son," he said to Luther, putting his hands on the boy's shoulders, "get up. You're out."

Luther snapped to attention then, the grin going from his face and ending up as the faintest of smiles. He looked to the second base umpire, who was not even looking back at him, and then to the next batter who was already lining up at the tee. He stood up, delicately stomped some dirt out of his shoes, and went to the dugout without saying a word. Then he emerged after a few seconds and went back to retrieve the helmet he'd tossed away. His eyes were on his shoes. He went back into the dugout and sat there on the side away from home plate, his fingers stuck through the holes of the fence, staring out over centerfield into the sky.

After Tee-Ball finished and drained away, Little League drifted in to take its place. Hershey took the plate with the hindcatcher, a scruffy little Pickensville boy named Lucas Gooch, and he began tapping grounders to short. Michael, whose arm was not so tender that day, remained in left field and pitched some easy balls to Wayne.

My daddy arrived straight from the bank in his slacks and button-down shirt. He came up to sit beside me and Mama for a little bit before going over to the Pirates' dugout.

"How was your day?" my mama asked him.

"Fine," he said, but he leaned over conspiratorially towards her. "Wayne talked to the board members last night about the mess with Peanut. He called me at the bank today."

"Well?"

"They don't recognize the forfeit--they gave Wilson a warning--but they said they're going to keep the new umpires."

Mama sighed.

"They said there wasn't a good reason to keep Peanut on when trained umpires were willing to come down to do the job," he said.

"What's a good reason?" asked Mama.

Daddy shrugged, and looked out over the field. His eyes wandered idly over centerfield and stopped there. "What the hell is that?"

Out on the centerfield fence, where once had hung the sign with the blue Napa Auto Parts logo, there now was a plain black board, freshly painted with no writing on it.

My daddy raised his red eyebrows.

The Napa Auto Parts store in Hope Springs was owned by the former vice-president of Long's Manufacturing, before it was bought out by Futures. Wilfred Long, of the Middlefield Longs, who always paid for new uniforms and bats for his team, never showed up for any of the games. His sign on the outfield fence, however, was repainted yearly in brilliant blue and gold.

Jerry Dog Wilson was huddled up with his team in the Jays' dugout, pounding a bat into the dirt to punctuate his sentences. He had to lean over to speak comfortably to his charges, because he was a tall man, a bit stooped in the shoulders, but with a splotchy complexion that was especially red in the neck.

"They got different caps tonight," my daddy said. "They got black caps and black shirts."

The whole Jays entourage, crammed into the far dugout in order to receive the pre-game motivational speech in the closest possible proximity, were indeed rid of their blue-and-gold Napa uniforms, all dressed in black with gray writing on the shirts. "I wonder why," I said. "Their new shirts don't look very happy."

"Those shirts don't look like they say `Napa' either," said Daddy.

Mama leaned forward and squinted. "They say `Futures.'"

"Damn that Wilson," said my daddy.

"Charlie," Mama chided.

"He knew I was going to ask for sponsorship."

"Oh, he did not."

"He had to have."

"How in the world could he have known that?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "Jerry Dog wouldn't think twice about using spies."

"With matching shirts and caps," said Daddy. His neck was blushing in tiny red rivers over his collar. "He beat me to it, and that's why they wouldn't back us."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it now," said Mama.

"Get Napa to sponsor you," I said. "I bet Wilfred Long's mad at Jerry Dog for pulling out after the season's started."

"I'm sure he's mad as hell if he pulled his *advertising* off the fence," said Daddy, a lone streak of color creeping up the left side of his neck to his chin. "Wilfred would go naked to Sunday church if he thought it'd sell one more wrench."

"How could he think that would sell one more wrench?" I asked.

"Charlie," said Mama.

"No way I'd ask Wilfred now. I won't take Jerry Wilson's leftovers."

"Wayne might," said my mama. "More comes out of his pocket than yours."

My daddy sat still and I watched the muscles of his Irish jaw flutter and grind.

Below us, in the wide vacancy left by the departure of the frame and voice of Luther Cordell's father, the young couple with the baby that I remembered from the opening day of the season came and sat down. The girl was sagging under the weight of the baby, and the boy was fidgety from the hunk of chew under his lip. I wasn't sure which Pirate they were associated with until they began calling to skinny little Lucas Gooch behind the plate, teasing him in heavy, poor Southern speech. The baby was promptly deposited in the gravel, naked but for his puffy rubber pants, and after chewing on the edge of the bottom bleacher slat for a moment, he began to crawl away.

Mama was watching him. "I wish they'd watch that baby," she said. "Look, he's already got gravel in his mouth."

On the field, Michael had stopped throwing to Wayne and was moving to the mound, winding his pitching arm in great circles to limber up his shoulder, his face as he squinted in the sun a study of deliberate seriousness, the reaction to anticipation experienced under the eye of a crowd. He shook his glove and beat it a couple of times against his thigh.

Daddy stood up. The color was fading out of his neck. "Are we going to have supper when we go home?" he asked Mama. "Or should I get a burger now?"

"There's a roast in the Crock-Pot," she said.

He tousled her hair a little with his hand, and she batted him away, but she was smiling.

"I'm off," he said, and he climbed down the bleachers. Wayne saw him coming and raised a hand in greeting, and when my father reached the fence they stood there and held a grim discussion with their arms folded, heads nodding in the direction of the Jays in their new black uniforms. Then finally they began studying my brother and stroking their chins.

Soon Lo-rene arrived with the mother of our centerfielder and they sat below us; the yellows in their hair clashed but still they sat together.

"Hey, Clare." Lo-rene's shorts were pinching the tops of her legs, making the marbled white rivers of the acid wash look like fissures ready to burst. "Reckon we'll play this game out, or get into another fight?"

"If they get into it again," my mama replied, "we are going to stand up and take the field and run this ourselves."

Lo-rene threw back her lacquered head and whooped. "Amen!"

The mother of the centerfielder, Jan Finch, shook her yellow head. "Good luck. When Jerry Dog Wilson dies, they'll do good to pry that damn rule book out of his tight little fist."

"I wonder, do the mothers on the Jays' side sit and rag him like we do?" said Lo-rene.

Mama shrugged. "As many of them as not have had to play against him, I'm sure. You can't help where your boy ends up."

Jan nodded. "It was luck of the draw where Abram Wilson went this year. He was on Beau's team when they's in Tee-Ball and I thought I's gonna have to strangle old Jerry before the season got overwith.'

"We've been lucky," said Mama. "Michael and Tyler Barfield have been on the same team since they started, and Wayne's really good with the kids."

A faint smile tickled Lo-rene's lips.

"He is, ain't he?" she said. "And what a sweet little nephew." She touched my arm with the giant square ovals of her fingernails, and I shivered.

"I think Gabriel should have to go over there and talk to him tonight," said Mama. "Don't you?"

Lo-rene looked up at her. "Uh-huh," she replied, but her eyes were cloudy underneath the fat coated lashes and the smile she put on her lips was flat.

"That boy is cute but I ain't sure about his nose," said Jan. She picked at a yellow permed curl with her fingers.

Wayne's nephew was now standing with my father and Wayne by the dugout. He had the rosters open to the working page and was holding the book against his abdomen so that the end dug into his ribs; my father was looking over his shoulder at the list and running his finger down past all the names, mumbling something to Wayne, who scratched his forehead under the brim of his cap and nodded. Wayne's nephew absently dug at the dirt with the heel of one shoe. One of them spit; I wasn't sure which, but I saw it

fly against the green of the field and smack the dirt, and none of their lips appeared to have moved.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Lo-rene. "What's wrong with their uniforms? I thought the Jays was gold and blue--no, I know they was."

"They *were* gold and blue," said Mama, "but take a look at what their shirts say now."

Most of Wilson's team was in the dugout, huddling together in a black ball to receive the great pre-game blessing. Lo-rene leaned forward to scrutinize them, screwing her lips and her eyes up into wrinkled wads that trailed lines all the way across her cheeks. "I cain't see the fronts of 'em," she muttered.

Jan Finch watched as one of Jerry Dog Wilson's helpers hung bats through the dugout fence by the handles, turning his torso our way intermittently. "They say, `Futures,'" she said.

"Futures?" Lo-rene's eyes unclenched, but the lines faintly remained.

"Jerry Dog's cashed in," Jan said flatly.

"Well, I'll be," said Lo-rene.

"Charlie was going to try to get them to back the Pirates," said Mama. "Jerry beat him to the punch."

"Jerry Dog *had* a sponsor." Jan picked at her hair and frowned.

Meanwhile the stands were filling. The graveled gap between the concessions stand and the bleachers on either side of the little building became crowded with lawn chairs, and the peeling

blue bleacher slats filled to the ends, depressed in their centers where the support was weakest. Many families sat together, but often the fathers drifted down to the front row where they could plant their feet in the gravel and shift around all they liked, elbow each other, and be a strong spit away from their sons when they made the jog from the dugout to home plate.

The second-floor balcony of the concessions building was skirted with twenty pairs of kicking legs. The kids running the electric scoreboard were set up at a small card table flanked on all sides by more kids. The children had scrambled up the stairs as soon as they had arrived with their mothers, vying for the choice spots all around the platform, plopping on their bottoms, scooting to the edge, hanging their legs over, and leaning their chests against the bottom slat of the railing. Some of the taller ones had problems because the upper slat obscured their vision; this was made tolerable, however, if they could manage to procure the seats directly in front, over home plate, where the foul-ball guard rose up high enough that the long-legged could touch it with their toes. If a foul ball were slammed up into the little cap of fence, they might be called upon to dislodge it, and if they couldn't stretch far enough, there was a broomstick propped in the corner of the railing that would do the job and which could also be used by quicker types to remove caps from concessions-stand patrons. "Oops!" they would bellow from above, and disembodied legs would wiggle with joy. Mothers

cringed at the creak of the platform under the swinging legs, but there was nothing to be done.

I noticed that in the bleachers there seemed to be a disproportionate number of big sisters there for their little brothers' games. My eyes passed over the away set of bleachers and there alone I counted eight girls whom I knew to be in high school--one of whom I was sure was an only child. I watched them for a few moments, kept an eye on their whispers--because some of them were sitting together--and where their looks fell.

The Pirates had assembled in their dugout to be read the roster. My father stood behind Michael, one hand on his right shoulder and the other winding Michael's pitching arm around and around on its cuff. Michael's head bobbed a little with the movement and he was not making an effort to fix his eyes on anything, so his gaze googled around the field and jerked to the rhythm of Daddy's winding. Wayne squatted in front of his team with the roster. Hershey sat on the ground, turning his cap round and round on his head as if he couldn't decide what made him comfortable. It was to this rotating cap whose embroidered "P" shone in the sunlight that most of the covert young gazes from the stands were attuned, I realized, and my stomach rattled in its empty hole.

Abram Wilson was not so tall as my brother. He tossed pitches in from the mound to his father, who was squatting behind the plate. Instead of coming around fluidly like my brother did, his pitch seemed composed of four separate motions in still

frames: he brought the ball and glove up to his face and hunched his shoulders; he raised his knee without moving his torso and kicked his foot from the ankle without moving the calf; then he hung in that position for a second, falling forward slowly like a tree just cut; then, just as he appeared in danger of tipping over, he sprang into the pitch and drilled it to the plate. He looked very uncomfortable. His shoulders never relaxed, as if he were constantly suspended from the collarbone. His pitches, though, were quite fast; they landed north of what I thought ought to be the strike zone, but perhaps I was biased because my brother's good pitches whistled in at the underside of the kneecap.

Hershey finally removed his hat when Abram was through practicing and the Jays left the field, and we all stood for the national anthem. Hershey's hair was swirled around and it stuck out over his ears. Several pairs of eyes in the stands looked reverently not at the American flag hanging limply in the warm air over centerfield but instead at the hair sticking out over Hershey's ears. I wondered how many mothers had gone home from the last game to their daughters and said, *Now honey, you better come to the next one and see this for yourself.* The national anthem sputtered over the speakers--from a tape in a jambox connected to the PA--in a tinny, fuzzy whistle that was nearly unbearable as we approached the land of the free. Four or five people applauded when it was over.

He drew a picture of *me*, I thought. I wished I had brought it with me, just to have it in my pocket and touch it between innings--I almost *had* brought it, but I had had a vision of it falling out of my pocket while I was talking to him, already a little too worn at the creases. I leaned forward and rested my chin on my fists, trying to make my hair swing over my face like graceful vines.

"Play ball!" called the umpire.

My father trotted out to first base, Pirates' cap in place, clapping his broad mitts together. For someone so large and well-clad in slacks and wingtips, it somehow did not look strange for him to be running and clapping. Wayne took his bowlegged stance by third base, his boot-cut jeans flopping down over the black cleats he wore--why Wayne would ever need cleats, I wasn't sure, because he hardly ever even unfolded his arms during a ballgame. His nephew stood at his side, and a little bit behind him, feet apart, hugging the roster on the clipboard to him, watching Abram Wilson take the mound again and run through his awkward pitching contraption a couple of times with his catcher.

Jerry Dog Wilson's assistant coaches jogged smartly to their places at third and first and along the fence (there were more of them than bases), whistles swinging across the expanses of their chests--Jerry Dog usually got his pals from his golf club in Alabama to help him coach, and they were all former baseball players themselves, and were in taut shape for an age when tautness had just become a bit more difficult to keep taut. They

wore the matching shirts Jerry Dog provided for them with tight gray athletic shorts and white cleats.

The first batter for the Pirates was the centerfielder, Beau Finch. He was skinny with a muddy complexion that made patches across the bridge of his nose, and his curly blond rattail bounced beneath the back of his batting helmet. He stepped up to the plate cautiously and dug his toes into the dirt, pulling the bat up into position, and he glanced back at Hershey, who nodded to him and gave him one thumb up.

Throats were being cleared all through the stands as the preliminary buzz of encouragement to the batter and the pitcher began, like an orchestra's concertmaster giving the first note and the instruments falling in behind him, holding on that high A-ish note that would not fall until the ball connected with a mitt or a bat.

"Dig in there, Beau," Jan hollered, leaning forward with her elbows on her thighs. "Start us off."

Jerry Dog Wilson emerged from the away dugout and stood behind my father; although it must have been hard for him to see over Daddy's shoulders, he acted as though he weren't even there. "Abram!" he yelled sharply to the mound. "Remember what I told you! Watch that elbow!"

Abram shook the ball around in his bare hand, testing the seams against the pads of his fingers, and then he brought that hand and his gloved hand together at his chest.

Beau hoisted the bat up into the air and stood waiting.

Jerry Dog yelled, "All right, men! One!"

Every Jay on the field but Abram snapped to attention.

"Two!"

In as perfect a time as nine boys could manage, they all jumped their feet apart and crouched low to the ground.

"Three!"

Each boy clapped his hand into his glove twice and began to chatter: "Annyannyannyanny. . . ."

"Oh, good Lord," said Jan.

The Pirates' side, led by mothers moved at the sight of such a stick of a boy standing bravely in the drone, began to scream. "You can do it, Beau!" "Let's go, Beau!" "Beau, Beau, Beau!" Beau looked ready to snap in two.

Abram kicked his leg, leaned forward, whipped his arm around, and released the ball.

"Swing!" cried all the Jays together.

Beau did.

The pitch was a little bit high, but so was Beau's swing, and the end of his bat nipped the edge of the seam of the ball and spun it back at Abram.

Jan leaped to her feet. "Run, honey, run!"

The ball had been thrown too hard for Beau's puny swing to give it any real momentum. Beau flung the bat behind him and took off for first--he was a good runner whose elbows and knees stayed close to his center--but all Abram had to do was hop to the front of the mound and wait for the ball to trickle to him.

He threw Beau out with a strike to first, beating him by only a couple of steps since Beau was so fast.

The Jays' side cheered and Jerry Dog pounded a triumphant fist into his palm.

"Good fingers!" he called to Abram.

"Good legs," my father said to Beau as he passed the bag. He clapped Beau's bony shoulder blade with his big hand.

"Way to make contact, son," called Jan. "You'll do it next time." She shook her yellow head as she spoke to us. "At least he made contact. That Abram throws so hard it scares me."

"He connected with the first pitch," said Lo-rene, patting Jan's leg. "That oughta scare Jerry Dog a little."

"Nothing scares Jerry Dog enough," Jan said.

Beau trotted past Hershey, who gave him the thumbs up, and into the dugout. The Pirates' next batter, Lucas Gooch, the hindcatcher from Pickensville, dug his toes in at the plate and brought his bat up over his shoulder. He was thin like Beau but wiry and tough and able to smack a ball through the gap between second and short that could take the tips off the grass. He was muddy-complexioned like Beau but his brown patches were due to the actual lack of bathing. His daddy, my own father had told us--Daddy felt sorry for Lucas and sometimes would try to get Michael and Tyler Barfield to take up with him, but it never worked because they insisted that they liked him okay but he smelled--worked in the quarries at Pickensville, and his mother had left them both several years before and taken Lucas's baby

sister with her. Lucas raised his bat and waved it back and forth as he spat across the plate. The stringy muscles in his arms pulled tight. The skinny young mother on the front row who appeared to be rooting for him called out, softly, "You go, Lucas."

Abram put the ball in his glove and stared at him.

"One!" hollered Jerry Dog. My daddy turned around to look at him. All the Jays on the field stood at attention, and Jerry Dog ignored my father.

"Two!" he cried, and his team assumed the crouch. Lucas Gooch continued to wave his bat, but he glanced over to Wayne.

"Time out!" called Wayne. The umpire raised his fist and stood up straight, lifting his mask.

"Wilson," Wayne yelled across the infield, not bothering to unfold his arms, "are your boys are going to jump and squat and turkey-call all night long, or are we going to get to play some ball?"

The mothers giggled and the fathers snorted, on both sides of the bleachers. Jerry Dog Wilson smiled.

"This ain't the Rockettes," said my father. "This is baseball."

All the fathers on the Pirates' side front row concurred, and they began to holler at Jerry Dog through cupped hands. I watched for a reaction from the Jays' bleachers, but they were quiet, although one of the fathers in an aquamarine lawn chair by the fence leaned forward over his hairy belly--it showed through

the bottom buttons of his shirt--and yelled, "Shut up and play the ballgame!"

Jerry Dog held his arms out in front of him, flipping the pages of the Little League rule book in his right hand with his thumb. "Show me where it says in here my men cain't all holler at the same time."

All the mothers began to squawk. "His *men*," Jan snorted.

"They never should have let on that it bothered them," said Mama. "Now he'll never quit."

"Well, don't blame Wayne," said Lo-rene.

Lucas Gooch stood at the plate with his skinny hip stuck out for balance, his bat resting on his shoulder, no expression flickering across his heavy pale eyes or sallow cheeks. Abram kept his hand in his glove at his chest, not stirring his front foot; it seemed that he couldn't quite remember if he'd begun to step and was afraid he'd balked even though time had been called; I had a feeling he'd been preached to on the subject on several occasions. The rest of Abram's teammates froze in mid-squat as if outhouses had just been blown off the lot of them, joints trembling a bit with awkwardness and strain, and they looked to Jerry Dog for reprieve and got none. Hershey turned his cap around backwards and waited with his lip curled up as if he had a very sour taste in his mouth. He looked as if he'd like to spit, and soon.

"I'm sure your book don't say they cain't holler whenever they want to," Wayne said to Jerry Dog, "I'm just saying that it's distracting my batter."

"You run your team, I'll run mine," Jerry Dog replied.

"You're bothering my batter."

"Teach your batter to concentrate."

"*I* cain't concentrate with all that going on. It gives me a headache," Wayne said.

The Jays' third baseman could stand it no longer. He straightened up and rubbed at his knees.

Jerry Dog saw him and pointed a finger. "Colby!" he barked.

Colby dropped back into his squat.

The umpire, a thickly packed man with jowls unusual for his young age, was growing impatient. "I ain't got all night here," he grunted, pulling his mask back down over his broad face. "Play ball!" Wayne threw up his hands.

Lucas stepped back into the box and raised his bat.

Abram had not moved since time had been called. He continued to hug his glove to his chest.

"Three!" Wilson growled, and his fielders, although momentarily tongue-tied at the appearance of a "three" without a "one" or "two" immediately preceding, began to chatter at Lucas.

My daddy shook his head.

Lucas looked back over his shoulder at Wayne, who ran two fingers across the brim of his cap and tapped at his nose with his pinky.

Abram kicked, hung, and swung around.

"Swing!' cried the Jays joyfully. Some stood up in relief.

Lucas did not swing.

The ball smacked the catcher's mitt. The umpire paused a moment, and then stood silently.

The Pirates' side cheered. "Way to watch, Lucas!" The Pirates in the dugout all turned their caps backward and raised their arms in some kind of incantation, humming indecipherably at Lucas, grinning when his poker face finally quivered with the hint of a smile.

"Good eye, son," my daddy said, clapping and then hitching his pants up a little as he bent and put his hands on his knees.

"Abram!" hollered Jerry Dog. "Son, do you *remember* what I told you about that elbow? *Do* you remember?"

Abram nodded as the catcher tossed him back the ball.

"Well, then," replied Jerry Dog. There was a smile on his face that didn't reach his eyes, and he chuckled shortly. "Act like you listen to me." One of his assistants clapped his hands together and said, "Let's go, Abram!" The others merely stood with their legs apart and hands clasped behind their backs.

Shouts rained down on the playing field from both sides of the bleachers, like hard kernels of feed tossed to pecking chickens. "You can do it!" "Make it be there!" "Be a hitter!" "Make him pitch to you!" "Rip it, buddy!" It could be difficult to pinpoint, were you the chicken, just which kernel was meant for you.

Lucas tapped his bat on the plate and lifted it up gracefully into the air.

"Back foot," Hershey called to him, tapping his right thigh with his hand. "Dig in there, Lucas."

The second pitch came right over the plate, and Lucas whipped around and caught none of it.

The Jays' side cheered for Abram. The Pirates in the dugout rattled at the fence and called out Lucas's name.

"That's okay, buddy," said Wayne, nodding his head and unfolding his arms just long enough to clap his hands together before he tucked them back in under his armpits and spat. "Way to swing for the fence!"

His words echoed all up and down our bleachers: "Good home run swing!" "That one was outta here!" "Get some wood on the ball!"

Lucas waited with his bat touching home plate for Wayne to wiggle his fingers underneath his armpits, and to snap his head twice to the side in a ferocious tic. Lucas nodded, a simple manly dip of the chin, and turned back to the plate, bringing the bat up and taking a tight little half-swing as he stared into Abram's eyes.

Pitch number three caught a little of Abram's errant elbow and landed upward of the catcher's right ear. Lucas held his swing.

The Pirates in the dugout rattled the fence and cheered.

Jerry Dog's ears pulled back for a moment, stretching his eyeballs out to the sides, and his teeth clamped around the sizeable hunk of gum he was chewing--he kneaded it in fierce, rapid-fire strokes--and he froze there for a moment, but then he clapped his hands together and nodded his head. "That's all right, Abram. Watch the elbow."

Abram nodded without taking his eyes off the catcher. He began his wind-up immediately and sent his fourth pitch to the plate; Lucas was ready. He arched his back shoulder and brought the bat to the ball, smacking it in a fierce low dribble just to the inside of the bag at first. The Jays' first baseman--Flint Farmer, whose headful of concentric circles, created on purpose with a razor at the barber shop, was hidden by his new black cap--tried to square up to it and get his glove down but wasn't quick enough. The ball sliced between his ankles before he got turned around, and zoomed for the right fence.

Lucas took off for first. The right fielder lunged fairly accurately for the ball--he had to follow it into the corner--and the Pirates' bleachers sprang to their feet and screamed.

The Pirates in the dugout rattled the fence and made piercing war whoops in the shallows of their throats.

Wayne hopped a little in his place at third, making a motion as if to clap but his arms were tangled in each other and so he left them crossed. My father leaped up and waved his arms in a very natural, unbankerly way.

Lucas rounded first just as the right fielder was catching up to the ball. His cleats threw up small hunks of dirt into the air as he came into line with second and pumped ahead, and he threw himself onto his belly and dove straight as an arrow for the bag. When the throw bounced in to the second baseman he had already come to a stop.

The crowd cheered. The couple with the baby on the front row hollered for Lucas. The boy whistled with his index fingers in his mouth, and the girl hung onto his arm and flopped around a little when he started to clap his hands. Their baby had crawled underneath the stands and was examining red crumpled Coke cups with drool oozing onto his chin.

"Way to hammer it, son!" my father yelled.

"That's the hammer!" agreed Wayne from third.

Lucas was standing with one foot off the bag, grinning and slapping the dirt from the front of his uniform.

Jerry Dog chewed his gum so that there was massive grinding in the muscles of his temple. He tapped his Little League rule book against his thigh with one hand and rubbed at his jaw with the other. He cocked his head and blinked his eyes nervously at infinitesimal intervals. He stepped forward and then back, toward Abram and then away, and I saw him mouth the word "elbow" once although Abram was not looking at him, and then a small sound came from his throat as if he thought to shout it, "Elbow!" but then his hand sneaked over from his jaw and covered his mouth. Energy from the repressed word seemed to channel suddenly

down into his feet and he stepped back and forth as if to rid himself of it.

Some elementary school girls who were sitting near the concessions stand were cheering earnestly, with tight school-cheerleader arm motions and rhyme schemes, looking at each other self-consciously to keep the rhythm as they clapped. There were five of them seated in a row, and they were attempting to make the letters of Lucas's name with their arms; the "S" couldn't figure out a way to make her representation realistic, and the "U" looked embarrassed for her. "You've got to want it/To win it/And we want it bad!"

The next batter to arrive at the plate was the egg-shaped left-fielder, Corey Taylor, who had practically no forearms and whose belly button loomed over the belt of his pants like a gaping canyon (his shirts always rode up over the soft white flesh of his belly). Corey had one swing to his name, and one swing only. This seemed due to the inadequacy of his forearms; he was only able to direct the bat to one place over the plate. If the pitch happened to be there, fine. If it didn't, he missed. But for someone whose swings were so lackluster and predictable, when he made contact, he knocked the crap out of the ball. His arms were pathetic but the weight of his stomach behind them was considerable.

On this particular day Corey was out of luck. Abram Wilson was too smart a pitcher to feed him a home run ball; under the watchful eye and the frantic jaws of Jerry Dog he directed three

straight pitches south of Cory's quick little swing. Corey retired to the dugout and Jerry Dog clapped his hands quickly, nodding at Abram. "Way to zing it in there, son. Good elbow."

"That's okay, Corey," my daddy said. Hershey clapped Corey between the shoulder blades as he passed him.

My brother was up.

Michael had been standing on deck, swinging two bats at once, practicing the dig of his foot and the arc of his follow-through, looking tall and sure of himself. I heard several of the mothers comment on how he'd grown over the past year; I heard several of the fathers wonder if he'd make the Hope Springs starting rotation when he started ninth grade. I saw Hershey say something to him as he dropped the heavier bat and twisted the one he intended to use in his hands, getting his fingers accustomed to the taped grip and the weight.

He came to the plate and spat across it.

Abram stood on the mound with the baseball behind his back, surely hearing his father mutter nervously by the dugout about his elbow, and he stared at his catcher with the intensity of a professional.

Michael tapped home plate with his bat, raised it into a couple of tightly controlled check swings that flexed the little muscles of his developing arms, and then held it up in the air, making it quiver deliberately as he waited for the pitch.

Abram brought his hands together and the leather of his glove twitched with the motion of his fingers inside.

Jerry Dog barked his players into their stance, and they began to chatter.

My brother spat again.

Abram kicked his leg.

My brother's front knee began to rock in anticipation of the swing.

The pitching arm fired for home, and my brother's bat came racing round.

"Swing!" cried the Jays.

The ball smacked the mitt.

My brother had to hop on one foot to balance the force of his swing, and Jerry Dog squeezed his hands together in delight and then made two triumphant fists, which he shook in the air. His rule book was clamped between his knees.

The Jays' side erupted in cheers. A terse round of tight claps and quick nods shot through the ranks of Jerry Dog's assistants.

My mama scooted forward in her seat and called to her baby. "That's all right, Michael! What a swing!" The stands were suddenly alive, shouting and echoing, leaning forward and back again; my father and Wayne simply stood where they were, foreheads knotting as their eyes drilled into Michael.

Abram smiled as the catcher lofted him back the ball and he flipped his glove over to snap it up. My brother and Tyler Barfield did not like Abram Wilson. This was not because they were on rival teams--that didn't matter off the field--but

because they thought he was too big a pansy to show any disrespect for the sacred art of baseball around his father, which they themselves were careful to do on a regular basis. Jerry Dog scared the shit out of Abram, and their little twelve-year-old minds could not respect that--never mind that my father was big and strong enough to wear the wadding out of my brother on a bad day, and that my brother actually *could* be afraid of him and sometimes was; it was simply that on the field Abram did not display the proper indifference, and my brother and Tyler, coaches' sons that they were, could not like him for it. But Abram did not seem to like them either.

Michael twisted his hands a little around the binding tape and hoisted the bat into the air again, his expression direct and unflinching. *Annyannyannyannyannyannyanny*, sang the infield.

Abram reared back, made his separate motions, and delivered a ball which seemed destined for the umpire's crown but then fell to the hindcatcher's. Michael watched it over with a disdainful flick of the bat, but shut his eyes when he saw the ball dip into the strike zone.

The umpire turned to his right and pointed a stubby finger at the Jays' dugout. He growled, "Strike!" and his jowls shook.

Michael's lip bent as the umpire spoke the word, and the Jays cheered for Abram, but then he straightened and spat and his eyes cleared.

The Pirates in the dugout raised their arms and shut their eyes, chanting Michael's name with their black caps turned

backward. Some of them were laughing and slitting one eye to gauge the reaction of the bleachers to their impromptu ceremony, but most of them had faces of reverent stone and voices as fervent as a choir of angels.

My father called to Michael. "Keep your eyes in it, son."

"Keep your head in there," Jerry Dog barked to Abram.

Abram's catcher returned the ball to him. Abram toyed with his cap, turning it around to air the strands of hair at his neck barely damp with first sweat, and he jiggled the ball in his fingers as he placed his foot alongside the rubber.

Michael's teammates in the dugout began to rattle the fence desperately and hum their impassioned pleas for a base hit.

Hershey had his arms folded across his clipboard. Michael turned to him as he tapped his bat in the dust, and he said, "Michael, you know where the ball is."

Michael nodded. He turned to the plate and pressed his toe fiercely into the dirt, raising his bat again but keeping it still as the air before a storm.

Abram nodded his head at his catcher.

The arm came round.

The splitting crack seemed to come before the ball had left Abram's hand; Michael's body was spread to meet the ball in the barest second, his arms flung tight, his lips curled in a sneer of exertion, and the bat flying for eternity. The sound of the ball against the bat was solid and thick and fierce, and the crowd sprung up without even having to think.

The ball tore straight forward.

Abram's eyes rolled up in a split second, as if to warn his forehead where the ball was headed.

The bat left Michael's hands and his body lurched across the plate toward first.

Abram's glove came up as his cheek snapped instinctively away from the bullet aimed at his head.

The thud of the ball against Abram was only slightly duller than it had been against the bat. His feet followed the arc of his head as it dove from the pitcher's mound to the green grass behind, and the bipartisan assembly of mothers gave a great collective shriek.

Michael was off for first, dirt flying in the wake of his cleats, but the Jays' staff was converging on the field, and the umpire called time.

Abram lay flat out with his limbs splayed and crooked but for his gloved hand, which had not moved from his face. The silence as the coaches scrambled for him was ugly, blue with the held breaths of every mother who watched. Abram's own mother, Jerry Dog's wife, clutched at the chest of her blouse and ran to the dugout.

My brother walked to first and stood dutifully on the bag with his hands on his hips, looking first at Daddy and then at the felled pitcher.

A swarm of black shirts circled around Abram's body, which rocked back and forth a little, wiggled, and moaned slightly.

Jerry Dog, making molecules of his bubble gum, was the last to reach his son, and he stuck an impatient arm through the crowd of helpers to grab Abram's glove.

"The ball's here!" he cried, pulling Abram's arm up straight.

The umpire, now at the mound, paused to look at the glove, and he reached out to check its contents.

He shrugged and turned to the crowd. "The batter's out."

As my brother threw his warmups to Lucas Gooch, the both of them grinning and showing off, Hershey stood just off the mound and nodded when Michael's form was as he thought it ought to be. He rocked back and forth on his heels, his calves turning to rocks and then relaxing, and I kept my eyes on the small alert pockets of girls scattered throughout the bleachers.

The baby underneath the bleachers was banging its head against the slat on which its parents were sitting, but they didn't seem to notice. Its wet baby lips were ringed with gray mud, and rocks clung to its rubber pants.

Jerry Dog Wilson was crouched in front of his first batter, demonstrating some new signals he'd just come up with--either that, or something stubborn was hanging in his nose that he couldn't remove; he swiped and batted at it but with a rhythm like Morse code which made me believe it was deliberate. When he

was done he straightened up, gave the batter a sturdy thump on his helmet, and jogged over to third base. His assistants spread all around, like watchdogs.

Abram sat in his dugout looking sullen under a thick block of towel-wrapped ice pressed to his temple. He had come off the field waggling between two of his father's coaches like a piece of wet spaghetti; although his glove had taken the brunt of the hit, it had smacked his face unapologetically right across the cheekbone. Several of his teammates had jumped up and down and lauded his amazing catch, but he had only glared at them. His mother held her arms out to receive him when he was escorted off the field, but he lurched past her and collapsed onto the dugout bench. She said to her husband loudly, "Look at this boy. You cannot expect him to pitch. He needs to see a doctor." Jerry Dog had come over to her with an arm extended to caress her shoulders, speaking to her in tiny tones that brought her own volume down to his, and we could no longer hear what they were saying, but Abram had remained on the bench.

The batter took his time about getting to the plate; he was twirling his bat around from his wrists and jabbing at the air with it, making sudden scissorcuts with his legs and breathing out forcibly with each thrust: "Wah! Wah!" I guessed he was taking TaeKwonDo, probably at the Saturday night classes in the back of the dig store on the highway. Some of the mothers on the Jays' side were giggling at him, and I heard a man yell, "All right, Aaron, cut that out!"

My brother held the ball behind his back as he watched Aaron dance around behind the plate, wielding his bat as if it were a weapon. The umpire ducked as a blow whistled by his head, and Jerry Dog started clapping his hands furiously. "Hey there, Aaron! Where are you? Where are you?" Aaron grinned and jabbed at the air again, and Jerry Dog's temples began to blotch. "Quit it, son," he said, nodding and clapping his hands and even managing a short chuckle, but his temples grew redder and I could see the pathway of a vein from where I was.

Aaron stepped in to the plate, and the umpire pulled down his mask. My brother stood calmly upon the mound and shook his shoulders, tugging at the collar of his shirt a bit to get it away from his neck.

My father stood with his arms folded by the dugout. He didn't look as if he were grinding his teeth to powder, like Jerry Dog did, but he was taking in my brother's entire stance, shifting his weight on his feet as if he were trying to impart a feeling of balance to Michael, who didn't need it.

Aaron tapped the plate with his bat and got ready to swing, and my brother raised his knee, which seemed to propel his arm around as if they turned on the same fulcrum. He was a perfect, remarkable machine.

The pitch landed in the dead center of the plate, just below Aaron's knees.

The umpire stood silently; he made no motion and stepped back a bit from the plate.

"Oh, come *on*," shouted Lo-rene. "That was perfect!"

Lucas Gooch, the hindcatcher, tossed Michael back the ball. Michael turned and grinned at my father, who was exchanging a look with Wayne; they seemed to be agreeing tentatively not to argue over the Pirates' first pitch of the ballgame. The fathers on the front row of the bleachers made loud comments intended for the umpire to overhear. "Well, if that ain't a strike, we're gone be here all day."

It wasn't a strike, and neither were the next three pitches, which fell more or less in the same spot. Aaron flipped his bat into the air in a tight spin, caught it by the end, and laid it gently near the on-deck patch of mud, and he trotted off for first with a bounce so unbridled that it forced him to take some extra steps and actually skip to the bag. I could picture his parents enrolling him in TaeKwonDo, and I could also picture them wishing they hadn't.

Lucas came out to the mound to talk with Michael; the whole crowd watched them shake their heads in disbelief although both of them were still smiling with the freshness of the game, and the fathers began to offer their support from the front row. "Son, we cain't believe it either." "You keep on keeping on, there, Michael, you ain't had a bad one yet."

My father and Wayne were headed for the plate to talk with the umpire. Their voices were still calm and their expressions conciliatory, but their hands were flying, rushing to indicate the exact whereabouts of the previous pitches relative to the

plate. The umpire held his mask in his hand. He did not look unsympathetic or irascible, but his heavy jowls seemed to make him unmovable. I heard my father say, "It was right below his knees," and the umpire replied, "Shoulder to knee is the strike zone," and Wayne said, "That boy is throwing major league strikes," and the umpire replied, "This isn't the major leagues." My father shook his head and said something about how having Michael pitch higher would encourage bad habits that could hurt him later on. The umpire just pulled his mask back over his head.

Jerry Dog, meanwhile, had a runner on first. His assistant nearest first was leaning over to Aaron--who was hopping nervously around the bag like a lit firecracker hopping on the ground before it explodes--and instructing him on the size of his leadoff. As soon as Michael had the ball in his glove on the pitcher's mound, Aaron danced off the bag toward second and hovered in the dirt about six feet from first base.

Jerry Dog hunched over, his hands on his knees, and stared at Aaron, pointing to his own eyes as if to draw Aaron into a trance.

My father called out to Michael, "Keep it up higher, son."

The next batter was one of the first normally built boys I'd seen all night, the flesh of his arms neither pudgy nor taut. He squared up to bat, and Michael prepared to pitch, when suddenly Jerry Dog called out Aaron's name; Michael looked over to first to make sure the leadoff did not necessitate a throw; having made

sure it didn't, he lifted his knee and started his motion to the plate.

Jerry Dog, together with all his assistant coaches, at the point when the ball left Michael's hand, yelled, "*Go*!"

Aaron took off for second base.

Michael, jarred by the sudden noise which actually was begun while his fingers were still touching the ball, jerked his follow-through and sent the pitch flying over the catcher's head.

Jerry Dog sprang to third and waved Aaron around second.

Lucas Gooch threw off his mask and scrambled for the ball, which had hit the fence and was rolling toward the first base line.

Jerry Dog motioned for Aaron to come into third standing, and the Jays cheered and rattled in their bleachers. The Pirates' side rumbled, and the fathers in the front row shot forward in their seats and began to shout something.

"Hold it!" cried my father. "Time out!"

The umpire raised his mask.

"They've got their boy running before the ball leaves the pitcher's hand," Daddy protested.

"The man in the field didn't call it," shrugged the umpire.

Jerry Dog's ears pricked up; you could see his temple muscles twitch. "My man did *not* run before his time," he said, chomping his gum. "He had a leadoff, the pitcher elected not to throw, he maintained the leadoff, he ran as the ball left the pitcher's hand."

The umpire cast his eyes to the clouds. "I'll be keeping an eye on it."

Michael was standing on the mound with his glove tucked in to his hip, one leg out defiantly and his bottom lip between his teeth, taking it in.

The umpire called for play to resume, and the batter took the box and Michael put his right foot against the rubber, keeping his eye on the flitty Aaron at third base. He brought the ball into his glove.

Jerry Dog hunched over behind Aaron, jabbering in his ear and running jumpy fingers across his chest in some obscure design. His assistants all had their eyes glued to him.

Michael stared at Aaron until he was satisfied with his leadoff, and then he began to pitch.

"*Go*!" barked the Jays' coaches. The sound was like a bullet being fired, and it echoed off the outfield fence.

Michael jumped, and once again the ball flew north of Lucas's head, but Lucas got a glove up to stop it.

Aaron never moved, never even feinted toward home.

Michael turned angrily to Wayne and Daddy.

Wayne called, "Time!" and he and my father wore ugly looks as they walked out to the mound. I noticed that my brother was picking at his arm, which was bleeding again from the crusty maroon stripes running from his elbow.

Mama sighed. "Get your fingers away from your arm," she said softly.

The conference at the mound was short and absent of gestures. The crowd on our side was growing restless, the front row hacking at the umpire with as little subtlety as they could manage. Daddy and Wayne stood at the mound; my father kicked absently at the rubber, and Michael looked at neither of them but instead at Lucas, who was grinning at him from home plate. No one's lips were moving. Daddy looked at the rubber, Wayne stared out at the outfield fence and shook his head, and Michael made faces at Lucas. After a few minutes on the mound with no apparent words exchanged, Daddy and Wayne left Michael to himself and the game resumed.

Michael warmed up his next pitch slowly. I could see his shoulders rise as he breathed through his nose. He winced a little as he came around, preparing to hear from Jerry Dog and his backup chorus.

There was no sound. Jerry Dog and his crew stood still.

The ball came across the plate without much fire and lobbed into Lucas's mitt right at the batter's head. The batter did not swing. Michael grunted in disgust. So did Daddy.

"Don't pay them any attention," he called out to Michael. "You just pitch."

And so Michael did. Jerry Dog, after running his hands across his chest, waited for Michael's arm to come round, and barked, "Good one!" from the bottom of his lungs. The pitch sailed in northwest of the strike zone by a wide margin. Mothers and fathers alike on the Pirates' side began a noisy uproar, and

the Jays' fans sat uncomfortably still. The batter trotted to first base, and the ump called time and motioned Jerry Dog over to him.

Jerry Dog paced vigorously to the plate. "I ain't doing nothing that's against the rules!" he insisted.

"It's not the rules, it's common courtesy," called my daddy from first. "It's sportsmanship."

"If your boy's a man he needs to learn to take a little competition," replied Jerry Dog.

"My boy's not a man," my mother frowned. "He's a boy."

The umpire took his mask completely off his head and breathed some fierce air into his ample jaws. "I'm not going to spend all night arguing with you people," he boomed, and the stands grew quiet. He took Jerry Dog aside, to the third base side of home; my father and Wayne converged at home plate, and they motioned for Michael to join them. Michael complied only with a tremendous roll of the eyes that must have strained the cords holding them in his head.

"Enough already!" hollered Lo-rene. All the mothers were shifting in their seats.

"Go down there and see what they're saying," my mama said to me. "If they're being mean to him you come back here and tell me."

When I reached the fence the huddle was intense. Wayne was standing protectively over my brother, arms tucked in and cleats planted, nodding sympathetically as Michael was speaking. Daddy

was crouched in front of Michael, stroking his chin. Hershey stood apart from them all, his hands clasped behind his back and clutching his clipboard, listening respectfully.

"I can't help it," my brother was saying.

"Well, you're jumping like you're scared," my father said. "If you know he's gonna do it then why would it scare you?"

"It's worse knowing he's gonna do it," Michael insisted. "You try it." He caught my eye through the fence. "Hey, get me a Coke." Wayne and Hershey and my father all looked over at me suddenly.

"I don't know that you need a Coke," said my father.

Michael grunted and rolled his eyes, and he wound his pitching arm in its socket and flexed his elbow. "Why not?"

"Aw, let him have one, Charlie," said Wayne.

"You got money?" I asked Michael.

"No, dork," he said. "I'm pitching."

"What I saw you doing wasn't pitching."

"Oh, for crying out loud," said Daddy, fishing in the pockets of his slacks for quarters. "Here."

I took the change through the fence and went to the concessions stand. As I was cozied up to the screen waiting for one of the mothers to pour a Coke, I felt someone pinch my elbow.

I turned around and saw Hershey grinning at me, and my stomach swam around and knocked up against my heart.

"Don't blame your brother for the way he's pitching," he said. "It's not his fault."

I swallowed. "I don't blame him."

"He doesn't have the concentration yet to be able to block out the other coach," he said, shaking his head. "He thought he did, but he doesn't."

"He's only twelve," I said.

"Exactly."

The woman behind the screen pushed my Coke out to me, and Wayne's nephew reached out and took it from me. "I came out here to get this," he said. "Michael said thanks."

"I bet he did," I frowned, and as I stood there he smiled and walked away.

Suddenly some impulse sprang from my stomach to keep him from leaving, and before I realized what I was saying, I called out his name: "Hersshhhh. . . ."

He turned around and raised his eyebrows at me; he didn't seem to be curious that I knew his name. "Yeah?"

"You didn't sign my picture," I said. An unwelcome blush spread hot fingers over my face, and I stood still and willed the blood to go back down my neck and to the rest of my body, which was a little tingly and needed it.

"I'll draw you another," he said. He raised the cup of Coke a little, as if he were toasting me, and then he was gone.

Flint Farmer, the Jays' first baseman, was the next to take the plate. In the on-deck circle he lowered his helmet onto his head and hid the bullseye his barber had sculpted into his head; there was not a parent within earshot who did not put in two or

more cents' worth about the state of his hair, and he seemed to derive a reasonable amount of pleasure from it. He raised and lowered his helmet a couple of times and stuck out his tongue at Michael, not between his lips as a prissy insult, but out from a wide-open mouth in a brotherly comic gesture.

"Thank God that crap will grow out," said Lo-rene, touching her fingers lightly to her own hair, which did not move underneath her touch.

"He ain't going to let it grow out," said Jan. "You look at his face and you tell me you think he's going to let that grow out."

Aaron hopped fanatically about the bag at third, drifting far enough to the wrong side of the bag, out toward left field, that Jerry Dog had to dart after him, take him by the shoulders, and place him on the track for home. Aaron crouched there and danced a bit with his knees bent, with an intense look at my brother that would have seemed like a dare to throw him out except that all the giddy wiggling gave him an air of utter harmlessness. My brother glanced at him and then chucked the first pitch to the plate.

"*Go!*"

Michael did not flinch this time, but his pitch landed to the outside, Flint declined to swing, and Aaron once again did not make the slightest attempt to steal.

The front-row fathers gave a great cry, and a volley of spittle arched for the fence. "Of course he ain't going nowhere,

he's on third!" one hollered. "Don't you listen to him, Michael! They's just trying to mess with your head!"

Mama was clenching her teeth. "I swear, why can't they just play the game?"

The umpire pointed a fat finger at Jerry Dog in warning, but Jerry Dog was too caught up in stepping back and forth at third and muttering at Aaron, who was twitching in the opposite pattern, together creating a nauseating little tango to have to watch from the stands.

Hershey whistled with his two fingers in his mouth--I found that the first time I stared at him from the field after having called him by his name, I wanted to say it aloud again, and I almost did; the "sh" in the middle of "Hershey" popped right out of my mouth, and my mother turned to me and said, "What?" and I pretended to cough--and he got my brother's attention, whereupon he just shrugged. At least that's the way it seemed to the crowd, but Michael grinned back at him and nodded as if he'd received an important message.

He jostled the ball in his hand and brought it to his glove.

Flint spat and dug his front toe in. His leg waved around like jelly down to where it remained anchored by the toe in the dirt.

Michael raised his knee and fired around.

"*Go*!" squawked Jerry Dog.

The pitch seared a line right under Flint's swing, straight into Lucas's mitt.

The Pirates' side roared. "There's you one, buddy!" cried the father closest to the plate.

Aaron, of course, had not budged off third.

Michael wasted no time delivering again. He shot the next pitch into the same slot, the ball fooling Flint into the chase but coming too fast to be hit. Flint's home-run swing spun him around and nearly onto his rear end. It unnerved him to the point that he passed up the next pitch, which only missed by a hair; this in turn unnerved him into swinging at the next one, which left a smoking hole in his bat.

The front row of fathers could not spit fast enough. They rose to their feet and clutched at the fence as Flint removed his helmet and trotted back to the dugout. "There's your pitch, big man!" they cried to Michael. "Smoke it to 'em, baby!" The mothers behind them cheered in relief, and my father and Wayne both looked as if they'd just passed a tremendous gallstone. Jerry Dog spit out his gum on the spot and escorted Flint into the dugout with a few quiet words.

Michael had found his warm and fuzzy spot. Jerry Dog and his toadies continued to bark at him at the point of his follow-through, but he threw only strikes--slightly higher than the pitch he had worked so hard to perfect--to the next batter, who could manage only a weak spinning foul on the second pitch before he struck out. The last man up for the Jays popped up to the infield, leaving Aaron to dance alone on third base for a few entertaining seconds before he realized the inning had indeed

come to an end and was prodded off the bag by Jerry Dog's hand on his elbow. He spun and high-kicked back into the dugout, where one of his teammates had to duck to avoid a cleat in the head.

Lo-rene patted Mama on the knee. "Your boy is something else."

"His daddy is something else, too," said Mama. She was watching my father and Wayne, who had descended upon Michael as he left the mound and placed their hands on his back, like bodyguards flanking a celebrity.

"We're not sure *what* else," I said.

"We're not even making guesses," said Mama.

Abram Wilson looked puffy and pale when he took the mound again, and his mother stayed by the dugout fence and stared at him all while he tossed his warmups, her fingers clutching the links. As he threw to his catcher there was no trace of a smile anywhere about his face. The front row of Pirates' fathers were watching him with strange looks upon their faces; they had huddled mysteriously as Michael had been spirited off the mound a few moments ago and appeared to be deep in discussion.

As the first Pirate batter took the plate Abram looked near to fainting, and our bleachers creaked as the entire front row stood up and lined up along the fence.

"What on earth are they doing?" Jan wiped the sweat from her forehead. "I have not known my husband to stand up during a ballgame for any reason unless they're giving away the burnt hamburgers."

It took only Abram's first pitch to find out. As he kicked his leg out--it seemed to be a tremendous effort for him, as if he were only just realizing the inefficiency of his windup--and his arm flung the ball around, the entire row of fathers at the fence screamed, "*Go*!"

Jerry Dog dropped his rule book.

Abram's pitch went over his catcher's head, and he sank to his knees in the dirt of the pitcher's mound.

My father and Wayne emerged from the dugout and stood dumbly by third base.

The umpire stood up, removed his mask, and threw it onto home plate. "That's it!" he cried. "I declare this game an official loss for both sides. Until you can figure out how to play ball in a sportsmanlike way, you're not going to play it at all while I'm here."

My father and Jerry Dog turned simultaneously splotchy, and the guilty fathers retreated sheepishly to their seats in the bleachers. Abram knelt sickly in the dirt, and his mother rushed onto the field. When she reached him and tipped his head back to look into his eyes, he did not resist.

Jerry Dog picked up his rule book off the ground and pointed to the Pirates fathers, who had their arms folded and had returned to a normal spitting pattern in an attempt to appear nonchalant. "Throw them out," he sputtered, "but don't penalize the teams."

"You started it," my daddy hollered.

"A loss for you," reiterated the umpire, pointing to Jerry Dog, "and a loss for you," pointing to my father and Wayne.

The stands groaned.

My mama stood up. "It feels like we've been here an eternity," she said.

"And now," sighed Lo-rene, "we can just go home."

There were not many words in our car on the way home, although I kept thinking to myself, *black leather house slippers, peeling cigar.* As Michael was getting into the car, Daddy clapped him on the back and said, "You were the man."

"The man," I repeated as Michael slid in beside me in the back seat. "The man."

Michael gulped down some of his free Coke and threw his cap into the floorboard. "Shut up."

Chapter Seventeen

It was the rap music, or anything on MTV, that most of the mothers didn't like to have in the house. The guttural beats made them nervous and they wondered why the kids wouldn't listen to real music, like some George Jones or a little Patsy Cline, like what they grew up with. They saw on Oprah where the music kids listened to today made men rape women, and small boys shoot bigger boys with automatic weapons, and straight-A students take drugs, and little girls have sex before they were ready. The stuff wasn't even music--it was just a fast-paced command, and if it rhymed it was by accident. Real music was a slide guitar with a little flirting from a fiddle.

What the mothers didn't know was that it was the fiddles that were whining when their daughters lost the great white blossom somehwere in the woods and couldn't find it back again. There would be a prom, or a graduation, or just a quiet Saturday night when nobody got shot in Pickensville, and the windows of the trucks gathered at the Quik Mart would be rolled down and everybody would disperse into the darkness. When Charlie Daniels was squealing from the tape player and wind was roaring into the cab, each driver would search for the dead-end roads that faded out into the tangled borders of someone's wooded property, and the girl in the cab with him would suddenly feel that it took two to drive. She'd scoot over the stick shift and twine herself through his arms, the fiddle talking to her body in a minor key that appealed to her teenage sense of the dramatic. If the

fiddles were still playing by the time the boy found the first suitable spot and yanked the keys out of the ignition, the deal was mostly likely done; and if there was a Vince Gill tape he could slip in on the heels of Charlie, the boy was home free. The sweet tenor would oil the last reluctant wheels and send everything into motion there under the loaded gun hanging in the rack.

And it wasn't necessarily hip-hop that was blasting at the parties either. Where there were campfires in secluded hollers, there were boys who believed the South was going to rise again and wanted to sing about it. Where there was beer there were songs about beer. The fashioning of lines of white powder on cold flat surfaces did not require a background of synthesized tombeats, only a wailing fiddle and a willingness to glorify the fallen Confederacy.

All the while, the mothers, having prayed for their children and set their snooze radios to WJIV Your Country Hitkicker, were asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Sometimes she would go out behind the barn, into the pastureland where there were walnut and poplar trees and a sluggish creek choked with pollen, and lie in the grass where no one could see her. She would spread out her arms and her legs under God's sky and wonder what it would be like if she were dead. It was funny, she thought, that in church under the watchful eyes of statues it felt like a sacrilegious thing to ponder, but out here in the fields under the watchful eyes within her it seemed the most natural question in the world.

Chapter Nineteen

"This is the last time we'll sit on these bleachers."

"No, it's not. You'll be here for football games and stuff."

"It's the last time Mr. Morgan will tell us to sit down and shut up and listen to him."

"You're going to miss that?"

"Yes," Page said.

I tapped my pen against an empty sheet of paper. The sun on the school football field threatened to be blistering by noon, and my entire graduating class was sitting on the bleachers awaiting instructions for the rehearsal march onto the field. Some junior boys from Ag were rolling a dusty old piano from the band room across the fifty-yard line. Most everyone was subdued, watching with quiet faces as the principal and the guidance counselor straightened folding chairs into neat rows. Rosemary had not arrived yet.

"Don't wait on me tonight to go out to the river," said Page. "I think we might have to go to Sammy's mama's to take pictures after the dance, so we might be a little late."

"Okay," I said. "Rosemary'll be with me."

Page used her hand as a visor against the sun. "I wish I was going off to school with you."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do," she said. "It's going to be you and Rosemary off by yourselves, like it always is."

I started to write my name in the margins of my paper. "Ten to one she'll decide not to go."

"It'll be U.T. this, Knoxville that, football games and parties, me and Rosemary this, me and Rosemary that, like, all the time. I'll hate it."

"I wouldn't worry about it."

Page looked down at my paper. "I cain't believe you haven't wrote your speech," she said. "You have nine hours and all you got on paper is your name."

"Encourage me," I said. "I need affirmation."

She put her arm around me and laid her head on my shoulder. "You're my best friend," she said. "I always liked it being just the two of us."

I twirled the point of my pen on the paper.

Page remained draped over me for a few moments, and then she sat up straight again. "It's still weird to me that St. Mary's is gone," she said.

"I know."

A skinny little sophomore girl with hair that preceded her came out onto the field and sat at the piano where the Ag boys had dumped it just shy of the end zone. I didn't know her name; I just knew she hung out with the Future Homemakers of America by the Home Ec room between classes. She placed her fingers on the keyboard, adjusting them several times, and plunked out the first chord of "Pomp and Circumstance," her left hand considerably behind her right. We were sitting so far from the piano that I

saw the keys depressed a fraction of a second before I heard the sound.

"I thought it felt like the end when we graduated from there," Page said, "in those dresses all the way to the floor and the bishop saying Mass . . . but *this* is what feels like the end."

"I don't know," I said. "I think more was over then than is over now."

"I don't see how."

I shrugged, staring at the sun growing brighter on my blank white paper.

"Is your daddy coming in?" I asked.

Page shifted in her seat, poking careful fingers into her stiff, striped bangs, testing them to check that they were aloft. "We cain't find him," she said. "Didn't even know where to send an invitation."

I looked up at her. "Surely he knows. Surely he's not far."

"Maybe," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You're here and Mama's here . . . and Sammy, which I don't care about."

"Oh, you do, too."

"I don't even know where he is now," she said, twisting around and looking back toward the school building. "He came

with me this morning, he said he was going to get more chairs for Mr. Morgan. . . ."

The principal stood near the piano amid a complicated snarl of wires. He raised the microphone on the dais to his mouth, the sun burning down on his bald head, and ordered us to line up under the far goalpost, boys on one side, girls on the other. We all stood and began to drift out of the home bleachers, and suddenly my blank paper and I were lost in a sea of people I did not really know.

The rest of the day I spent wandering around with my paper and pencil under the prickly gaze of my mama, who fussed with the silver and the dusting and fluttered around me like a squawking hen. I felt her eyeballs over my shoulder measuring the length of the fake paragraph I was constructing to appease her sanity as I struggled to come up with something real in my mind. "We have come here tonight to show you who we are," I wrote in big ugly ink letters, dribbling blots off the ends of the characters, and my mama seemed at least to breathe after ink made an actual physical appearance on the page. I copied the sentence over and over and over until it made four paragraphs on two sheets of paper, and made sure I stood well away from my mother as she flew back and forth past me in a flurry of flour and furniture polish.

At some time in the afternoon when my mother had sufficiently mired herself in dishwater I snuck into my parents' bedroom closet and wormed through my father's pile of winter sweaters in the back. There was a silver box underneath; I knew

it was there because my father had specifically shown it to me and my brother, in case we were ever alone in the house at night and thought we heard anything outside. (I had written down in my book that day, *ice-cold metal, sticky trigger.*) The gun in the silver box was kept loaded, now that we were old enough not to play around and kill ourselves by accident, and since Daddy knew that if I were ever threatened and needed a gun I would not only forget how to load it but also tremble too hard to keep bullets between my fingers. I didn't know what kind of gun it was; it was small and heavy and therefore was not used to kill deer, and that was the extent of my knowledge of guns. This time I didn't take it out of the box. I put the box under my shirt and stole it upstairs, and when the time came to get dressed for the graduation ceremony I opened the silver clasp and lifted the lid. I wrestled the gun gently from the velvet-covered grooves and stuck the thing in the waistband of my suit skirt and quickly zipped my white gown over it. The reality of bullets aimed in the direction of my toes made me walk funny for the rest of the night. My mother asked me if something was wrong with my hip when I came downstairs, and I shook my head so hard that she said, "You better sit down and let me pin your cap to you. You don't look so good."

By the time the actual ceremony was beginning, and I had my mortarboard clamped unshakeably to my head with bobby pins, I still had no words on my page and I was too concerned with the pain of the bobby pins digging ditches into the tender skin

behind my ears to think of words to put there. The tip of the gun barrel under my gown kept flipping the elastic band of my panties upside down and it was driving me crazy. The metal was no longer cool and it didn't feel foreign any more; it felt like part of my hip, a small, annoying tumor that I had to walk with a swagger to hide. I caught Rosemary's eye as we lined up for the march onto the field; I could tell she knew my speech was in need of her prayers. Page was right next to me in line, and she yanked my tassel with considerable force as "Pomp and Circumstance" began.

"Watch it," I winced.

"I love you," she said, her lower lip trembling.

"Don't cry *now*," I said. "Cry after I pass out on the podium."

"This is *it*," she moaned softly. "It, it, it."

All through the opening march and the prayers and the terse greeting from the salutatorian--Kenny Ray, the Hope Springs place kicker whose snivelly voice I could not stand--I thought of nothing but the places in which my cap was stuck to my head. I couldn't help it. I noticed that Jamie Pinedweller was in his place in the seats, looking barely dry from the shower, so I assumed he had passed geometry after all. I saw my daddy sneak around to the front of the parents' section and whip out a camera as he crouched on one knee; I counted nine flashes before he straightened up and went back to his seat.

The part of the ceremony during which awards and scholarships were presented was sluggish and impersonal, inspired not by any particular achievement on the part of our class but rather by commencement habits forged over years of inaugurating lives from the football field. Local businesspeople and politicians sat behind the podium in a tedious row facing the graduating class, coming forward one by one to give away hundred-dollar scholarships to prospective attendees of a Columbia State Community College forty-seven miles away. Jackie Don Springer from the Lions' Club stood at the podium and gave the five-hundred dollar Academic Excellence prize to the son of the Lions' treasurer. Sue Davis of the Hope Springs Telephone Company stood and licked off all her fuchsia lipstick while she presented Tammy Braden with the FHA four-year dedication award. Mr. Morgan, the principal, called up Nicky Bowles, a skinny little chain-smoker who wore his blue corduroy Ag jacket every day of the year, and Tara Showderman, a fat fish-fleshed girl with hair like the bow on a package who hung around with the cokehead Kelvin twins, to receive their twelve-year perfect attendance awards. The sun sank behind the goalpost over the podium, between the uprights. The community figures continued their respective marches to the podium, each clutching an entire sheet of paper even though most contained only one or two typewritten sentences, each delivering small monetary tokens of congratulation as they spoke through sticky lips. One graduate at a time walked up to gather his due amid polite smacks of applause, his tassel swinging like a

pendulum. The sun was on the backs of the grownups; it was in our faces.

When the awards were finally over, we all received our diplomas in an enforced silence broken by flashing bulbs and the wild shrieking coming from pockets of supporters in the stands. After the presentation of diplomas, the eight graduating members of the school chorus filed somberly to the piano and lined up, holding hands and crying like babies, to sing a thin Lord's Prayer that hung feebly in the air left utterly empty by a reverent crowd. By the time "Amen" came round the tasseled heads of the singers were bent together, muffling the teary stream of harmony filtering so delicately into the microphone, and the whole prayer seemed swallowed up in grief. I watched the evening turn purple in the wake of the sun now gone below the hills, and the trees on the horizon poked their plump green heads into the sky.

The singers separated and returned to their seats, and Mr. Morgan got up from his and took the microphone. "And now Gabriel Sullivan, our valedictorian, will give the farewell." I stood and made my way up to the podium.

As I stepped onto the platform and turned to face my graduating class, my knees seemed equivocal about supporting all parts north, and my tongue turned sticky and tried to cleave to the roof of my mouth, but for the most part I felt the different parts of me functioning normally. I looked out over the sections of black and white robes, past the parents seated behind them,

past spectators crowded into the bleachers as if this were the last football game of the season, to where the old oaks joined their crabby fingers over the brick school building. They were so old that in my lifetime nothing had changed in the way they looked. Spring had difficulty finding a lifeline in the dead, spongy trunks, but somehow it wormed through to the top, poking its green head tentatively out among the highest twigs.

I spoke into the microphone and my voice echoed over the silent field. "I have a piece of paper in my hand," I said, relishing the sight of the entire town of Hope Springs sitting still, pinned under the double boom of my words, pulse and echo, just as I was pinned under my mortarboard, and the gun was pinned to my hips by the band of my skirt, "but there's nothing on it."

There was a little laughter, but I wasn't smiling. "I've been trying to write this speech all week," I said. "I really don't know what to say."

I looked up and I was looking for Hershey. It wasn't as if I expected to zoom in on his face from where I was, standing above and among an eternity of minute faces, all turned to me, or as if I even expected him to be there at the ceremony at all, but I knew as I returned the crowd's collective gaze that it was him I was looking for.

My classmates were fixed on my face, and as the seconds ground past I became fixed on theirs. I saw Rosemary lift long fingers to her face to dab at tears that didn't turn her nose red. I saw Page sobbing so conspicuously that her shoulders were

shaking. I saw the seven boys that I had loved during my years at St. Mary's, separated by the alphabet and by time in the black ranks of manhood to the right of the podium. I saw the four girls whose white robe fronts sloped like mountains into their laps, and the two who were still able to fold their hands primly over newer, flatter secrets. I saw girls who already had lined lips from the clutch of a cigarette, whose eyes bore a hard squint even when they were relaxed, and who would surely look forty by the time we had our first reunion. I saw the two boys for whom Navy Lieutenant Peter J. Briggs was waiting at the end of the seated elite behind the dais, to whisk away to the bosom of their country before the night's first keg could be rolled from a truck bed. I saw the odd four dozen who would soon be sleeping days with their clocks set to the red master at Futures.

"I guess there really is nothing to say," I said, concentrating on the sound of my voice in the absolute quiet uninterrupted even by birds singing or cars in the distance. "There is nothing at all to say, except goodbye."

Everyone whose eyes were attuned to my face looked alarmed as I paused. I considered stepping down from the platform, having uttered only five sentences, but I saw my mama and daddy looking particularly disturbed from their seats in the fifth row behind the caps and gowns, and so I remained where I was, my brain grasping for words that made sentences.

I felt the gun slip a little and tug my underwear, and I pressed my hip suddenly to the lectern. I had no idea if the gun

would fall. I had no idea how I would walk back to my seat if it started to fall, or what the ensuing scene would be if it actually hit the ground.

"No matter what I say here tonight," I said, only slowly enough to think out the sentences before they came out of my mouth, "we're all going to make mistakes." I let my eyes fall on a girl whose legs were straight out in front of her because it was too uncomfortable to cross them because of her distended lap; I couldn't help it. She looked back at me. "Some of us have already made some big ones, ones that have changed our lives . . . so really all I have to say to you is to remember that this is your home, where your home has always been and always will be, and this is where there are people who will always love you when you make the mistakes you're doomed to make."

I paused, sensing I was at the end of what I was going to say. "There's nothing else that's important to remember."

I saw Page in her seat, wiping away her tears, giving me the "V" sign with her fingers.

I stood there in silence and let my eyes fall over each tasseled head. I felt the gun at my hip, rubbed it a little against the edge of the lectern, and listened to the vast silence that buzzed in the waiting loudspeakers; I had known all day that I wasn't going to use it. I just wanted it there with me when all the eyes in the world were on me, to feel its spark running through my hip and down my leg. The sun reached toward me with

its last purple fingers but it couldn't get at me, and I knew that the gun was secure, that it wouldn't fall when I moved.

I stepped down and headed back to my seat, a sour taste in my mouth and a headache coming up between my eyes. There was applause but I couldn't look at anything except my feet as I put one in front of the other.

At home following the ceremony my mother's kitchen was overrun with women. My aunt Agnes was camped by the counter next to the refrigerator, arranging parsley sprigs on the tops of little red potatoes with some sort of fluffy white stuffing inside; Beth had her head stuck in the pantry as she crouched on the floor, searching for the sack of sugar my mother swore she'd bought for iced tea; Granny was wiping off the cabinets for the third time, unattended; Mama was counting cake plates and saucers from her good china and laying out silver forks in neat rows; Uncle Joe's wife, Ellen, was shaking up baby formula; Uncle Will's wife, June, was complaining about all the noise the children were making playing Twister in the living room--why couldn't they be more like her Ernie, who was holed up in the guest room coloring on himself and being quiet as a mouse? On the counter by the stove there was a sheet cake with white icing and a big clump of sugary yellow roses in the upper right corner, and a simple message was piped across the cake in a thick green

script: "Congratulations Gabriel." I had changed out of my cap and gown, had smuggled the gun back into the closet, and was running my fingers through the excess icing at the edge of the cardboard sheet.

The men were in the dining room with their beers. Joe and Will were sliding an extra leaf into the table, Will never looking less like the agile Joe as his face puffed and turned pink from the strain of pulling our table apart; it usually tended to stick. "Charlie's glued the damn thing together," he grunted. Agnes's husband, Terry, already had the footrest cranked on my father's armchair and was soothing his constricted tummy with a second Budweiser. My daddy had forgotten to get both film for the camera and Cokes, and had gone to the Quik Mart; Michael had been allowed the fourth of Daddy's beer left in the can and was stretching it as far as he could, sipping from it and then holding it lightly above his waist as he had seen it done before. There was talk of banking and loan policy that drifted into Little League baseball, and Michael set Daddy's beer down to demonstrate the arc of his ill-developed knuckleball so that Joe and Will and Terry could help him straighten it out.

"Ice," said my mama suddenly, setting down the pile of forks in her hand. "I didn't tell him to get ice, dern it."

"Sugar," said Beth from inside the pantry. "Clare, are you sure you bought it? 'Cause I can't find it."

"It should be on the very bottom shelf, behind the paper plates," Mama said. "Gabriel, could you put out the chip and

dip? I'm gonna call the Quik Mart and see if I can catch your daddy."

I licked a hunk of icing from my index finger and opened the cabinet above the dishwasher, standing on tiptoe to search for the green glass bowl with the little attachment for dip, and Granny moved past me with her dishrag, and Agnes reached across me to tear off a paper towel from the rack under the cabinet, and Beth stepped over me on her way out of the pantry.

"Tell Charlie to get sugar too," Beth said to my mama. She pulled down a can of coffee from the shelf over the stove and handed it to June, who was standing by the sink with her arms folded. "Make yourself useful," Beth said. "You can stare at Joe's kids all night and they're not going to turn into Ernie."

My aunt Ellen swallowed a smile as she turned Margaret's baby bottle upside down and squeezed formula into the nipple. A drop splashed onto her wrist and she rubbed it against her other wrist, just as if she were donning perfume. She left the kitchen to go feed the baby, who had just awakened and was wailing from her makeshift pallet on my mother and father's bedroom floor.

My daddy came through the kitchen door then with plastic sacks hanging on his arms.

"Oh, shoot," said Mama, hanging up the phone. "We need ice, too."

"I'm way ahead of you," said Daddy. "It's in the garage."

"We need sugar too," said Beth.

"Oh, shoot," my daddy said.

"Well, Beth, there it is," my mama said, pointing to a fat yellow paper sack on the counter, "sitting out by the fridge."

Beth grunted. "Well, hell, I looked all over for it. I guess I couldn't see it for Agnes's big. . . ."

"You just hold it right there," said Agnes, who was arranging her fluffy little potatoes on a plate.

Daddy set his sack down on the counter. "You won't believe what Elaine Brink just told me at the Quik Mart."

"You saw Elaine?" Mama started pulling Cokes out of the sack.

"She just came from the rectory, she was getting gas." Daddy put one hand on his hip, and leaned against the counter on his other hand. "They're moving Father Smiley out."

"Out?" My mama stopped, her hand resting on the cap of a two-liter of Sun-drop.

"Out?" chimed my aunt Agnes, licking potato filling from her fingers.

Beth shook her head. "Well, we usually make it a point to ship 'em in and ship 'em out as fast as we can, but I believe this one's gonna see his ass in front of his face."

"He's not moving back to Nashville," Daddy said. "He's moving into the convent."

"The convent!" hollered Aunt Agnes.

"This isn't just interesting," Beth said. "This is downright sordid."

"The convent!" Mama was yelling. "What's he gonna do with the *nuns*?"

"*That's* what we all don't want to know," said Beth.

"Shut up, Beth," said Agnes. "Charlie, tell the rest."

"I don't know that I got the whole story," Daddy said. "Elaine was in a hurry to get back before the lid blew off, but apparently Father Smiley--and he wants us to call him that, instead of Father John--he decided he didn't like the rectory, that the stairs were too steep is what Elaine said, and decided he'd just swap with the nuns since the convent's one-story."

"Swap?" My mama stood with her mouth open. "So he just gave 'em notice? They just have to pack up and get out? Tonight?"

"Well, that's an interesting point," replied Daddy. "He says that the convent's so big, he'll just stay on the north end until they can get packed and moved into the rectory. But--" My daddy smiled. "The nuns say they're not going."

"A standoff!" cried Beth.

"Good for them," said Aunt Agnes.

"What could that man be thinking?" said Mama. "If he's young, and he thinks he can't get up those stairs, then how does he expect poor old Sister Bernard to? Besides, they've lived in that convent for twenty years now. It's their home."

Granny had stopped moving around the kitchen with her rag. "The priest can't live in the same house as the nuns," she said. "It ain't right."

Joe and Will had finished pushing the table back together and had come into the kitchen with their beers. Terry stayed in the recliner.

"I don't see how a priest can do that," Joe said. "Doesn't he have to go through Parish Council first? It's the parish that owns the buildings."

"Well," said Daddy, "if he's already gone and done it before he's even said his first Mass here, he probably knows it's too much trouble to try to budge a parish council if they're not inclined to do what you want. Nobody'll make him move out now and he knows it."

"He's smart," said Agnes. "I don't like him already. Everybody try one of these stuffed potatoes."

"I'm sure the bishop's already told him how much trouble we've had down here," said Will, taking a potato from Agnes's plate. "I guess he's pretty sly if he's already shuffling the deck before people even know he's here."

"Elaine told me," said Daddy, "that Percy Davis has been over there helping Father move into the convent."

"Good Lord," said Agnes.

"Well, that's the most important part of the story!" Beth hollered. "What'd you leave that out till the end for?"

Mama rubbed her forehead with her hand. "Charlie, we've got to get all the reasonable people in this parish together and let them know. I can call an Altar Society meeting by tomorrow."

Daddy shrugged. "Maybe we're overreacting."

"I doubt it," said Beth. "If Percy Davis already's got his claws into the new priest, something smells."

"All I smell is the cake," I said. I had finished scooping French onion dip into the small bowl and dumping the chips out of the sack into the big bowl. "Could we eat?"

"Oh, yeah," said Aunt Agnes. "I seem to remember that we came here to celebrate something."

"I have to go pick up Rosemary before too long," I said. "I'd like to eat my cake and receive all my presents before I go dance the night away."

"Don't worry," said Daddy. "All your presents won't take but about five minutes."

"I guess I'll call the Altar Society up tomorrow," Mama sighed. "Charlie, will you run out and get the ice and put it in the sink?"

Beth dropped three tea bags into a pot of boiling water on the stove. "It's time to celebrate the shortest farewell speech I ever heard. Hip, hip. . . ."

"Hooray," said Joe and Will and Agnes. Joe messed up my hair with his hand.

Will sipped his beer. "You looked like you was about to die up there," he said to me. "Whiter than your gown."

"You kept slouching," Mama said. "I was afraid you were leaning on the thing for support because you were getting sick."

"If you must know," I said, "the band of my underwear was turned around and I was trying to fix it."

"Gross," said my brother, tipping up the can of beer to squeeze out the last drops on his tongue. June's nostrils flared a bit and she turned back to the coffeemaker.

My mother continued to stand with her mouth open. "I can't believe you would adjust your underwear in front of two thousand people."

"I can't believe you would admit it," said my father, who was leaving the kitchen to get the ice.

"It's all over now," I said. "You can relax."

Mama shut her mouth and got her white cutwork lace tablecloth out of the bottom drawer of her china cabinet, and she and June shook it out and draped it over the dining room table. Agnes followed with her plate of potatoes, and then a tray of cut cucumbers and carrots and celery and pickles and broccoli with dip, and then a deli tray of roast beef and turkey and cheese from the Kroger in Middlefield; Beth brought out the cake. *As I remembered it, all the celebrations of my life were just like that, a smorgasbord of wedding china and plastic trays, the occasionally inventive hors d'eouvre with a lot of cut vegetables.*

Everyone eventually filtered back through the kitchen to pour themselves something to drink; Mama and Daddy had set out the contents of the liquor cabinet along the counter where the glasses were: there was vodka, and Jim Beam, and Cabernet

Sauvignon, and some other bottles; there was also some nine-month-old apple wine that my uncle Will had made. I got myself a Coke.

"Want me to add some zip to that for you?" Beth asked me. She was tipping a bottle of brown stuff into her glass of Coke.

"I'm sure there's plenty of zip to be had all over town tonight," I said. "Not that I'm one to be zippy."

"Oh, come on," Beth said, swirling the liquid in her glass. "You graduated."

"Beth," said my daddy, "get away from her."

They all wanted to give me my presents before we ate dinner, so as soon as the table was ready they ushered me into my father's chair, and my mother instructed me to shut my eyes.

"Everyone all pitched in and got you one thing," she explained.

"Okay," I said, holding out my hand and squinting my eyes shut.

"I can't put it in your hand," Mama said.

"Well, I know," I said. "I figured you'd just give me the keys."

"I *doubt* it," my brother snorted.

"Charlie, get the camera," I heard Agnes say. I felt everyone's breath as they crowded around me. I heard something dragging the ground, again and again, and Joe said, "Keep your eyes shut, don't look."

Finally the dragging stopped and my daddy said, "Okay, open."

I opened my eyes, little colored circles that had been dancing across the backs of my eyelids now drifting in the open air.

There, spread all across the living room floor, were the matching pieces of an astonishingly complete set of luggage. There must have been twenty pieces. I saw a makeup bag, an overnight bag, a duffel, a mesh laundry bag, a garment bag, a hard suitcase, a briefcase, a carry-on . . . all an elegant gray, with the travel tags in leather cases hanging from the handle of each one.

"Ta-da!" cried Beth. A couple of people started to sing, "Happy Graduation to You," and my mother said, "For when you go off to school, Gabriel."

I stared for a moment, and said, "I know what luggage on graduation is for," and then I got up to go open each piece and marvel over its construction and gadgetry, because I knew that was what they wanted me to do.

I was in the fourth grade when the Hope Springs City Council commissioned the Civic Center to be built in the park. The ladies of the Hope Springs Beautification League had wanted a

columned brick saltbox on top of the highest hill on the property, where wedding receptions could be held and Christmas balls given. What they got was a tin Butler building on the gravel lot by the gates, with a tile floor and muddy oak paneling on the inside. Of course, wedding receptions were held there anyway, and all the high school dances; there was a stage on the west end of the one gigantic room where, in the seventies, live bands might have played for the prom, but since it was built in the eighties, it served mainly as a platform for the massive woofers and tweeters whose sound ruffled the American flag hanging to the left of the stage. Undaunted, the ladies of the Beautification League had finally, ten years later, drummed up enough cash to build a giant wooden gazebo on the far side of the city pool with which they hoped to lure wedding receptions out of the gravel lot, if not the occasional dance. Perhaps they hoped that the Civic Center would grow derelict enough to be considered for demolition; I once saw Annie Davidson kicking at a loose pipe on the air-conditioning unit in back until it fell off.

On nights when there was a dance in the building, the flimsy beige walls would seem to puff in and out with the pattern of the bass and the pulse could be heard from the highway when there wasn't much traffic. Usually sophomores ran the music from the stage; a group of three or so speakerheads would emerge each year who spoke the highly technical language of optimum audio and little else, one of whom necessarily had parents who were able to invest in the right equipment. Together they would produce a

sound that could milk a numbing bass line from even the toughest udder: slow country guitar ballads, it was discovered, could be made to vibrate through the soles of your shoes to the point of tickling your nose.

When Rosemary and I got out of the car at the Civic Center, the walls were puffing in and out to the rhythm of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird."

Graduation dances were more important than homecoming dances or post-ballgame dances or any other miscellaneous dance because the adult community had a pointed interest in keeping the dancers bound to the Civic Center. Each year some graduate, usually one who had been pulled through the last semester by his hair and the grace of God, would throw a party in a holler by a creek. Which holler and which creek were topics up for speculation as early on as March but the manner of amusement to be had was never in question. (This year Greg Hardiman, twenty years old and stubbly and by then a five-semester expert at Mr. Lambert's freshman earth-science class, was hosting a small soiree down on the Pickensville side of Second Creek, which was wide enough to be called "the river" although it really wasn't one; he and a few of his friends not fortunate enough to be graduating had spent the day there building a massive bonfire, and he had shown up for the ceremony so stoned that he sat on the girls' side all the way through the benediction before someone assisted him to his seat.) As May approached, the teachers and parents both were conjuring up private grotesque visions of the potential morning after, like

the wake of a world war, with teenagers lying all about town dead and drunk and pregnant. As a result the graduation dance was initiated, to which all seniors by some fleeting code of courtesy made a perfunctory appearance before splitting to get high, and which the principal and all the teachers and some of the parents attended in hopes of stirring up enough fun to prevent them from leaving. The adults were there, and that was enough; the doors closed at three a.m. in a desperate bid to be hip but most of the seniors would be gone by midnight. The dance was advertised as the "Drug-Free Dance" and there were usually door prizes, but the first strike against it was the name. The parents' best bet would have been to advertise free margaritas, attract and contain all the partygoers in a single wave, and then bolt the doors.

Mr. Morgan stood on the cement step at the front of the building, his bald head lit up by the plastic lanterns on either side of the door. As Rosemary and I passed him he shook our hands and slapped "Drug-Free" stickers on our shirts. "Have a good time," he said.

The doors closed behind us as we stepped into the dark, and we felt the solid presence of "Free Bird." There was a large crowd already, acting as they usually did while "Free Bird" was playing, which meant there was a mix of couples trying to get romantic to a song that wasn't quite romantic and a handful of independents who stood out in the middle and just swayed their arms around. Eight or nine years before, there had been a freshman who had committed suicide, and so "Free Bird" had been

requested, I had been told, at every ensuing dance for the rest of the school year, and now it was more or less a tradition, even down to the meaningful facial expressions adopted all around when the first few bars sounded over the speakers. But now no one remembered the kid's name anymore; very few even remembered that it had happened at all.

Red plastic chairs were set up all along the walls, and that was where most of the crowd was. We elbowed through all the people with the cocky tilt of chin that came from an evening of bearing a tassel on one side of the head, and we sat in a corner on the opposite end from the stage. Balloons hung down from the ceiling, taped to crepe paper streamers, and they swayed to the deafening music like pendulums, flapping wildly whenever the doors opened.

I saw Jamie Pinedweller from across the floor, sitting with the cokehead Kelvin twins, looking at us. His face was shadowy but I could still see the sullenness on it.

I leaned over to Rosemary and shouted into her ear. "He's going to come and ask you to dance."

"What?" she shouted back.

"Jamie," I said, tilting my head toward him.

She looked through the "Free Bird" swayers on the floor to the other side of the room, squinting her eyes, until she saw him, and she wrinkled up her nose.

I shrugged. "He will," I said.

On the end of the room opposite from the stage was the kitchen and bar, and ten or so mothers were scurrying in and out of the doors with two-liters of ginger ale and plastic jugs of fruit juice in order to keep fresh cups of punch lined up on the counter. I saw Booley standing over by the wall there. The only light in the whole room was the light in the kitchen coming through the bar, and it shone in the slick curve of Booley's hair. He was drinking punch, checking out the room.

"Free Bird" flew, the last chords dying in the speakers, and scarcely had it begun to fade when an acoustic ballad roared in to take its place, a measure taken by the pimpled wizards onstage to pull the dancers on the floor out of their mechanical Skynyrd reverie. The couples pulled gratefully closer and the lone swayers drifted over to pick up partners out of the seated crowd. The fringes of the floor condensed, dreamlike, to the middle.

Kiley Cleve, a junior football player sitting behind us, tapped Rosemary on the shoulder and raised his eyebrows at her, and she stood up. He took her by the hand and led her out onto the floor; she put her hands demurely on his shoulders, and he laid his, feather-light, on her waist.

I looked over at Jamie, who was watching them, and I smiled. One of the Kelvin twins elbowed him.

I sat still in my chair and tried to keep my eyes straight ahead. I always danced with the same three boys at every dance, and I hadn't seen any of them as we were coming in, but actually to turn my head and look around me was to invite doom upon

myself; skulking in all corners waiting for the invitation of eye contact were short and audacious freshmen; or, worse, graduates of years past who still came to the dances; or, inevitably, Booley. My three regulars were my defense against all comers. One, Mark Fleischmann, was in the grade behind me at St. Mary's and was skinny enough to break in two with my bare hands; the second, Webber Lee, was a chubby football player whose adolescence seemed to be trying to push through his baby fat instead of melt it; the third was Renny Waters, one of only two black students at Hope Springs, two inches shorter than I was, a fast talker, and bound to dance with every girl in the whole room before the night was out. The thing was, Renny always danced with me *twice*, so I counted him as special.

After a few seconds I turned my head, so slightly that it was surely imperceptible in the dark, and I let my eyes roam all the way to the right side of my head, so far that it actually hurt, and I searched the area by the door for Mark or Webber or Renny, none of whom I saw. What I did see was Booley dropping his empty cup into a garbage can and heading for my side of the room.

I stood up then and stepped past the people sitting around me. I scooted around the dance floor, between the couples and the stage, moving in the opposite direction of Booley, all the way to the other side of the hall where the bathrooms were. As I moved past the dancers I caught a glimpse of Rosemary and Kiley

in the middle; Rosemary was shaking her head at something Kiley was saying.

Inside the ladies' bathroom the light was weak and orange. None of the stalls was occupied but a girl named Christie King was putting on lipstick in the mirror. I'd had German and English classes with Christie for three years in a row.

"Hey," I said, letting the door bang behind me.

"Free at last," she replied, all her words narrowed from the way she was holding her lips. "Thank God Almighty, free at last. Have you seen Page anywhere? I borrowed bobby pins from her to hold my cap on, but I didn't see her after graduation to give 'em back."

"I don't know where she is," I said. "I think I was supposed to go over to her house afterwards to take pictures, but I didn't."

"Uh-oh," Christie said, smacking her lips.

I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was getting frizzy and the light made ugly shadows on my face.

Christie capped her tube of lipstick and stood straight up so that I could no longer see my face. "If I know Page," she said, running a finger underneath her bottom lip to wipe off some excess color, "she and Sammy won't even make it to the dance."

"You don't know Page," I said.

She raised her eyebrows at me. "What do you mean?"

I didn't know. I picked through my hair with my hands.

"What are you doing in here, anyway?" she asked, moving past me to the door. "Hiding from Booley again?"

I nodded. "He's on the prowl."

"This song's just started," she said. "You've got a ways to wait."

"Oh, don't worry," I said. "I could stay in here all night."

"Well, I'd love to keep you company," she said, pushing the door open and letting the rush of noise come into the bathroom, "but Eddie's out there."

"By all means," I said, and she left.

I waited in front of the mirror through seven more songs, leaning against the paneled wall so that the bottom line of each song hammered through into my shoulder. Thirty or so girls drifted in and out and I had to move so they could get to the mirror, and most of them wanted to know if I was sick, and was it true Rosemary's boyfriend had hit her? I answered no, and yes, but she's okay, thirty or so times, and finally after seven songs were up Rosemary came in herself.

"Thanks for leaving me out there," she said.

"I'm sick."

She snorted. "Booley's standing right by the bathroom door."

I sank. "Crap."

"You should dance with him just once. He's probably been thinking about it all day."

"You sound just like Page."

"I'm not making fun of you. I'm just saying, be nice."

"Have you danced with Jamie yet?"

She rolled her eyes. "I promised him the next one."

"I told you he'd ask."

She glanced at the mirror but didn't linger there; she put one hand on the door. "I just don't want to start anything up. I want to have a good time tonight at the river."

"You want him to leave you alone?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She started to push the door open. "Come on."

"Rosemary," I said, "I don't care if you make out with Jamie all night at the river, if that's what you want to do."

"I don't want to," she said. "Come on."

We left the bathroom, Rosemary holding on to my hand, and having spent the last half hour in the light, I was blind as a bat in the crowded darkness of the dance floor. She let go of my hand. I couldn't tell where people were; all I could see was the red letters "EXIT" lit up over the doors, and then someone touched my elbow.

"Gabriel?" Booley closed in on me from behind and spoke directly into my ear so he wouldn't have to shout.

I turned around to face his voice. All I could really see of him was an inky shadow, although as the seconds passed by I began to detect a faint gleam of light on his hair. I was sure

his mother had made him slick it back for the graduation ceremony, and for a second I felt sorry for him. He was just a formless black shape with a glint on the top, leaning toward me and retreating at the same time.

"Would you dance with me?" he said into my ear, and I smelled a pleasant musky smell that overwhelmed my nose.

I stood there for a second, looking around me, and then I nodded faintly, so faintly that he would have to be right on top of me to see it. He took my hand--his was drier than I expected--and nudged me toward the floor, but he stayed behind me, shuffling his feet.

I frowned and pulled him behind me onto the floor into the crush of couples, all drifting round and round like figures in a music box. I stopped before we got too close to the middle and turned back to face him. He put his hands on my waist, and I lifted up my arms, but instead of clasping them behind his neck I put my hands palms down on his shoulders, my elbows stiffly bent. I turned my face away from his and watched the other couples. Across the floor, nearer the stage, I saw Rosemary dancing with Jamie; they seemed connected where they were touching, which would be best attributed to Jamie's tenacity, I supposed. She had her face turned away from his the same way I was doing with Booley, but Jamie was speaking to her, his head dipping into the crook of her neck and shoulder, and she was listening.

Booley, on the other hand, dared not move his face into the free zone I was creating between us. He stood respectfully

straight and shifted back and forth on his feet only as the music dictated. He was a good dancer, I knew, because his parents gave two-step lessons in the Mt. Horeb Baptist Church fellowship hall on alternate Saturdays; he had tried to take my hand in the more traditional way as we had begun to dance, one hand on my back, but had quickly resigned to putting both hands on my waist when I had dropped my palms like cement on his shoulders.

"Gabriel," he said, and I smelled that pleasant, straightforward musk again.

I kept my face turned slightly, but I looked back at him. "What?"

"Uh. . . . ." He leaned in a little so he wouldn't have to yell, but he did it haltingly. His eyes roved upward and took in the length of the ceiling. "I'm sorry if I bother you."

The back of my neck started to prickle, and I shifted my hands on his shoulders a bit. "You don't bother me."

"I know you probly don't want to go out or nothing," he said, his head darting in close to me and then darting right back out again. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't."

"Don't," I said, shaking my head.

Dark bodies crowded my periphery, and subtly pushed me and Booley to the middle of the floor, swallowing us up. I watched as heads tilted and tongues flickered in a mass display of an artistry totally foreign to me, and hundreds of pairs floated around us like separate dreams.

"I cain't help it,' he said. "This is the last dance, and I don't know when else. . . ."

"Please," I said.

Rosemary and Jamie drifted past us. His hands were roving her back and he was leaning in close, and although her face was still turned away from him, her eyes were closed.

"You're gonna think I don't mean it," Booley said, "when I say this, or that I don't know or nothing, but. . . ."

"Stop it," I said.

He squeezed me where his hands rested on my waist. "I love you."

I yanked my hands down off his shoulders, broke easily from his tender grip on my waist, and walked away. I pushed through the crowd of twirling, tonguing couples, all terrestrial now, and vulgar, and went over to Rosemary and laid a hand on her arm. Booley stood rooted to his spot like a stake driven into the ground.

Rosemary's eyes snapped open and she stopped dancing, and Jamie raised his head as if out of a comfortable fog.

"Find your own ride to the river," I said.

As I walked out the doors Mr. Morgan told me to have a good, drug-free night, and to please drive safely.

Once I stepped through the trees with my paper sack and my book they closed behind me, separating me from my car and shutting out the sky except for an occasional solitary star peeking through the needles. The Christmasy smell of my childhood drew me in. I listened, as I stepped gingerly among the dry needles and cones and brushed the furry arms of pine from my face, for the sounds of other human beings--after all, this was graduation night, and the hollows and groves and dark places in August County were likely to fill from the bottoms up with the sounds of sex and the smells of pot smoke and gin, or worse. And I wondered faintly if Page would remember this place in a honeyed wave of nostalgia and drag Sammy here for reminiscing. But the pines were quiet. They closed like a mother's arms around me and stroked my face.

The stones when I reached them were visible by a stream of starlight, thick and cluttered with pollen, that filtered through the canopy of trees. I sat down in the middle and toyed with the arrangement of the circle around me, pushing wayward stones back into place and sweeping needles into neat lines over the hard dried mud. I sat up against the gaudy, knobby hunk of iron ore at the twelve o'clock position--a real find from Springer's Lumber--and felt it press into the bones and muscles of my back. In the distance was the steeple of St. Mary's which I could barely see through the pines but could feel towering over me, the backbone of God, straight and stalwart in the sky. *I remembered Page and her lily-white veil on First Communion Day, standing*

beside me . . . we had joined hands in the shadow of the great steeple and run for the woods, for the private solemnity of the holy circle where the boys did not follow. We had drunk from a little bottle of grape juice I brought, and picked flowers and dropped them into the circle as an offering while the bells rang and God sang back to us.

I took a bottle of vodka out of the paper sack. I liked that it was in a paper sack, that I had had to spirit the bottle--it hadn't been touched all evening--off the kitchen cabinet, into the sack, and out to the car while Beth and Agnes and June and Ellen and Mama were simultaneously occupied with the dishes after dinner. It seemed more secret that way, more like a dirty habit to be kicked under the seat of the car, to be sipped from covertly at quiet intersections, or to be hoarded in a dark grove of pine trees. I crumpled the sack in my hands and then held up the bottle in the weak light, tipping it back and forth so that the liquid waved in the bottle, reflecting soft light back at me.

I twisted the cap. It was stubborn under my fingers, creaking and groaning a little without budging, but finally it gave. I dropped the cap on the ground and held the bottle up under my nose. Of course I didn't smell anything; I didn't expect to, simply because I'd heard you couldn't smell vodka or really taste it, but in the back of my mind I think I was waiting for something sinister to creep in on the tail of the shaft of air I was sucking into my nostrils, a slight smell or sense of a smell that was dark or lonely.

I stuck my finger into the neck of the bottle and touched the liquid. It wasn't cold, it didn't bite me. It just felt like water. I removed my finger from the bottle and touched it to my tongue. It tasted warm, but it tasted clear.

I lifted the bottle to my lips and held it there, for a moment unable to tip it. Then I took a quick and miserly swallow, letting just a little bit splash into my mouth and down my throat. I didn't cough or sputter, but I paused, sensing the tiniest unpleasantness as small rivulets coursed down my tubes. The taste in my mouth wasn't the taste of water.

I set the bottle down on the ground against a rock. My book was between my legs. I opened it, the pages difficult to see in the heavy shadows, illuminated only by a sliver of a moon and a skyful of stars, but I knew the pages so well that I didn't have to see them at all. I opened to "Rosemary" and picked a page not by sight or by counting from the front, but by the feel of my hand on the book, the weight of a certain number of pages between my fingers. The page was full of the curves of my handwriting, too dim to read but nonetheless certain and familiar in my mind, dates that I remembered like I remembered my birthday. *August 24. A mall in Nashville, by the Estee Lauder counter at Dillard's. The woman in her white lab coat and dragon-fire lipstick called to us from where we were looking at shoes, said, Come over and let me see that angel face--really, hon, you should try a dark rose on your lips with that complexion. You have such*

an angel face, she said, her eyes never even passing over me, but tuned to Rosemary as she smiled and clucked her tongue.

I picked up the bottle and took another sip, bigger this time, and it caught in my throat and burned, making me cough. Before it had time to hit my stomach I chugged back another sip, and for a second I thought I'd choke, but then I settled down and let it burn. I was not enjoying the taste in my mouth.

My lips were very relaxed, tingling just a little, and they wanted to smile, but the cogs in my brain were still ticking precisely and did not want my lips to smile. I put the book aside. I took three more sips, as quickly as I could stand to, the last one perhaps bigger and longer than I meant it to be, and then I lay down with my head at the twelve-stone. My hands were at my sides, my legs slightly apart. I lay in the woods, among the stones, breathing uneasily, waiting for the big picture to start.

I take the curves slowly because the sun has sunk and is bleeding brilliantly into the edges of the farms, setting the tips of the fences on fire, and I want to move through it leisurely and to bank this one last glorious scene into my memory. The hills dip and twist in the sun and the cows are black dots in the orange blaze. The trees are gnarled and crooked and thirsty, their roots stretching to eternity for all I care . . . the leaves cannot seem to grow green enough, and they expand and shove one another out of the way to grasp at more of the dying sun, and the roots push madly under the ground and suck

like leeches. There is no sound except for the hum of my motor. But I imagine that I hear behind me the rumble of thousands of feet and voices as they shuffle between hot dogs and bingo, as they suck on red, white, and blue Independence Sno-Cones and await the grand fireworks over centerfield.

As I clear the last bend of the highway, the hills falling away into Pickensville which turns its eyes from the setting sun and recedes into the shadows, I can see the bridge ahead. The knee-high rails are wrapped in the eternally curling fingers of greedy vines. The bank of the river is steep, the trees frozen out over the water by their roots. I think of Mama, of Granny, and then gradually of everyone else in one last tumbling thought that is overwith quickly. The gas is down, the motor is loud, the stretch is straight, and the leafy knee-high rails flutter helplessly as I bear down upon them. I briefly fear that the vines will grab at my tires as I take off.

But they don't. Into the burst of orange fire that rages across the evening sky I fly, free of the green earth, free of the shadows of the day that is dying, and I sail over the bridge like a shooting star.

Down, down toward the water I am diving.

Into the web of vines that chokes the water I plunge, dropped by the sun into the shadows, and as I make contact the car is swallowed in flames, the metal burning and crumpling around me. But the water soothes the angry orange tongues--I myself am untouched, my head falling gracefully into the open

window, my hair spilling over my face down into the water like sweet and unselfish vines.

Who knows who hears the sounds, who knows who could be strolling idly over the bridge so late on the Fourth of July, but someone is, and feet race to the nearest house to alert the sirens.

At the park the game is just beginning. Crowds sticky with Sno-Kone juice and threads of cotton candy are raising clouds of gravel dust as they abandon the balloon dart booth and the ring toss for the bleachers. They are all united by touch, an elbow to a hip to a knee to a finger to a ponytail, an open circuit primed with Sno-Kone juice, and although they talk loudly beneath the fluttering banners, in the distance they hear something, ever so slightly, and the spark passes through them all. The distant hum swells into a wail, and they all feel it together. Then someone in a corner whispers a name, Gabriel, and it rides the circuit in a heartbeat, gliding along the paths of least resistance until the umpire must stand and call time, and then the race to the bridge begins.

When they arrive they spill down the hills over the vines, they line the knee-high rails with their hands to their faces, they part only to let the men in the orange jackets through. The sun is gone, the sky is purple, and the tears flow down to the water and the moans echo down to the holler in Pickensville. The world seems to spin around my dead-white face, untouched by the flames.

Rosemary is there. She does not understand. Page is there. She wails and moans and puts a hand to her forehead as she slumps to the ground, and someone catches her, and she smiles at him. Chad O'Brien is there, back from Atlanta. Many boys from high school are there, on their knees, mesmerized by my dead-white face. My uncles and aunts are there, and my mama and daddy and Michael and Granny, but I don't want to see their faces from where I am, up in the trees looking down, I don't want them to spill any tears or wail in grief--they don't really belong here at all.

The music of the sirens turns into the opening strains of an organ, and my hair is spilling over the white silk pillow as little schoolchildren pile into the choir loft, singing, The Lord is risen to life, the Lord is risen to life, the Lord has conquered sin and death, and brought us back to life. The Lord will watch over you, the Lord will smile when you laugh, the Lord will care in your moment's loss, and bring you back to life. The church is heavy with tears and can't hold the people who are filing in through the vestibule. The schoolchildren drop lilies from the loft which waft like feathers down to the people below. I am watching from the steeple, from God's shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I jumped up, opening my eyes, and although the sound of a human voice frightened me, I found that I was smiling.

Hershey was crouching by my side, staring into my face. I hadn't heard anyone come near me at all. "This is the second

time in our brief history that I've had to ask you that question."

I batted needles out of my hair with a hand that knew the direction of my head, but only in the most general sense. "Did you . . . ?" I began, but I lost what I was going to say.

"Did I what?"

I remembered. "Did you hear any of that?"

"Hear what?" he said, picking a needle off the top of my head. He looked scruffy, dressed in cutoff jean shorts that had some tendrils hanging all the way down to his knees.

I grabbed the bottle of vodka from where it was propped up against a rock and got up on my knees. "What I was thinking. . . ." I looked all around me, and my lips were smiling, although I didn't feel like smiling, and my cheeks were wet.

He took the bottle away from me and held it to the light. "There's not much gone from this bottle," he said. "You're not very good at this."

I sat back on my feet and wiped my face, which felt detached from my skull and heavy in the nose and mouth. "How did you get here?"

"I was out on my motorcycle, riding around the ballfield," he said. "Didn't you hear me?"

"No."

"I saw your dad's car through the trees. I don't think you ought to be sitting out here alone in the woods at night."

"It's safe," I said, shaking my head. "Give me back my bottle."

"You don't need this bottle. You're merry enough."

My head felt crooked, as if all the hair on one side were standing straight up. "I don't feel sick," I said.

"That comes later." He put the bottle behind him and eased me down onto my rear end. He wiped one of my cheeks with the back of his hand. "What on earth are you doing out here? When I first saw you I thought you were dead."

I shrugged, unable to stop smiling or squinting my eyes. "I left the dance."

He sat down on the ground beside me. "It's your graduation night. You ought to be out with your friends."

I was struggling to string together cogent sentences in my head that stayed intact all the way to my lips, and I could do it, but I found that it took all my concentration and left the rest of me without guidance. I noticed, with amiable detachment, that I was making kissing noises with my lips.

"Good God," said Hershey.

"You could draw me." I squinted at him.

"Now?"

I rolled my eyes. "No. Yesterday."

"The lighting's a little dim, don't you think?"

"There's moon enough," I said. "It's on my hair. You can see my hair. All you draw is my hair."

He pulled his arms up around his knees and looked at me. The pale moon lit up the hair over his ear. "I didn't bring any paper," he said.

"Oh," I grunted. I looked above me; the stretch of the arms of the pines over my head was soft and graceful, and blurry. "Just as well, I guess, if you drew my eyes tonight they'd be. . . ." I gestured with my hands. "On the ground."

He laughed, and he touched my nose with his finger. "Do you feel this?"

I waved his hand away. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"Is this what you were doing in the closet the other night?" His smile could not have been bigger.

"I cannot imagine what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on." He leaned into my face. "I was looking for a place to sit where there weren't any people. Some girl that lives next door to Wayne invited me to go."

I shrugged. I tried to touch my shoulders to my earlobes for effect. "Sissy Johnsburg."

"Yeah, that's her. Eyes too close together."

"Didn't like her?"

"I wouldn't have if I had spent more than five minutes with her. This way I can just say I don't know her very well." He paused. "I think the way to figure out what the hell you were doing *there* is to figure out what the hell you're doing *here*."

He laid his head on his arms, his chin in the crook of his elbow as he looked beyond the confines of the stones into the evergreen shadows. "So there was a dance?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why did you leave?"

"Psshhhh. . . ." I waved my hand at him. "I always leave the dance."

"Do you always come here?"

"I like it here."

He looked around him and smiled. "Did you do up these rocks all pretty like this just for tonight?"

"No," I said. "Can't you tell they've been here?"

"A long time?"

"A very long time." My lips were heavy and dry and wanted to smile. "Do you like this one?" I twisted around and slapped the hunk of iron ore. "It has pretty colors but it's too dark."

He raised his eyebrows. "Where did it come from?"

"We stole it from the lumberyard."

"Who?"

"Me and Page."

"Who's Page?"

"What?" I cupped my hand to my ear. "Can't you hear her?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, well if you knew her you wouldn't think I was drunk."

"I know you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk," I said. "I'm just slow."

"Do you always cry when you drink?" His voice was muffled a bit in the crook of his arm.

"I'm not crying," I said. "I'm laughing. Really, see . . . if you look at my lips you'll notice that I . . . can't stop smiling." I tried to slow down a little. "It's very unfortunate."

He scrutinized my face. I couldn't hold my lips still.

"Oh, I like it here, all right," I said.

The moon and the stars shed wan light onto the carpet of needles and onto Hershey as he sat and made an anxious study of me, curled up in some reflective pose and guarding his middle with his knees and his arms. The light was weak and blurry and slipped through the pine branches like pieces of a ghost, but it made fine, delicate lines along the curves of his face and his arms. I was able to stare back at him because my face was warm and tingly and not at all a part of me.

Then he reached down below my legs with one hand.

"This your notebook?" he asked. "You writing your memoirs out here in the dark?"

I slapped my hand down on the cover of my blue book, missing the center so blindly that my fingers plunged into the metal spiral. "Don't open it."

He withdrew his hand. "Sorry."

I sniffed.

"What is it?" he asked me.

I looked down at my book which had never been in the close company of another human being, and I saw where some of the spirals were bent the wrong way, where small pieces of the perforated paper edges were shriveled and caught in the binding. The blue fuzz on the cover had eaten away some of the metallic gold print. "It's just lists," I said. "Don't ask me any more questions because I can't control my mouth."

"Lists? Like what . . . groceries?"

I took my hand off the book and let it just sit there, without it touching me, or me touching it. "Do you think it's a book of grocery lists? Does it look like a book of grocery lists?"

"No," he said.

"Well, then."

"What do you make lists of?"

"People I hate," I said. "If I had a pen I'd put you on it."

"You would not."

I sighed. "You're right. I wouldn't."

He looked at me very seriously. "Do you really have a list of people you hate?"

I sat still but tipped my head forward a bit, letting my hair fall between me and him to hide my face. "No. I did in third grade."

"Let me see the book."

"No."

"Just a little bit?"

I shrugged. "I don't know what you want to see. It's just lists."

Hershey put his hand, broad with veins coming over the knuckles, on the cover of the notebook and let it rest there, stroking the blue fuzz a little with his index finger. "One list. That's all."

"Why?"

"I'm just curious."

"That's the problem," I said. I picked up the book and set it on my lap, letting the cover fall open and the pages of the first section spill on top of it.

Hershey leaned over close to me, and the two of us seemed to be one lump of shadows together under the black pines. He saw the first divider of the book, and he strained to see it in the darkness. "I don't see how you read anything in this light."

"I don't," I said.

He squinted at the one word in black ink on the manila divider. "Starts with an `R.'"

"It says `Rosemary.'"

"Who's Rosemary?"

"Absolutely nevermind," I said.

"You're the one who opened up to that page," he said.

"I know it."

"Well, don't show me something you don't want to talk about."

"You know," I said, "you look bigger for a second, and then smaller, so I wish you would sit still."

"I am still." He shut his eyes and stuck one finger between some pages in the last section of the book, and he flipped the book open to where his finger was. He didn't open his eyes. "Is there a list on this page you can read me? I'm not looking."

I glanced at the page he had opened to. A warm feeling in my stomach was spreading out to all my joints and limbs. "It's not an important list," I said. "And I feel sleepy."

"If it's not important then you can let me read it," he said, and he took the book into his hands.

"Pushy," I said, but I let him have it.

He lifted himself up off the ground a bit, reached into the back pocket of his shorts and pulled out a cigarette lighter. He flicked the wheel with his thumb and produced a quick flame, tall and acrid.

"Do you smoke?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "It's Wayne's. I used it today to burn my shoelace." He stuck out his foot and showed me his sneaker by the light of the flame. "See?" I saw where his lace had lost the plastic on the end, and he had burned it to keep it from unraveling. Then the flame leaned and wobbled and petered out.

"Oops," I said, drawing the syllable out too far.

He flicked the wheel of the lighter again and another flame came up.

"Do you like being here?" I asked him. "Living with Wayne?"

Hershey's nose cast weird shadows on his face that jumped around as the flame bounced on its small pedestal. "I guess," he said. "Are you going to let me read this or not?" The flame turned squat and died, and his face went dark. "You talk too much. Shut up and let me read."

He lit the lighter again and held it over my notebook. "October 5," he read. "Last year?"

"It was 1987," I said.

"Okay." He leaned over the book a little more. "`Milk, marmalade, peanut butter. Peaches, sugar, syrup.'" He looked up at me, his eyes reflecting thousand of pieces of the light of the tiny flame. "I thought you said this wasn't a book of grocery lists."

"It's not," I said. My throat was thick and the words swam up out of it.

"Then what is this?" he asked. The lighter went out, and he dropped it on the ground.

"Well," I said, concentrating to keep my verbs behind their subjects, "my mama has a spice rack in the kitchen that has a list of . . . okay, a grocery list . . . printed on the front, of basic stuff, like milk and eggs, to . . . remind you of what you need to get each week. A grocery list *starter*." I smiled, pleased. "See, not an actual grocery list in itself." A burp was hanging in the pipes under my throat, and so I spoke with my chin tucked in to keep it down. "I just . . . I don't know, I was sitting in the kitchen one morning, eating cereal . . . Apple

Jacks, and . . . I was reading the spice rack, and I just thought some of the words sounded good together. They made me hungry, so I wrote them down, to save." I shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

Hershey shut the book and put it back on my lap. Then he leaned back on his hands, and the moon on his face lit up the faintest of smiles. "So you're a poet, huh?"

"No," I said. "I just wrote down what was already there."

Keeping the heels of his hands still, he raked his fingers through the mat of needles on the ground. "You know," he said, "I'd really like to see the rest of that book."

"No."

He laughed, sitting forward and dusting the needles and dirt from his hands. "We'll see."

"You'll see," I said. "I can be very *st* . . . what's that *st* word?"

"Stubborn," he said. He laughed again. "I was kidding. You don't have to show me anything you don't want to."

"I was kidding about stubborn," I said. "I didn't really forget the word."

He threw a handful of needles at me. They hit my shoulder and fell to the ground.

"In fact," I said, feeling the first poking fingers of an ache underneath my eyebrows, "this may be wearing off." I put my hand to my forehead.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

"I still feel warm," I said, "but maybe my head's gonna hurt."

"I could rub your temples," he said.

My heart lurched against the wall of my chest so hard that I looked down at it. "Come now," I said. "I hardly know you."

"Oh, come here," he said, turning his body around to get behind me. "Move away from that rock."

I scooted out to make room between me and the slab of iron ore. Hershey crawled in the space and sat down, stretching one leg out on either side of me and nestling me in the middle. He pushed my hair to one side, over my shoulder, and then I felt his hands over my eyes. He held them there for a second, just like you would sneak up behind a child and play peekaboo, only I already knew who it was.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Starting," he said, and when he spoke I could feel it against the back of my head.

He took his hands off my eyes and placed the tips of his fingers just above my cheekbones. They were just like I felt they ought to be, warm as if all his blood were rushing there, and a tad rough from the grip of a wooden bat and the fingering of seams. He pressed down and rubbed in slow circles toward my eyes.

"Does that help?" he asked.

"Actually, my eyeballs are what hurts," I said, moving a little helplessly under his fingers, "but I'd just as soon you didn't rub them."

I felt his legs on both sides of me, hairy and muscular and unaccustomed, at every point where they touched my own legs. I felt there should be some sound, some loud bang, to blast through the trees, bending the tops and shaking down the needles, to echo through the whole town and clear out the hollers. I felt him at my back, his arms bent over my shoulders; I was completely conscious of where his mouth was because I felt it when he spoke or breathed, and I sensed the distance between his mouth and mine, and I was afraid to turn my head at all.

"I do this for my sister sometimes," Hershey said. "She has migraines."

"You have a sister?"

"Two," he said, kneading my head like a ball of dough.

"Take it easy there," I said. "You're squashing my brains."

"Sorry." He kept his thumbs on my temples and moved his fingers to my forehead, pressing in gentle circles, very lightly.

"You know," I said, "I think you should tell me about yourself. I don't know you at all . . . and here I sit, letting you rub on me." I felt somehow embarrassed that I'd said the word "rub." I tried not to be tense, to relax my muscles, because his hands were so close to my mind that I felt transparent. "And besides that you interrupted my roster of activities for the evening."

"I think you had about all the activity you can stand," he said. "Have you ever drunk vodka before?"

"Now, why'd you have to ask me that?" I groused. "I seem to always want to tell you the truth."

"I didn't think you had," he said, his breath moving my hair and his fingers crawling up into my scalp. "Have you ever had any hard liquor before?"

"No," I said. "Are you happy?"

He laughed.

"Now, see?" I said. "We're back around to me again, and it was you I was trying to find out about."

His fingers didn't stop moving. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything," I said. "You're a complete stranger."

He moved his hands completely into my hair, his fingers spread wide and encompassing my skull, and he pressed into my head slowly, and said nothing.

"Okay, fine," I said. "You talk funny. Where are you from?"

He breathed out a small laugh that I felt in my hair. "Well, Mama's from here, you know that," he said. "She met Dad when they were freshmen at Lambuth--he's from Boliver--and we moved to Ohio when I was four."

"So why have I never seen you before?"

He pressed the palms of his hands into my scalp very faintly. "We usually spend holidays at my grandma Crawford's. My mama and her father don't get along that well."

"Oh."

He ran two exploratory fingers from each hand over the top of my skull. "God, what's that?" His fingers stopped at my crown.

"I have a depression in my crown as deep as a soup bowl," I said. "I guess I should have warned you."

"Fascinating," he said, running his finger inside. "It's amazing you can think with this sticking into your brain."

"You know, that's very private," I said. "Very few people know it exists."

"I'm honored," he replied. He resumed massaging my scalp. "I guess that's why you grow your hair so thick?"

"You don't like my hair?"

"I like your hair very much."

"Oh."

He caressed the knob at the base of my skull with his thumbs. "So how are you feeling?"

"I feel well," I said. "Warm, not dizzy or spinny, a little thick and I'm still spouting off at the mouth a lot."

He lifted my hair up with his hands, his fingers like the teeth of a giant comb, and held it up in the air with one hand while the other stroked my neck.

"You know," I said, "you could braid my hair and throw it over my shoulder, and then it wouldn't be in your way."

"Braid your hair?" he snorted. "What do you take me for, some kind of a sissy boy?"

I giggled. My eyelids were heavy, the corners of my face tense from smiling but somehow slack from liquor at the same time. "Well, you sure draw some pretty little pictures," I said. "I bet you're a little light in the cleats."

He swatted me over the head with the wad of my hair that was in his hand.

"Do you take art at school?" I asked him. "I mean, I heard you were in college. Are you?"

He moved his hands down to my shoulders and began to knead the muscles. "I go to Vanderbilt," he said.

"Ooh," I said. "What year?"

"I'm a junior next semester."

"Scholarship?"

"Baseball," he said. "I figured you would have heard that already."

"Well, I did, but I was checking. Pitcher, I guess?"

"No, third base." He tugged at my hair. "You know, your little brother has a really great arm. If he keeps training he could go a long way."

"Don't I know it."

"Your dad's really good with him."

"We have a weight bench in the garage that sees plenty of action," I said. "You never answered me if you take art at school."

"You never let me," he said. "I take a couple of classes."

"Like what?"

"Well, next semester, sketch and design, and clay models."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Want to do?"

"With your life, I mean."

"I don't know."

"Not going to play pro ball?"

"That's not really something you decide you want to do," he said. "That's something you're told whether or not you can do."

"Is there hope?"

"There's always hope," he said. "It springs eternal."

"So why are you here?" I asked. "If you're looking for hope you're in the wrong neighborhood."

"Wayne's paying me."

I laughed, pressing the sore smile on my face even deeper. "What all do you have to do?"

"Help coach at the games, help that Jamie person with the rosters, help the kids get their batting and pitching right."

"Help," I said.

"Plus," he went on, "I didn't really want to go home this summer, because Mama and Dad are splitting up, and they can't quit screaming at each other." His voice didn't change expression, and the squeezing action of his hands on my shoulders didn't pause.

"I'm sorry," I said. I sat there and let heaviness collect in my eyelids for a moment. "You didn't have to tell me that. I hope you didn't think you had to."

"It was the least I could do," he said, moving his fingers slowly back up my neck. "You showed me the dent in your head. And your grocery list."

I felt like slumping back and relaxing my back, but there was no way I could. "You could have stayed in Nashville for the summer."

"Yeah."

"So?"

"I don't know," he said, and he put both hands on my back, running them from the shoulder blades down to the small, very gently. "I guess I just wanted to . . . go somewhere where it's quiet, no school, no competition." I thought I felt him shrug. "And I miss Grandma and Grandpa Barfield."

"Well, quiet you got, but competition, I don't know," I said. "Hair height, for example. The height of your hair is very important here. If you're a girl, I mean. Girls can come to blows over hairspray in a place like this."

"Oh, yeah?" He rapped on my back with his fist.

"And Little League is vicious." I sighed. "But you know that already. And hey--what the hell kind of a name is *Hershey*?"

"My mama had a lot of cravings when she was pregnant with me."

"God, lucky you," I said. "My granny ate pigs' feet when she was pregnant."

"My middle name is Sardine." He patted his hands on my back then, a finishing gesture. He drew his knees up and sat back a

bit, and I felt as if I were sitting alone under the pines as cool air fell in between us.

"Will you tell me something?" he asked.

"I've been telling and telling," I said. "I don't see why not."

"Why," he asked me, "are you drinking vodka alone in the woods on your graduation night?"

I didn't turn around, and when I spoke my voice seemed like a very small point in the big darkness. "I'm not alone," I said, "and I'm no longer drinking."

He tugged on my hair, but he didn't say anything.

"Page and I used to pour water in the middle of this circle and have our own communion," I said. "We'd bring jump ropes out at recess because we were supposed to play on the driveway, but we'd sneak off back here with glasses from the cafeteria and play in the woods."

"You went to school here?" he asked. "That red brick building is a school?"

I nodded. "Was a school. The Catholic school. It shut down after we graduated eighth grade."

"How come?"

"Well, there weren't many kids--Page and I were the only two girls in our grade--and how could you really in a town this small have more kids, but some people don't understand that--the problem was really the bastards who sit on the other side of church."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh." I waved my hand. "We the Catholics of St. Mary's don't give a lick for Christian charity."

He laughed. "You can explain it to me when you're sober."

"I came here for prom, you know," I said. Some of the warmth was draining from my face but what it left behind was not coolness. My face felt taut and my eyes were made of lead. "I got dressed up like I was going but I came here and nobody knew where I was and I just laid here with all these rocks. I got mud on my dress but nobody told my mama," I said, and I pointed a righteous finger at him, "and I didn't drink anything that night."

Some tears that came without effort trickled down my face--my nose didn't tingle, my lip didn't quiver, it was as if the tears had been lying in my eyes all night waiting to fall, and they just got tired of waiting.

Hershey stood up. He stooped a little to keep his head out of the pine branches. "I'm taking you home."

"No, you're not," I said, but he already had me by the hands and was pulling me up. "What about my car?"

"You can come get it in the morning." He let go of my hands.

"You think I'm going to just climb on the back of that motorcycle and let you take my life into your hands?" I grumbled, picking up my vodka and the crumpled sack and my notebook.

He turned and started to leave the circle, pushing pine branches out of his way. "It's a little late to start thinking you don't trust me," he said.

I rubbed at my eyes as I followed him. "A stranger on a motorcycle rescues the damsel in distress. Blecchhh."

"It's not his fault the damsel is blitzed," he said. "And he's not a stranger anymore."

When we cleared the trees and I stood up straight, my blood began to course at normal speed again, flowing past and pushing against the soreness in my temples and a new stiffness in my back. My steps still had to be calculated.

I saw Hershey's bike parked right behind my daddy's car. "That's no motorcycle," I said. "That's a moped."

"I know," he replied, moving past me. "I lied."

"That seat is barely big enough for both of us."

"You'll have to sit in front of me and squat a little."

"Oh, I can't," I moaned. "I'll be sick."

Hershey unstrapped the helmet hanging from the bar across the back of the bike's seat. He brought the helmet to me and put it on my head.

"Ouch," I said as he plunked it down over my ears. The surface was black and shiny and plain; the foam inside was peeling a little and it tickled my ears. "Please be careful with my head."

"Sorry." He fastened the strap under my chin and pulled it through the buckle to tighten it.

My forehead throbbed as he pulled and my center of balance lurched forward into the front of my face. "I mean it. Please don't move my head so much."

He stopped. "Are you going to throw up?"

"No."

"I'm not kidding," he said. "If you have anything to share, do it before you get on my bike."

"It's not like it's your antique Harley."

"Vomit is vomit."

"Don't use that word," I said. "It makes me smell vomit."

He snorted. "Would that be on your list of words that smell like they sound?"

"It doesn't smell like it sounds. It sounds like it smells, and it smells like what it means."

"No, you said it was the sound of it that makes you smell it."

"Stop," I said, "or I'll do it."

He kicked the pedal on the side nearer him up to the top of its arc, turned the motor on and set the choke, stood on the pedal and jumped it down. The motor sputtered on the first try and popped around for a second until it began to hum smoothly, and the bike quivered on its kickstand.

"Let's go," he said.

"What, no helmet for you?"

He snapped his fingers. "Damn--I must have taken my spare out of my back pocket."

"Well," I said, "let's get this overwith."

He kicked the moped off its stand and sat back as far as he could on the seat, patting the little pointy front with one hand. "For you."

"What about my notebook and stuff?" I asked. "I can't hold on to this and you both."

"Stick the notebook up under your shirt," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave the vodka for the nuns."

"They'll be needing it this week," I muttered.

"What?"

"I can't leave it here," I said. "It's my parents'. It's almost full."

"Put the notebook in your shirt, and put the vodka in the trunk of the car," he said. "You can sneak it out sometime later, I guess."

"Oh. I'm good at sneaking."

I did as I was told, and with my bodice stiff and flat and cold metal wire curling down my left side, I tucked the front of my shirt back into my shorts and climbed onto the bike in front of Hershey. I placed my feet side by side on the bar and sat gingerly on the front of the seat, bending my knees into a squat and holding on to Hershey's arms.

"Hurry and get me home," I said. "I can't sit like this for very long."

"This isn't the safest way to travel," he said. "I don't think we should go very fast."

"Cut across the churchyard back over there," I said, letting go of one of his arms so that I could point, "and get on Cherry Street."

He gave the bike a push with his foot and revved the motor with his right hand, and we took off. As I felt the air rush at my face and up into my helmet, not fast enough to be uncomfortable or intrusive, I knew that I would not throw up. But I felt silly with the helmet on, stuck in an outhouse crouch between Hershey and the handlebars, and my knees began to ache.

As we rode I shouted directions, not because the motor was too loud but because he couldn't hear me through the helmet, and he would crane his neck around it to listen. We rode past everything that was quiet until morning--the bank, the drugstore, the neatly trimmed yards tied together by rows upon rows of trees that laced together visibly at the tops and invisibly underground. When we got to the highway we rode in the grass, off the road and away from cars, behind the Quik Mart and the other concrete sentinels of town whose bulbs were aglow. We turned off onto the old farm road, where most of the Catholic families still owned the same fields their great-grandfathers had, and we rode the quarter of a mile until I could see the faint sparkle of the porch light of my house winking through the trees in the dark.

I directed Hershey to stop at my driveway. "You can let me off here at the end," I yelled.

He squeezed the bike to a halt, and I gratefully put my feet down on the ground and stood up straight, stretching out my legs.

"Is this your farm?" he asked.

"All these fields on this side of the fence--I don't know if you can see it in the dark," I said, pointing toward the horizon. "There's a creek under that line of trees. That's the property line between our land and the Ehemanns'."

"This is beautiful out here," he said. He reached around me and undid the chin strap on the helmet, lifting it off my head.

"Come sketch it sometime," I said, stepping over the bar. I untucked my shirt and let my book fall out. It hit the ground before I could catch it, and I leaned over to pick it up.

"I'll do that," he said, putting the helmet on his head. "Geez, it's hot in here--what have you been thinking about the whole way home?"

"Nothing," I said. "It was just the vodka in my ears." I stood there for a second, and then I realized there was nothing to do but turn around and head up the driveway for home, so I did. "Thanks for the ride," I said, raising my hand.

"Sure," he said. He flicked the accelerator a few times, scooting forward on the seat to get more comfortable. "You know, Gabriel . . . you didn't miss anything. A couple of Bon Jovi songs, some punch. No big deal."

I looked at him for a second, and then I started to kick at a rock in the driveway until I understood what he was talking about. "I know," I said finally.

He eased the bike forward a bit. "I'll see you later--get some sleep."

"Okay."

He sputtered off, but as he was leaving he shouted something over his shoulder to me. I didn't understand him at first, but as I stood there I realized he had said, "My grandmother's maiden name was Hershey."

With that he was gone, and I watched his little moped putt down the farm road--his long frame was cramped with his feet on the pedals, and I hadn't realized how uncomfortable it must have been to have me between his legs all the way from St. Mary's--and then he disappeared over the rise. I listened until I could no longer hear him and then I walked up the driveway in the dark.

Chapter Twenty

When the revivals swung through town tents came up faster than mushrooms after a rain. The tents actually preceded the revival by a few days and stood in the city parks or behind the endorsing churches, empty with promise, the breezes of the Lord sweeping through and waving the tassels on the center poles. A few days later the operational outfit would arrive, and the visiting preacher would dig in at the podium to begin his crusade of holiness. A thunderous voice would flush the sinful from their hiding places.

The confessional was supposed to be soundproof. That was why the Catholics no longer confessed behind a curtain, because a room had been installed which let no sound in or out. Admissions of guilt were collecting there by the ceiling, trapped by the white cushiony squares with little holes meant to suck up the sound and put it away forever. That of course did not mean that God could not hear what they were saying. God saw into their hearts.

The preaching from the tents was so loud that you could hear it everywhere. If you were having your groceries hauled to the car from the curb of the Bi-Rite you could hear the PA system shriek from the park grounds; without the clarity of words you could hear the single voice of thunder rising and falling with the spirit, and the chorus of sin pleading after it. If you listened closely--although you probably wouldn't be inclined to, since you would be impatient to get home before your ice cream

melted--you would hear the shouts of encouragement as the line to salvation formed outside the tent. The "Amen"s were loud and teary, the faces pale that walked the center line to the podium, the voices ashamed that confessed their sins to the universe ("Out here in the open air!" cried the preacher, although it was plain to see that there was a tent between them and their Lord). Yes, they confessed their sins right there, uneasily laid their fornication and drinking upon the altar of their God--because most of them were young--and received their salvation as the preacher screamed his sweaty approval, speaking for the Lord, who Himself was not sweating under the morbid enclosure of the tent.

The Catholics could hear none of this going on. The confessional was soundproof.

Chapter Twenty-One

She wasn't so good with the sentences. It was hard enough to find time to write things down because she was the center about which the farm spun, in their universe, but then when she carved out a few precious minutes from the end of her day and sneaked to the pantry with her candle and pens and paper, and tried to call back again what had been so easily hers throughout the day only to find that the sentences were no good, she could not stop the tears.

English was not completely hers. It would do her no good to try the task in German--who here would bother to read what she had written--but was that her intent, after all? She couldn't keep her hands off the fresh clean stationery when she was alone, but when she cluttered it up with her ink and could not stand to read what she had written, the feeling in her stomach was indescribable. Indeed, that was the problem.

She could not catch the light in her hand. She could not feel in a language that was not hers. She was trapped in a place between English and German, yet she continued to beg the paper for mercy, caressing it with the point of her pen and christening it with her tears. She kept the good and the bad, the pieces and the single words that she lingered over and the full pages.

One night the flame of her candle was teasing the ripples of wax built up around the edge of the dish and she knew it was time she joined her husband in bed, only there was nothing on her page, nothing in her heart, but something unmistakeably inside

her. She took her pen and drove it into her finger until blood fell onto her page, and it felt as if some of the force inside her was gone, and as she smeared the small spare drops over the page she relaxed for the first time all night. There were still no words on the page. That was the only piece of her paper that she ever threw away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I was having some kind of vague dream about dancing pine trees when the telephone beside my bed rang the next morning. It startled me out of a very smooth sleep that bore no pain at the edges, or nausea in the middle.

"Hello?"

"Girl." It was Page. "Did I wake you up?"

"Yeah--what time is it?"

"Eight-thirty."

"Good Lord." I furrowed down deep in the covers, tasting sticky strings of sleep between my lips.

"I had to call," she said. "I woke up without a hangover and God, was I trashed last night."

"I would have been happier for you at nine," I mumbled. "Ecstatic by around ten."

"Well, I wanted you to get up and come over."

I hugged my pillow to my abdomen and curled myself around it. "Right now?"

"I thought we could have Mama take our picture since we didn't get to last night."

"I'm not getting dressed up in my cap and gown again."

"Oh, I know. Me neither. But we could talk and stuff."

I could see as soon as I pulled into her driveway that I'd been conned. Both of Page's garage doors were open and a fairy veil of dust floated in the air over boxes dragged out into the

sunshine. I saw her mother bent over a bucket inside the garage. I turned off the motor.

Page came out to the car as I was shutting the door. The scraggles raveling from the bottom of her denim cutoffs hung down to her knees, and her bare wet feet squished in the gravel of her driveway. Her eyes were pink around the edges.

She blinked brightly at me. "Hey--we're just starting to mop."

"I see that."

She flicked at the rocks with her big toe. "I got in so late last night."

"Does Jane know?"

"Of course she knows. Why do you think we're cleaning the damned garage?"

"Was Sammy drunk too?"

"Gawd." Her eyes rolled back up into her head and I saw the bright vessels in the white of her eyeball pitchfork up into the iris. "He didn't know his own name." She sighed. "We didn't do nothing. We just sat at his house and he laid his head on my lap and slept."

"You didn't go to the river?"

"We stopped by there for a minute," she said. "I didn't see you, but I saw Rosemary. Where were you?"

"I was there," I said. "I was down on the water."

"Oh." She sniffed. "I cain't believe we didn't spend graduation night together."

"Who, you and me?"

She nodded.

"You should have come on down to the water last night, then," I shrugged, and I followed her inside the garage. Jane was sitting on the kitchen doorstep checking off a list made on a napkin, a cigarette stuck to her bright pink lip. She either waved hello or waved smoke out of her face, I couldn't tell which. "Hey there," she said. "Interesting speech you gave last night." She raised an eyebrow already unnaturally arched, but her eyes remained on her napkin, one pink fingernail tracing over the writing.

"You totally blew it off," said Page. "You totally just didn't write a speech."

"Do you want me to mop, or what?" I asked.

"First we're going to scrub all the cat piss off the floor," Jane replied, smoke inflected with the shapes of her words dribbling up from her lips, "and then we're going to trash everything in those boxes."

"Not everything," said Page loudly. "It's Daddy's stuff."

"Most of it." Jane shrugged, and banged with her fist at the old carpenter's bench beside the steps, whose piles of unused doodads jangled under their dust and rust. "And I want to get all his nails and screws and shit into separate containers so when I need something out of here I can *find* it."

"I'll scrub the floor with the wire scrub," Page said to me. "You don't have to do that."

"To be honest with you, I wasn't going to offer," I said. "But I'll mop."

Page had two cats, fat virile toms named Travis and Tritt, who left territorial demarcation in a frenzy all over the garage, especially in the corner where the laundry room vent opened up through the wall and left drifts of lint on the concrete floor. The lint and the urine made an appalling paste which, baked by the heat from the vent, clung in the cracks and made the whole room stink. Occasionally the young scraggly things wooed by Travis and Tritt would appear with brimming bellies hanging pitifully to the ground, and each would seek out the corner with the strongest olfactory remembrance of her beloved to deposit her litter. By the end of the spring the garage made it nearly unbearable to be in the kitchen.

Jane got up and threw her cigarette in the yard and inspected the garage windows, which were spread thick with cobwebs and heavy black dirt. "If you really want to help, Gabriel," she said, "I done started mopping under the tool bench--you can grab it and keep going up till the Philco, till Page gets done with the scrubbing."

Page tipped the bucket of soap water so that some splashed into the corner she was scrubbing. She had a long-handled brush whose bristles were splayed and brown and she began picking gingerly at the cracks of the floor with it.

I took the mop from where it was leaning against the tool bench and dipped it into the water. I drew it back out and

traced the heavy, dripping strings in slow patterns over the floor.

"Well, Gabriel, are you going to visit UT over the summer?" Jane asked me. She was knocking off the biggest clods of dirt from the window with an old baby diaper. Her tone was not in the least inquisitive; she spoke as if her mouth were still clenched around a cigarette.

"I have to, in June."

"For her orientation," Page said.

"It's a good thing you got school paid for," said Jane. "God knows how I'll eat once Page goes off."

"I have a scholarship, Mother." Page began to scrub harder, her brown bristles straining against the concrete.

"But not one that pays everything." Jane misted the windowpanes with a spray bottle of cleaner.

"I'm going to Columbia State, not the University of Tennessee," said Page. "It ain't going to break you."

"Well, with your dad not sending any money." Jane spoke the phrase as a sentence. "You was picking at your cap when you went up to get your award last night. I told you to use more bobby pins."

I buried myself in my mopping. My lazy strokes were not producing much except for thick soapy stripes running from the steps to the old refrigerator on the other side of the tool bench. I stared out beyond the garage and watched the sunlight

catch the feathery threads of dust that still spun in the air over the boxes in the driveway.

"Page, you are every bit as smart as Gabriel," said Jane. "She knows how to work, is all."

Page worked the brush into the concrete with fervent diligence.

"Is *all*," Jane repeated, applying herself to a relentless speck on one of the lower panes. She shook out her cloth, black and damp with dirt. The back of my neck tingled and I turned away from both of them with the mop.

From across the highway Travis came trotting through the yard and into the garage. He sniffed at the wet floor with a complete absence of alarm. He blinked his eyes coolly and began to pace the floor, slinking in between the garbage cans lined up along the wall and running his twitching nose along the baseboard to see which boundary lines had been washed away. He flicked his tail and purred in what seemed to be amusement.

"Get that goddamn cat out of here, Page," Jane said when she heard him. "And rub his nose in his piss first."

Page scooped Travis into her arms; he kicked at her with a back paw. "What good would that do? He *likes* the smell." She dumped him outside. When he tried to come back in, she pushed at his nose with her foot until he ducked and padded away.

For a few moments the furious squeak of Jane's cloth on the glass was the only sound, and then she paused to sigh a sweaty

sigh and say, "If your math scores was just a little higher you could be going off to school with Gabriel."

Page wiped her forehead and sniffed.

"If you wasn't so careless," Jane said.

"I recall, Mama," said Page, "that you was married when you was my age."

If you weren't so careless, I thought as I drew broad, languid designs with the soap on my mop. The room got extremely quiet for a moment except for a storm breeze from the southwest breathing in at our feet; Page stopped scrubbing, Jane stopped squeaking, and I felt that somehow my thought, that one bare sentence, had been heard aloud. I blushed. The silence only lasted for a trace of time before Jane's trigger finger sprang on the spray bottle and enveloped her half of the garage in a cool blue mist.

By the time we finished the floors and got to the boxes, the air outside was thick and hot, and the garage was pungent with heat and soap. Page opened the first box herself, and bright curls of dust spun away from the flaps and into the air.

Jane had lit another cigarette, and ashes fell onto the newly clean floor. "We're going to have to have a yard sale."

"No, we're not," said Page, coughing against the smoke and dust, digging into the box. She pulled up the edges of a faded quilt and motioned for me to take two corners. We removed it from the box and shook it out; sunlit dust sprayed up my nose and I sputtered and choked.

"Needs a good beating," Jane said.

Page and I carried the quilt to the back yard and spread it on the grass, where the sun beat down and showed the faded creases in the pinwheel design, which appeared to have been blue and red and cream, once upon a time. "I should have taken better care of that," Jane said. "Joe's mama made it for me when we first started dating. I used it up till we moved here and then I never brought it in the house."

"It stinks," said Page.

"It's just been sitting in that box, collecting bugs. I bet nobody would buy it if we tried to sell it."

"We're not selling it," said Page.

"You never even seen that thing," Jane snorted. "What do you care?"

"It doesn't have any holes," I offered.

"Nobody would buy it."

"It just needs cleaning."

"*Gabriel*," said Page.

"Nobody would buy it," Jane repeated.

I looked at the quilt and I wanted to throw it away. The cracked, bleached pinwheels looked dead in the bright sun.

"Keep digging in them boxes," Jane said, making no motion toward them herself. She sucked on her cigarette and drew a brightly painted toenail through the damp gravel of the driveway.

Page was already sunk headfirst into the deep box, tossing workshirt after workshirt, all flannel and densely pilled, out

behind her. As they hit the grass they belched dust. After there was a small pile of them lying there in the sun Page declared, "That's all that's in here. Shirts."

"That would sell," I said.

"I don't know." Jane paused, smoke seeping out from the bright pink lips in a slow stream. "They're in good shape--I don't know as I'd get back what I paid for 'em."

"I'd wear some in the winter," Page said.

"You would?" Jane asked.

"She wouldn't," I said.

Jane breathed a voiced sigh that pushed rippled smoke out her nearly closed lips. "Let's start another box."

With her cigarette aloft in one hand she toyed with the flaps of the next box, and Page abandoned her half-empty box to help. I knelt quietly in the grass behind them, beside the flannel shirts, and I began to fold them one by one, and I placed them back inside the box where they belonged.

I spent the rest of the day at home, out in the back yard with my book of lists, watching Daddy hoe weeds from the garden. I tried to remember what all had been in the boxes that Page and Jane had gone through. Page had her own section in my book, too, but hers was thin and the paper was in good condition. Rosemary called three times--Mama came outside to tell me--but I was too busy with my book to call her back. *Flannel shirts, smoke, and dust*, I wrote, and my father's hoe sliced the dirt.

The next morning in the car on the way to Mass my family and I speculated about what the new priest was going to be like. Daddy wondered if he would explain Father Dozier's sudden departure; Mama wondered if he would explain his cohabitation with the nuns, which apparently was still going on because neither side would budge; Michael wondered if he would make the CCD classes go to school in the summer. (Now that St. Mary's Elementary was closed, all the parish children enrolled in South August Elementary went to religion classes on Wednesday nights.) I simply wondered if I would like him at all.

The sky was dark with rain and church was crowded by the time the bells in the tower began to ring at 10:30. The organist, Lilah Murphy, nearly as old as the church, struck the opening notes of "We Gather Together" from upstairs in the loft, and we all stood and turned our heads to the back of church as if we were waiting for the bride to come in.

Father Smiley entered from the vestibule, behind his two altar boys and Percy Davis, who was the lector for that morning. Even tanner than I remembered, and smiling beneficently, Father had his missalette open to the right page and he belted out the first line of the song when it came time. Actually, a shade before it came time. He had a strong voice that could easily be heard over the rest of us--which was no big deal, because as a parish our singing was pretty anemic--and which seemed to propel him and the others up the aisle at a remarkable speed. His

chasuble waved like a flag in the wind, and Lilah tried to speed up her sleepy notes to compensate. Father Smiley was on the altar ready to genuflect by the time we had reached "In this celebration/All sing with jubilation," which had Father Dozier beat by several seconds.

Lilah had to wind down the song after the first verse because Father Smiley went straight to the opening monologue. "Good morning to all of you," he said as Lilah killed the last chord with a flick of the volume pedal.

"Good morning, Father," we replied.

"For those of you whom I haven't yet met--which is most of you," he said, his youthful voice booming into our old cavernous church, "my name is Father John Smiley. I usually go by Father Smiley--it makes me seem friendlier." His tanned face split into a broad smile, showing his straight white teeth.

The parish chuckled in response, all at once.

"I'm very excited to be here," he said as one of the altar boys came round with the prayer book. "Hope Springs is a lovely town and I hope my stay here is long and happy."

Everyone around me was smiling back at him. The parish was wearing its expectant heart on its sleeve. The nuns were seated in the front row, the rigid bodies of Sister Cecilia and Sister Sheila shoring up the pillowy Sister Bernard, although Sister Bernard for once did not seem anywhere near sleep. Her eyes peeped out from her fat dry face and fixed upon the face of Father Smiley as he spoke.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen," he intoned, passing his hand over us in blessing, and we all crossed ourselves, and thus began Father John Smiley's first Mass in Hope Springs. Everything proceeded normally from there, except that he sang the Mass parts with such gusto that the nearly blind Lilah was clearly straining to keep up on the old Wurlitzer. His voice was friendly and somehow calming, if of a slightly surprising volume.

He read the Gospel in a clear, no-nonsense voice and made broad gestures with his hands that seemed to beckon you closer to him; his hands came out toward the congregation and then pulled back into his body until they nearly disappeared under his vestments. The gospel was from John, the passage in which Jesus assures Nicodemus that "whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of God's only Son." Father Smiley's vibrant voice rang through the nave and, I was sure, unsettled antique strains of dust in the most remote corners of the building. He wasn't yelling; he just had a strange excess of resonance.

"Everyone who practices evil
hates the light;
he does not come near it
for fear his deeds will be exposed.
But he who acts in truth
comes into the light,
to make clear

that his deeds are done in God."

The "d" of "God" rang and rang, turning over and over in the pause Father Smiley allowed before he spoke the words, "This is the Gospel of the Lord."

"Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," we responded, and we took our seats.

Father Smiley closed the Lectionary and placed it on a shelf in the lectern, and then he clasped his hands together and gazed out over all of us. He turned and left the lectern, and came right down the steps, off the altar and into the center aisle. I looked at Mama, and she looked back at me and raised her eyebrows.

"Can all of you hear me okay?" he thundered. There was scattered nodding as the echoes of his voice rattled off the ceiling, and he began to pace the aisle. "I like to be on the same level as my congregation. It also keeps you from falling asleep." His eyes crinkled into a smile, and we all craned our necks to follow him up and down as he paced.

"My name is Father John Smiley," he told us again, "and I'm a diocesan priest from Nashville. For the past three years I've been pastor to St. Charles Borromeo Parish in McMinnville, which is a lovely place as well--not quite as small as here, but still a place where I was on a first-name basis with the people of the Lord. That's very important to me." He stopped and looked all around him, his eyes seeming to stop on each parishioner in search of first names. He even looked up into the choir loft,

where Lilah Murphy sat all shriveled on the organ bench squinting back at him, up at the thirty or so people squeezed into the old pews upstairs and the choir benches on risers.

"I have confidence," he continued, "that as a people and their shepherd we can grow in the Lord together." He was ambling back toward the altar as he said this, and he stopped at the steps and turned back to face us all. "I have heard from the bishop about some of your troubles as a faith community," he said, "and I want us to end the division here and now." There was a slight separation between the words in the phrase "here and now."

"Of course, when the liaison between God and man fails you, it is not easy to pick up and go on, I realize," he continued. "When the priest whom you trust behaves in a manner that is less than exemplary, where do you go for direction? To whom do you turn?"

I looked at my mama again, but she was looking at Daddy, and he was looking back at her. Surprise crossed the channel between their eyes.

"What I want you to understand is that Father Dozier is gone," said Father Smiley, "and a new time has begun, a time for healing."

The thunderous echo of his voice stopped then, for me; it was as if he were speaking through a paper tube; his words seemed small and narrow. He did not go on to specifically accuse Father Dozier of any Laney-Brink-related crime (although she was not in

church); he began to speak of something else altogether, something leading into a treatment of the day's Gospel, but I turned to look at the other side of church, at the Davises in the front row, and Percy Davis wore a solemn look of concern on his face, nodding ever so slightly. Even Sharla's skittish gloppy eyes were trained on Father Smiley. I felt a flash of a tremor in my gut for Father Dozier, departed and defenseless.

Only a thin, reedy version of the rest of Father Smiley's sermon piped in to me as I sat in my own world of disbelief between my parents. I watched the gray light from outside shift intensities as rain readied to fall, and I heard Father Smiley tout salvation as a product of faith in Jesus, but I was trying to imagine Father Dozier touching Laney Brink's fake-blond hair. I was trying to imagine his starry eyes affixed to anything less than his imagined shape of God. I couldn't see the faces of all the people around me; I didn't know if they were as surprised as I was.

Father Dozier had been the tenth priest at St. Mary's that I could remember. When I started first grade, the pastor was Father Fassbinder, who drank more than his Massly share of communion wine; in third grade came Father Samuel, who was nice and bearded and read his homilies from a book; in fourth grade, Father Dorschafft from Austria, who spat visibly during Mass and terrified the altar boys; in sixth grade, Father Clement, so old that the walk from one side of the altar to the other to read the Gospel took upwards of a full minute, and he usually nodded off

in the silence after Communion; in seventh grade, Father Matt Whitehead, who was young and liked for us to call him just "Matt"; two months further into seventh grade, Father Rocca from Brooklyn who choked on a chicken bone at a fundraising dinner and did not die but refused to come back to Hope Springs; in eighth grade, Father John Vianney Prater from Pocatello, Idaho, who jogged seven miles before Mass every Sunday; then the expensive and eminently tasteful Father Igglemarch; in my sophomore year, Father Alphonse McClellan, so round of stomach that new vestments had to be ordered and stocked in the sacristy, and Elaine Brink had to have extra help in the rectory kitchen; and finally in my junior year Father Dozier had come, gliding magically into the rectory one evening near Christmas like a sugarplum dream. It was difficult to give a tangible cause for the embarrassing rectory rollover, with the exception of maybe Father Rocca's chicken bone; but inevitably--and I knew nothing of this when I was younger--the parish would react to each new priest by splitting down the middle: half would treat him like royalty, and half would stop just short of spitting upon the rectory doorstep.

It had all depended upon the priest's position on one issue, up until the issue was moot: the parish school. Half of the parishioners, including the Whittingtons, insisted that the school sucked the treasury dry and was not an asset as long as the church building needed repairing and the rectory was falling apart and the prayer leagues had no funds with which to do their

good works; the other half, which included my parents, clung ardently to the old school, to the identity of separation and education by the nuns. Neither side was above nastiness. Even priests like Father John Vianney Prater who got wise and straddled the issue as expertly as they could were spun out of orbit before they even realized they were not at the center of the parish solar system.

Finally, after Father Igglemarch's dismissal and the passage of the resolution requiring tuition of St. Mary's students, the Whittingtons' camp had found in Father Alphonse an ally, because he was too old and fat to have the energy to minister to the school, and with his help, or at least without his opposition, and with the good fortune of the retirement of several older members of the board, they were able to elect a Parish Council sympathetic to their cause and bring the issue to a vote. But at their decision to close the doors of St. Mary's the other ill-represented half of the parish gave loud cry, and eventually the uproar came to the attention of the bishop of the Diocese of Nashville, under whose jurisdiction we fell. He had seen the rise and fall of many a priest in our parish, had reassigned to us as many replacements as he had the patience to attempt, and had paid several brief and perfunctory visits to warn us to get along or else; he reached his breaking point at this last scuffle, and he declared the school a liability to parish unity and therefore to the diocese. He ordered it closed immediately. He did not even do it in person. The parish received a letter

from him after the last child's shouts died away in the halls of St. Mary's that June, a letter congratulating us on our Christian spirit that kept us together, which Father Alphonse read to us at Mass in lieu of a homily. He was often doing things in lieu of a homily, such as reading from *Lives of the Saints* or from the *Twin Circle*, and he did not deem this letter, which comprised one-and-a-half pages, too short to be acceptable.

In the year that had passed since the school's closing, the wash of red ink on the church's ledgers had indeed receded, although not in the proportions that the Whittingtons had hoped, because it cost money to provide the new religious education classes that had to be held for the former students of St. Mary's, even though the nuns had agreed to teach them. But the clinking of new coins in the coffers proved too irresistible; soon there was a new parish sore spot, and the bitter divisions reasserted themselves right down the center aisle. The church building, Percy Davis had decided, needed to be modernized.

I found it difficult to concentrate on the rest of Mass. My eyes wandered up to the high arch and traced the cool foreheads of the angels all during the petitions, and when we knelt for the eucharistic prayer I saw Father Smiley's thatch of gray-white hair hover over the altar between his outstretched hands; I don't remember noticing his face as he spoke the words but I remember that of the available prayer selections he chose the shortest, and it was over quickly.

"Through Him, with Him, in Him," he sang in closing, and I thought the stained-glass saints would shatter in their panes. "In the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever."

"Amen, Amen, A-a-a-amen," came the slow chords from upstairs. The congregation sang "Ah-men," as we always had, and Father Smiley sang "Ay-men," in a tone so bright that it hushed the rest of us up. The juxtaposition of the two sounds was what jolted me out of my dreaming and back into Mass. We rose from our knees and the church filled with the racket of the kneelers being raised to make more legroom.

Instead of beginning the Lord's Prayer, Father Smiley waited for the sound to die away, and the church grew completely silent.

He stepped around the altar table and came down the steps again into the aisle.

It somehow didn't seem right for him to do that, with the consecrated bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Jesus, simply left behind him on the table, the focus of the Mass suddenly shifted from them to this spot of white hair and this stripe of white teeth in a brown, brown face.

"It is time for us to pray to the Father as Jesus taught us," said Father Smiley, looking not at us but straight down the aisle and apparently out the door. "I want us all to join hands in the love of Jesus."

What happened next could have taken only five seconds at the most but it was pronounced enough that it seemed to last far

longer. At Father Smiley's request that we join hands, the entire parish recoiled as if we'd been asked to turn to our neighbor and kiss him on the lips. It wasn't a physical shudder exactly, but more like a giant roomful of simultaneous furtive glances, some directed at the loved ones we were sitting with, others at the people sitting next to us in the pews whom we were being asked to touch. I in my own microsecond was glad that the Whittingtons and the Davises and the rest were on the other side of the church. Then, with no noticeable pause, we reached for each other, doubtless because of the commanding presence with the crown of gray hair standing in our aisle with his eyes now closed. Maybe we felt powerless to resist and so we reached out to each other as if we held hands at every Mass.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven," began Father Smiley, his friendly eyes remaining closed as we joined in with him, "hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." The roof crackled as the first small drops of rain splattered against it.

The nuns did not hold hands with each other. They were close enough as it was, and they merely bowed their heads as they were accustomed to doing.

I really didn't have it so bad. I was between Michael and my father--Daddy's hand dwarfed mine; Michael's hand squeezed mine, to the point where my index knuckle nearly touched my pinky, and I dug my fingernail into the tender pad of his thumb. Daddy was on the end of the pew and so his right hand rested at

his side. Mama had Michael's left hand and I saw her shake it a bit and frown; I assumed this was because Michael couldn't separate the functions of his left and his right hands and was probably pinching her in his effort to inflict pain upon me. Mama's other hand was in Elaine Brink's.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Father Smiley was approaching the first pews as we prayed, and he led the parishioners at the center aisle ends of their pews part of the way out and toward each other, and in his hands he joined theirs, connecting the two sides of church across the middle. The people in the first pews stretched their arms and shifted their positions to make a solid row across the church, and then the rest of the pews followed suit at a nod from Father Smiley. Daddy dragged me along as he stepped into the aisle to join hands with John Whittington. They gave each other the man's nod of greeting. Daddy cleared his throat.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen," we finished, our hands hanging limply in each other's, and Father Smiley said, squinting his closed eyes a bit more tightly, "Don't let go of each other yet."

A priest had never spoken to us in such a way; we seemed to be in a theater watching him onstage, or we seemed to be onstage ourselves.

Michael looked at me and flared his nostrils. I flared mine back. The church stood in silently borne curiosity, connected at the hands.

Father Smiley raised his hands for the traditional prayer, but showed no signs of moving back onto the altar. "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy, keep us free from sin, and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

We began to respond, as we were accustomed to--"For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever"--but Father Smiley interrupted us and the words died away.

"Raise your hands in fellowship," cried Father Smiley, "raise your hands in prayer!" He grabbed the joined hands of the two people in the front and center of church and raised them up in the air, and the rest of us watched and then raised our own clumsily and without fervor, so many arms in mismatched connections at awkward heights, the short with the misfortune of standing next to the tall stretching and straightening at the elbows, the circuit stretching and groaning across the middle of church until some adjustment was made in the position of our feet. Michael looked up at me and crossed his eyes. I wasn't looking at him, but I knew he was doing it--I sensed his eyeballs heading toward his nose; I was too dumbfounded to look back at him. I stared at Father Smiley, whose eyes were closed, as he

began the words for us, and we joined in quietly: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever."

We stood in silence, not knowing what to do. Michael held my left arm as high as he could pull it, trying to straighten my elbow, but I resisted and so our arms wobbled. My father held my right arm only barely above my waist, although he had a firm grip on my hand; John Whittington had Daddy's right hand lofted in the air, pointing to heaven. John Whittington seemed actually to enjoy it, even now that a vague pause had settled over all of us, frozen under the glassy gaze of the saints with our arms splayed out and pointing in all directions.

Father Smiley reached up and with his outstretched palm slowly lowered the hands of the parishioners directly in front of him, and then he opened his eyes and smiled a smile that did not offer a glimpse of the whiteness of his teeth until he spoke. "I want you to feel this every Sunday," he said, and he turned and strode back up on the altar.

Feel what? I thought, as we lowered our arms and released each other's hands. Those of us pulled into the middle of the aisles compressed back into the pews, and there was a lot of racket as the kneelers were kicked and shuffled into. Small spurts of throat-clearing erupted over the noise of the floor, and at the Kiss of Peace we shook hands with the brevity we were accustomed to, and it was not until we filed out of our pews for Communion, our eyes yet upon one another, that some measure of comfortable silence crept back into the service.

By the time that Father Smiley announced, just before the final Sign of the Cross, that confessions would be held just as they had been before his arrival, directly after Mass, the general unease seemed to have passed but the congregation was fidgety and coughing and whispering, anxious to be outside. The final hymn ushered Father Smiley out with gusto and volume.

When the sound of feet overpowered Lilah's last chord, the congregation flowed neatly from the pews to the door, hushed but lightly abuzz, clearly still nonplussed from having broached physical connection during Mass--some people were whispering to each other and holding out their hands with the fingers splayed apart as if checking to see that they were still attached. The families that generally remained for confessions did so (mine was regularly one), plus a few parishioners who were simply curious, and we drifted to the back left-hand side of church, where the confessional was, and knelt in the pews.

The confessional was the only sign of the twentieth century in the whole church. Tucked under the stairs to the choir loft, it was a soundproof closet with two small electric lights over the door, red for *occupied* and green for *come ahead, sinner*. The priest had a switch by his seat that he flicked as penitents came and went. The soundproof room had been installed when I was in the second grade; before that the confessional had been separated from the church proper only by a white linen curtain that billowed when you walked past it--and although the church was drafty because of its architecture, you sensed that if the air

bouncing off your body could flounce it up into the air like that, the secrets that your lips whispered inside were not too safe. It was unnerving. You constantly felt exposed. In school, when the nuns weren't looking--and they usually were, but the focus of a St. Mary's education for most children gradually came to be the divination of when sisterly attention was devoted to you and when it wasn't, and being ready to run for the sun when your time came--the boys would crawl to the back pew while the girls were confessing and listen to their high-pitched whispers slipping under and around and through the curtain. Once Matthew Murphy regaled me on the walk back over to school with a verbatim list of my petty offenses against my mother, and I told Sister Bernard; Matt had to write off the chapter in the religion book about the Sacrament of Reconciliation fifty times. It took him five whole weeks to do, and his parents were even called in for a conference and threatened with his suspension, but Sister Bernard stressed that it was a very shameful thing he'd done. I ended up helping him finish his write-off because I felt so bad. I was a good forger, and it wasn't like I cared that he knew I watched TV all night after Daddy told me to help my mother with the dishes. Pretty soon after that the soundproofing was installed in the confessional and the curtain was replaced with a genuine door.

My family and I took the pew closest to the back as the last of the Massgoers filtered out through the vestibule. I knelt beside my brother and folded my hands up under my chin, my elbows

resting upon the curved cherry back of the pew in front of me. The pews were elegant and dark and smooth except for where graffiti had long ago been etched underneath the hymnbook holders by students at the daily 7:30 Masses before school. The ancient backs were high and straight and uncomfortable and probably encouraged the carving of graffiti.

Father Smiley had not come back inside yet--since this was his first Mass, he was likely held up on the church steps, shaking hands--and so we knelt, waiting. The time spent kneeling before confession was supposed to be spent in reflective meditation upon one's sins, and on the dredging up of the appropriate regret--at least that's usually where I managed regret, in the five minutes before confession. I knelt and thought about how ludicrous it was going to be to say for the thousand and fifty-first time that I was routinely impatient with my brother, and that I was selfish with the television. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd watched the television.

I knelt and tried to think of what I would say. I didn't actually talk to God; it was more like thinking about talking to Him that I was doing, raising points for which I figured His response would be silence. As imaginative as I liked to consider myself, I could never imagine God's talking back to me. Ever. I looked up at the statue of Mary on the side altar in front of me, still crowned with flowers because it was the month of May, and the bones inside me felt dry. I did talk to Mary sometimes but I didn't feel like it now.

Father Smiley entered the church after fifteen long minutes, up near the altar where there were heavy wooden doors on either side of the church. The rainy breeze followed in behind him as he opened the door and it ruffled his vestments, sending his green chasuble flopping up into his face and exposing his pleated white alb, but his hair didn't move at all. As the door shut, his vestments deflated and he made his way down the side aisle toward the confessional, smiling sweetly at all the good parishioners who had remained to be absolved of their sins. I watched his face as he came briskly toward the back, and I wondered whether I would kneel behind the screen or sit in the chair opposite Father Smiley and face him directly. Since we Catholics were offered a choice in the confessional, I always took the direct approach; I figured that in such a small town it was stupid to get behind a screen and pretend I was being anonymous, especially after my whole family had just paraded through before me with a matching set of sins. Besides, I never confessed anything embarrassing anyway. I never *did* anything embarrassing. At least nothing that was simultaneously embarrassing and sinful.

Father Smiley disappeared into the confessional and shut the door behind him. I didn't turn my head from where I was kneeling but I heard the tiny click that meant he was giving us the green light. I still didn't know what I was going to say, but since my family was in the very back pew, closest to the confessional, we were going to be first. My father got up, crossed himself, and

left the pew, and I heard the door shutting and the tiny click that meant the green light had changed to red. In the hush of the church, in the quiet agitation of bent heads engaged in the recollection of wrongs, the click of the little light bulb echoed and echoed until it disappeared into the deep vault of the ceiling. Through the closed doors of the vestibule I heard the muted conversation and laughter of the rest of the parish, who were still milling about the steps, presumably under their umbrellas since the soft patter of rain against the roof was becoming steady. The only windows in the church you could see out of were the square glass ones which had been placed in the side altar doors, and I watched the light rain feather past the glass and drip from the gutters. The stained-glass windows of the saints which lined the walls grew dark as the noon light dimmed with rain; beside me, the roses in the cloak of St. Elizabeth of Hungary turned from pink to crimson, and the sweet light in her eyes went out.

My father emerged from the confessional after about a minute and a half. He always managed to hustle in and out like there was no tomorrow. I could picture him giving a succinct list of transgressions, possibly in chronological order but more likely from least venial to most mortal--only my father would never run around loose with mortal sin on his soul; he'd be at confession within a hair of doing anything that might possibly cost him eternity--because for my father there were distinct and ordered

gradations between white and black, and he knew where he'd fallen short.

My mother went in next. She invariably took longer. While she was inside and my father knelt beside me to say his penance (when Father Dozier was pastor, usually three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys were the rule no matter what you'd done), I pictured in my mind the paneled walls of the confessional. They were deep brown with heavy grain and black grooves between the panels, hung with things that must have been rummaged from the convent basement: there was the ubiquitous guardian angel watching over the children on the bridge, in a black plastic frame, and a brass crucifix, and another wooden crucifix, and a crown of cloth May flowers that hung from a tenpenny nail beside the door. Over the confessing screen was a print of a tanned Jesus dressed in a grainy ecru linen, holding up his well-manicured hand in absolution over a modern primary-school sinner. The picture was framed in a flat oak square with a finish so brown and shiny it looked like molasses ready to drip on your repentant head. The confessional was 1978 snuck in to nest in a dusty corner of 1878, but by now it felt as old as the rest of the church to me.

I had liked having Father Dozier as a confessor, insofar as I could like confession; to be sitting that close to someone so far away was thrilling to me. I never rattled off my list of old standards to him because I felt like his ice-blue eyes saw straight to the center of me, even though they never seemed quite

focused on me, and I didn't feel like telling him that I didn't have the mental patience to stand still and help my mother with the dishes. Instead I settled on one or two sweeping sins, like my general lack of mental patience altogether, and just told him that they seemed to cover everything I did wrong and I didn't know where to start undoing that. He would smile and nod--sleepily, but in ultimate understanding, it seemed to me. He never gave me advice, though, and he doled me the same half-dozen penance every time; and then, of course, there were some wrongs so close to the middle of me that I never mentioned them; I figured he saw them anyway. So it was not an entirely satisfying experience, but it was a thrilling one all the same. Maybe it was thrilling because when he asked me to say the Act of Contrition, he smiled and said my name: "Now, Gabriel, your Act of Contrition." *Gabriel*, he'd said.

Mama came out of the confessional and knelt by Daddy, who still had his head bent although he was surely done with his three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys by now. Michael placed a swift elbow in my side as he rose and stepped over Mama's and Daddy's legs to leave the pew.

Michael liked to try to beat Daddy's time in the confessional. Only I knew about it, because if Daddy ever discovered Michael was using the time allotted for penitence to count the seconds--"one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two"--it took his father to be forgiven, someone would somehow be taught, I was sure, a deeper, more stinging appreciation for the Sacrament of

Penance. Of course, I had to time Michael while he was inside, so I could not expose him. He had tried to time himself in the confessional once, the first time he thought of this fascinating little game, with undesirable results: "Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry, sixty-eight. . . ." The priest at that time was Father McClellan, who gave him a two-minute-and-twenty-four-second lecture on the importance of taking confession seriously. The speech itself was longer than Daddy's whole confession. So Michael had decided to let me in on it. It made things easier.

But Michael did take confession seriously. He might have been counting in his head, but he was also sure of his absolution. He was young enough to keep both things on his mind at once. I knew this because once I was griping about having to go to confession right before Easter--Rosemary and I had been planning to go to the movies, but there was a penance service that night that Daddy was making us go to, and I knew it would last an hour and a half--and Michael said to me, "You're supposed to go to confessions during Holy Week, to get ready for the Easter Triduum." He was nine years old at the time. Using the word *Triduum.* Of course, he was still in St. Mary's then, and he was crammed full of tips from the nuns for achieving optimum Holy Week piety, but still. He was nine. And he would never tell me what he told in the confessional, either. I told him what I confessed all the time, but he didn't like to hear it, as if he believed it rendered my absolution void, which possibly was the reason that I told him.

When he returned and knelt by me, I leaned over and whispered, "One-twenty-four," and he winced.

I rose and stepped over the legs of my whole family, who, lost in a revery of atonement, did not budge an inch to make it more convenient for me. I approached the door, its little green light all aglow, and I thought of Father Smiley's beaming face calling on the parish to join hands, and I decided I would kneel behind the screen.

I opened the door and stepped into the tiny room (divided by a little half-wall that separated priest and penitent, with an iron-lattice square window covered with a curtain sewn by Sister Bernard, through which you could speak should you choose to kneel in front of it), and I sank into the cushioned kneeler. I could only see the green edge of Father Smiley's vestments and the black shiny tips of his shoes. My heart was beating through my shirt; I didn't think I had got up too quickly out of the pew, but my breathing didn't feel right.

"Hi," he said. *Hi.* I'd never had a priest greet me in the confessional with "hi."

I ignored it. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," I said, and my voice was ragged coming out of my throat, my words half whispered and half solid. "It's been two weeks since my last confession, and these are my sins."

He gave a small noise of affirmation, an "mm-hmm" or an "uh-huh," and then he was silent.

The silence started as something small, a point in space, the closure from his lips as the sound of his utterance died away, but as I pictured his face on the other side of the screen, pleasant and unaware of the contempt I had for holding my neighbor's hand during the Lord's Prayer, I felt the quiet in the room creep around the divider and swallow me up. I pictured Father Smiley's face as a real face, with skin and pores and smile lines, and his hands coming out from under his vestments with hair on the knuckles.

I stared at the vacant armchair across from him where I could have been seated if I had chosen to. The green vinyl of the seat was straining against the antique brass studs tacking it to the wood, and I wondered if possibly our two pairs of eyes could be looking at the same thing in this small, deafeningly silent space.

I knew he was waiting for me to begin, and I couldn't speak; my ears filled with silence until I thought the drums would burst. I looked up at the caramel-brown Jesus in His sugary frame over my head and felt my stomach turn. Father Smiley was waiting.

"Uh . . ." I began.

"Take your time," he said, in a voice that split the thick quiet right into two pieces. I felt my half falling, falling, falling on my head.

I suddenly was in a panic to begin, anxious to hear my own voice, but I didn't know what to say. I started out of habit in

territory I could run through backwards with my eyes closed. "I guess . . . I don't have enough patience," I said, faltering, about to mention snapping at my brother, the idea of television running faintly through the back circuits of my mind, when my voice trickled to a dead stop.

"Go on," he said, and I couldn't tell in what kind of a voice since I couldn't see his face. My mind spun.

Tears were burning at my eyes and my nose was starting to run, and I was afraid to sniff at first for fear he'd know, but after a few seconds I had to. I sniffed and my breath shuddered. I leaned forward until my lips touched the curtain and my breath pushed it away from me. The curtain smelled funny.

"I'm planning to kill myself in July," I said.

The last syllable of "July" bounced back through the little room in the quiet that followed. *Ly, ly, ly, ly, ly.* I heard nothing.

Then I heard a slow intake of breath, through the nose. For a single second--a long, stretched second--there was no response and then he said, "Think about what you are saying." I wondered if his jovial face had hardened. I tried to picture his eyes.

"I have thought about what I'm saying." The words came all in a rush. "I have thought about it and thought about it and thought about it."

"Have you prayed about it?"

The question came right into my face and I shut my eyes. "Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins because of Your just punishments. . . ."

"I didn't ask for your Act of Contrition," Father Smiley interrupted me, but I kept on: ". . . . but most of all because I have offended You, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. . . ."

"I can't absolve you of your sins," Father Smiley interrupted me again, his voice soft but insistent, "if you have intentions of committing mortal sin."

"I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more, and to avoid the near occasion of sin," I whispered. My mouth was dry but all the words were out.

He let me finish, and I heard his breathing flow evenly through his nose, and as hard as I tried I could not picture the expression on his face. There was a small table beside his chair with a lamp on it, and it cast the silhouette of his head on the curtain I was speaking through; I tried to gaze at it but it was too close to my face.

"Despair," he said, and the word sunk like a stone into my heart, "is the most reprehensible of sins."

Immediately, with no hesitation and with no warning, anger shot up from my stomach into my throat. "Tell me why," I said.

"It is as much as saying that God is not powerful enough to help you in your time of need," he said in a voice clear as the daylight. "It is blasphemy."

"You don't believe that," I said. I didn't know why I said it. The tiny room was quiet with strange charges of emotion shooting now through the curtain, between me and this new priest whose manner I already didn't like. I felt them and I swallowed.

"I must say," he said slowly, "that you should come to me for counseling."

"It's not about God's power at all," I said. My throat felt constricted. "How could you think that?"

"You need to come and talk with me," he insisted, his voice low. But I sensed a kindness, or maybe just the hint of a softness, in the words. "You have somehow lost the Lord. Do you understand me? You have lost the Lord."

His voice pricked into my skin. "Let me guess," I said. "I get more than three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys this time around."

"Penance is not a joke," he said without hesitation.

"I get a whole rosary," I said.

"I cannot absolve you of your sins," he replied. "I cannot administer the Sacrament of Reconciliation to you in this state."

I rose from my knees. "I would never expect you to absolve me of my sins." I left him sitting there in the confessional, and I shut the door behind me on my way out.

I returned to my pew and knelt down beside my brother and bent my head just as I would if I actually had penance to say. Someone else rose to take my place in the confessional. The wind

kicked up the rain against the roof, and there we knelt, four Sullivans, heads bent in supplication to the Father.

Granny was tearing her bacon into thin strips, the grease running over her fingers and into her eggs, when she finally spoke. "I don't think we should talk ugly about the priest." Her voice was gravelly with the bacon she was already chewing.

"I don't think what I was saying was ugly," said Beth.

"Oh, it was too ugly," said Agnes.

Sunday breakfast had been consumed with analysis of the new priest and his first Mass. Joe and Ellen were convinced that he'd given them a dirty look when two of their brood had begun to squall during his homily; Beth had replied, no such thing, because no dirty look could have come from such a slick pair of eyes.

"It was a quick look," Joe had said.

"Daggers," Ellen had agreed.

"But he didn't stop smiling the entire time he was preaching," Beth had said. "I fail to see where he could have given you a dirty look. Not that I don't think he's *capable*. He seems mighty weaselly to me."

"It was there," Ellen had replied solemnly, slinging Margaret onto her shoulder and coercing a burp with a firm hand below the baby's tiny shoulder blades.

"What I want to know," said Agnes, patting Granny's hand so that she would stop tearing her bacon, "is what was that snide little reference he made to Father Dozier?"

"Exactly," said Beth.

"How dare he," Agnes fumed. "It's one thing to gossip at the breakfast table. It's another to do it from the pulpit."

Will and June were mostly quiet for the duration of breakfast; Will held his child with some difficulty in his lap--Ernie did not want to eat any eggs but did in fact want to hold a spoonful of them in his hand--and said that he didn't think Father Smiley seemed weaselly at all, but that his confession was a little rushed. June, being Church of Christ, did not always go to Mass with Will, but she had of course that day; she said she liked him. When Beth inevitably snorted at her June did not back down.

"When we all held hands. . . ." June began.

"Don't get me started on that," said Beth. "I can't even *begin*. . . ."

June reddened and pursed her lips, stroking Ernie's hair as he contorted in Will's lap to resist a force feeding, and then she continued, right over the top of Beth. "When we held hands it actually felt nice in there for a change."

Six hands reached for the biscuit basket at once.

Agnes cut her eyes at Beth, and blew the steam from her biscuit as she pulled it apart. "How nice did it feel, Charlie,"

she asked, "to be holding John Whittington's hand in the middle of church?"

Granny wiped her greasy fingers on her paper napkin, over and over and over again. "There's no need to be ugly," she said, and the noise of the children in the living room trampled right over her timid voice.

"I don't think there's any need to panic just yet," said my daddy to Agnes. "I'm going to wait and panic Wednesday when we have the first Parish Council meeting and find out what his agenda is."

"I don't see anything wrong with panicking right now," said Beth. "My knuckles are afraid to go to Mass."

"I feel like I need a shower," said Agnes.

"Ugly," whispered Granny, her fingers working her napkin to shreds.

"I don't care about holding hands," said Mama. "It's what all else he might have on his mind that worries me."

"How could you not care about holding hands?" said Beth, whose food was getting cold on her plate. "You weren't sitting next to Al Warmus and his cruddy overalls or you'd care plenty."

"I'm more worried that Father Smiley is going to get an earful from Percy Davis and get a hankering to redo the church building," said Mama. "I'm afraid for all the old paintings and statues."

"There's no way that can even come to a vote this year," said Agnes over her cup of coffee. "They don't have any plans drawn up at all, much less an estimate."

The phone ringing interrupted them, and my uncle Terry jerked with a sharp snore in his armchair and then settled back into his rhythm. I got up to answer it.

"Hello?"

"I knew I would catch you there," said Rosemary.

"I should have known better than to answer the phone," I said, waving my hand to my family to let them know it was for me, and they went back to their discussion, and I wound around the wall that divided the dining room from the living room and sat on the floor on the other side, pulling the phone cord around with me.

"You can't avoid me forever," Rosemary was saying. "You are going to tell me right now where you were graduation night."

"I was with you at the river."

"I put up with this at the prom," she said. "I let it go. I didn't ask. But I'm not going to let you get away with it this time."

"I'd really rather not talk about this here, anyway."

"I can hear Beth right now," she said. "They're not listening to you."

I pulled a coil in the phone cord apart until it turned inside out, and then I placed it on the end of my nose.

"I needed you with me," Rosemary said. "Jamie was a total pig, a drunken stinking jerk, and a cokehead even, which I never knew before."

"He was all over you?"

"I wouldn't have known about the coke, except somebody told me they saw him down in the pumphouse with the Kelvin twins," she said. "I can't tell high from drunk."

"Oh."

"Yes, he was all over me."

"Mmmmm."

"And there's something else," she said. "Mindy Shannon came down to the water about one o'clock and told me she saw Buddy's car parked about three miles from the woods, when she came the back way from Fox Creek."

I pressed the receiver into my lips and felt the breath from my nose make the plastic moist. *I was not there the first time he ever hit her. I wish that I had been, because then it would only have been the size it was, and not a fantastic mural painted against the sky. Not the picture I have of her fleeing his apartment by the front steps in the night with the music from his stereo crying in the background, the first blood surging up and pounding with angry momentum at her cheekbone, turning blue and yellow in frustration, and then green, green, green with envy. I remember when she came home at three o'clock in the morning and told me with the colorlessness in her voice and waited, waited for me to say something that would bring it all home to her, and*

how I had the urge neither to be afraid nor to be shocked, but to sit in my bed with the phone in my hand and laugh at myself until the sun rose into my empty room. She had wanted to go home early, and that was all, and his tall, broad body had kept her to the wall with her backbone in the doorframe, kissing her until she regretted asking to go, then until she changed her mind and wriggled to be free, and the back of his hand found her face with a familiarity that was surely smug since I have no colors to paint with but those I choose. I remember.

"Are you listening to me?" Rosemary asked. "Someone saw him down at the water by one of the campfires and came to tell me so I could get away."

"And did you?"

"I had to get Jamie off me and get Mindy to take me home," she said. "And where were you? What I'm asking is, where were you?"

"I don't remember where I was," I said.

"Don't do that to me."

"I don't see as I'm doing anything to you."

"Do you want me to feel sorry for you?" she asked me. There was no meanness or sarcasm in her voice, only honesty in a note as soft as she was whispering. "I do feel bad for you."

"Stop right there," I said, standing up and shaking the phone cord from my face. "My biscuits are getting really, really cold."

"I don't know what's wrong with you anymore," she said. "Don't you dare hang up."

"I'm hungry," I said, "and I'm missing what Beth is saying about the nuns, and my biscuits are fabulously cold."

"I'm just trying to understand. I'm only trying to. Maybe I don't, but don't hang up."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow." I hung up the phone.

The other phone call that I got that day was after we were back at home. My mama handed me the phone and said, "It's a man," and she stood right beside me for a second, waiting, but I wouldn't say hello until she went in the other room.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Gabriel?" The voice was mellifluous and low and resonated so loud in my ear that I had to hold the receiver away from me.

"Yes?"

"Gabriel, this is Father Smiley."

I glanced into the living room to make sure my mother was wrapped up in something besides listening to me, and I wound myself into the phone cord and spun into the kitchen, until I was bound fast and practically on top of the stove. "Hello."

"How are you?" he asked, and without waiting for my reply, "Your confession today disturbed me a great deal."

"Umm. . . ."

"I understand that you may not be able to talk to me about this on the telephone," he continued, so loudly that I could not

place the receiver back by my ear and I worried that someone would hear. "But as your confessor I want you to realize that anything you tell me, in or out of the confessional, will be in the strictest confidence."

I could not move. I stood knotted in the phone cord, my stomach sucked into a tight wire, unable to speak.

"Gabriel?"

"Yes."

"I want you to come to see me for counseling," said Father Smiley firmly.

I could hear my breathing buzzing in the phone even though it was an inch from my mouth.

"It would be shirking my responsibility as your minister to leave this unresolved," he said, and with this sentence the knots in my stomach eased.

"All right," I said.

"Good, good," he replied.

"When do you want me to come?"

He had an answer ready. "You should come to the Parish Council meeting Wednesday night. It's my first. We can meet in the rectory afterwards."

I spun slowly out of the telephone cord, shutting my eyes. It unwound and lay at my feet. "All right," I said again. I hung up without saying goodbye.

I told my mother, when she asked, that it was just someone trying to sell me vacation property over the phone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

What was important, if one was a woman, was that one either liked children or needles. There were schools to teach in and hospitals to give shots in anywhere from Middlefield, Tennessee, to Florence, Alabama. So a woman could go off to school when her time came and learn to teach or give shots; easily done at the community colleges in Pulaski or Columbia, or even at the University of North Alabama in Florence, because she could drive either place from the same bedroom she woke up in on her first day of kindergarten. Or she could actually go and try to stay there during the week, in the dorms, but why? It made her stomach hurt to think about it, she didn't know why, and even the thought of Mama and Daddy calling every night, Mama's voice thin and questioning, made her get teary. And there was free laundry, free meals at home, which of course was mostly the reason she was staying.

She could try to go farther. There were places where she could go and only be able to come home on the weekends. Mama said she'd wear out a car that way, an eighteenth-birthday present of sparkling new wheels and no monthly payments was a crazy thing to waste, and she agreed. Besides, who did she know up there? Nobody. How stupid. She had been admitted. She could have gone, everybody knew that. But why?

She had known other girls who hadn't really liked children or needles either one. They sometimes went off right after high school to places where you couldn't come home until Thanksgiving,

but they were mostly the kind you didn't talk to much in high school. Or you did, they were okay, but you never really knew exactly what you were talking to, they weren't cheerleaders. And she could count the ones she knew or remembered on her two hands.

But there were other ones, ones who had meant to like children or needles, who either started out the way she did at Columbia State and then sidled their way out to a university, or who took the big leap with tears and weekly trips home until their mamas said, against what they felt in their guts, enough, you're too tired to be doing this all the time. They would stay on that first weekend that their bodies and their cars couldn't stand to have to come home again, usually not until October or so, and that would start it all. It wouldn't happen again for a while, but it would happen, and then there would be weeks in a row that they wouldn't come home. They had meant to like children or needles, but suddenly they were finding other things to like, and then when they did come home their faces and voices were different. Oh, sure, they'd come to the Quik Mart and try to hang out, but when you said something about how they sounded different--because they did, and you wanted them to know you knew, but you hadn't really meant anything by it--they took deep breaths that let you know it was over. She'd seen that, and that scared her worst of all. Because they eventually quit coming home. Their mamas would have to defend this at church, at the grocery store, and other places.

She was afraid of being one of those kind.

Chapter Twenty-Four

In church the eyes were omnipresent. That she had never felt naked before here in God's house amazed her, but it was nonetheless true that she now felt that there was no place where she could be the woman her husband, her family, her neighbors knew; she was who she was under the blank eyes of stained-glass holiness, under the tearful eyes of Mother Mary turned sorrowfully upon her head, under the vague promise of the omniscient gaze of God, but ineluctably under the burning, hateful little eyes that plucked her heartstrings from the womb.

The first Mass which the doctor attended was quite simply a competition. Practically speaking, she herself had already lost, separated from the pack by a string of straw-colored heads that bobbed sincerely with the motions of Mass, and by the wall of rock that was her husband on the other side of church. She couldn't jump into the pool that included the young unwed women and the married mothers whose hair was steely and whose children were gone; the caretaking pains that would be showered upon the young bachelor doctor were deemed natural coming from these two groups but somehow excluded her own circle of women with younger husbands and younger children. She knew it would look amiss to heave her own offering in the grand volley of pies and preserves being shot in his direction, should it be noticed in the thick of battle.

How her wrists ached when she was trapped here in the church. Her blood was a tide dammed unnaturally by her veins and

it pounded against her. How so, then, she wondered, that it did not drown those tiny eyes? She wanted, she wanted, her wrists ached with the futility of wanting.

As the priest raised his hands to heaven, unsuspecting, his back turned to the people as he summoned the sacrifice in the ancient manner, she knelt and dreamed of leaping from her place and crashing onto the altar, the eyes of her whole world upon her as she rid herself of the blood inside her that so desperately wanted out.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The clouds that piled up over the orchard fence after breakfast the next morning were sodden and dirty-looking. The cherry trees with their bright loads of fruit stood out against the dirty clouds, ready to be picked, only a breath from the kitchen door on the south side of the house, and in the air you could smell the sourness of a frustrated rain. Agnes and Beth were at the house by eight o'clock with their buckets. They were off work because of Memorial Day. They dragged me away from the piano--I was trying Mozart again, with no success on the runs; Beth said, "That sounds wonderful, but you won't get to tell stories with us if you sit in here"--and gave me a bucket of my own.

"There's only one story that gets told when we pick cherries," I said. "I don't have to hear it again, really. Especially this close to breakfast."

You only had to pick cherries once with my family to find out that one day in May when Beth was six, my grandfather had told her to stay out of the cherry trees before suppertime, but she went anyway and ate enough sour cherries to choke a horse. Then she got scared that her daddy would spank her and she hid up in one of the trees. The cherry trees had grown so thick with fruit that year that when her brothers came looking for her they couldn't see her at all, until my daddy spotted a slow dribble of green cherry vomit sneaking out of the backside of the biggest tree. "I tried to suck it in," Beth would insist. "It wouldn't

stay." Daddy and Joe and Will let her stay up there until her stomach was empty and then they brought her back to the house, where she got her butt striped with nothing less poetic than a cherry switch.

"I promise not to tell that story," Beth said. "What possible motive could I have for telling that story?"

"I don't see how you can even stand to eat cherries anymore," I said. "I can't eat cherries because of that story."

"The principle I try to follow now is, red before green."

"Well, you're not six anymore."

"Exactly."

Beth and Agnes and Mama and I all took buckets and the stepladder to the back yard--Michael was in bed and refused to get up, and Daddy was messing around in the garden. The cherry trees were the closest fruit trees to the house; the peaches and apples and nectarines and pears spread out behind them, not yet ready to bear. Mama left the kitchen screen door open while we were picking to let some fresh air in the house, only there was no breeze and the clouds sat like lead pillows on the edge of the sky.

The trees seemed to ache with too many cherries; the clouds seemed to ache with too much rain. Once we all got started picking I felt I couldn't pick fast enough to keep the limbs from breaking with the weight of it all; I smashed a lot of what I was picking in hurried fingers.

"No rush," said Agnes.

"If you're going to smash them," said Beth, "lick the juice off your fingers. Don't waste it all."

"You," Agnes pointed out to Beth, "are eating roughly twice as much as you're putting in the bucket."

Mama was up on the stepladder and was reaching far into the tree. "It's a good thing we got out here today," she said. "The birds have already eaten a lot of these."

"And the wasps," said Beth. "Damn."

"Speaking of predators," said Agnes, reaching for a perfect red cluster of cherries, "does anybody know what's going on with Father Smiley in the convent?"

"He hasn't moved out." All that was visible of Mama was her legs. "Elaine Brink called last night to tell me he called *her* to get her to move her office supplies into the nuns' chapel."

Beth slurped cherry pulp from around a pit in one lightning motion. "The nuns better not give in."

"They said that they're not moving into the rectory," said Mama. "They said they'll go back to Nashville to the convent at St. Bernard's if they have to move."

Beth flicked a pit into the bucket. "Good."

"Not good," Mama corrected her. "Do you want the nuns to leave?"

"Get that pit out of the bucket," Agnes told Beth. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't want the nuns to leave," said Beth, "I guess." She leaned over and picked the pit out of the pile of fruit and tossed it into the grass.

"You guess." Agnes set a handful of cherries gently into the bucket.

"Well," said Beth, "I can't really think of a reason they ought to stay, now that the school is gone."

"We need the nuns here," said my mama.

"Why?"

Everyone kept picking.

"I don't want them to go, I guess," said Beth.

We scarcely had half a bucket full among us when we heard the phone ring from the open kitchen door. Mama started to disentangle herself from the branches and climb down the stepladder.

"Let me run," I said.

"No, I'll get it." She hopped to the ground and brushed the crackle of leaf debris from her hair as she dashed for the kitchen.

When she returned she was taking off the rag she had tied around her waist. "It's Mama," she said. "I'm going over there to calm her down."

Agnes wiped her hands on her shorts and dusted them together. "I'll go, too."

"No need," said Mama. "I can't tell if it's bad."

"Let's just all go in my car," said Agnes. "I'm behind you in the driveway. We can do cherries later."

I didn't much want to go, but I didn't say anything; I just piled into the car with everyone else. Granny was standing in the front doorway of her house when we pulled into her driveway, her thin eyes in a thin face staring plaintively ahead. Her forehead lay against the glass of the storm door.

"Mmmmm," said Beth, the only one of us who said anything.

As we came to the door Granny didn't move out of the way to let us inside. Mama squeezed the door handle and tugged gently on it, but Granny kept leaning against the glass. Her face, I saw when I was close enough, was wet and her eyes red.

"Mama," said Mama gently, pulling on the door. Granny tumbled forward a little, clumsily, and wouldn't look anyone in the eye; Mama caught her body against her own arms and Agnes took the door.

Granny mumbled something. Beth slipped past her and into the house.

"What, Mama?" My mother led Granny into the house, and I followed, and Agnes shut the door behind us. Beth was in the kitchen; I heard her running water into a pot.

"I *said*," said Granny, looking only at the floor, "I want you to say the rosary with me."

I rolled my eyes.

"Of course we will, Mama," said my mother, and she nudged Granny ahead of her into the living room. Granny's steps were

halting and she seemed to be waiting to feel the weight of my mother behind her.

"Say the plastic one, not the crystal one," said Granny. "Say the plastic one."

I went into the kitchen, where Beth was starting tea. "Oh, good," I said. "Give her caffeine."

"Iced tea will calm her down."

"She's plenty calm right now," I said. "And so will we all be, because we're about to sit down and say the rosary."

"Shit," said Beth. She pulled the tags off the tea bags she was about to drop into the water. "You're kidding."

"No," I said. "The plastic rosary, as opposed to the crystal."

"Which would mean?"

"I was hoping you'd know."

"Well, well," Beth sighed. "Let's hope her lucky number today is single-digit."

"She didn't mention it."

"That doesn't mean there isn't one."

"Are you saying that we could be dealing with multiple recitations of the rosary here?" I asked. "Because I am a busy girl."

Mama poked her head into the kitchen. "Y'all come on in here and sit down. She wants to say the rosary."

"Let me finish up the tea," Beth said.

"Oh, that's ingenious." I followed Mama into the living room. "You'll miss the first decade altogether."

"Hush," Mama said.

Granny was sitting in the recliner, rocking only slightly, staring at the carpet. "In the name of the Father," she was saying under her breath. "In the name of the Father."

Agnes had gone into Granny's bedroom to retrieve some rosaries from the nightstand. The ones she came back with were plastic, and she handed us each one. Granny did not respond when Agnes placed hers in her hand; her fingers remained limp and she let the beads clink shallowly into her lap.

Mama took the lead. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," she said, "Amen."

"Say the Apostles' Creed five times," said Granny. "Not just once. He has to know you believe."

"All right, Mama," Mama said.

We began the creed, and Granny only interrupted once, to say, "Slower, I can't understand what you're saying," and I heard nothing from the kitchen. Beth was standing silently over the boiling tea on the stove.

". . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen." Mama and Agnes and I finished the Apostles' Creed, which Granny had been echoing in a fuzzy mumble, and Mama paused for a second.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," she began cautiously, taking up the first bead in her hands, but Granny cut her off.

"The creed again," she said. "I told you five times."

Granny looked up as she said this, and her clear eyes met mine for a single second. Her eyes were lucid reflections of each of us in the room. *Not a person, not an angle misplaced, the sharpness of us all reflected to infinity in the pure blue windows of her eyes. I remember that there were no clouds there, because I was looking for clouds.*

I did not want to sit still for another minute of the rosary after that, and we had barely begun. My grandmother's eyes wandered off me and rambled into the dining room.

Somewhere into the third decade of the rosary, Beth came in with iced tea for everyone. It was odd to be having the rosary over tea, but we all took our glasses, except for Granny. She interrupted Mama, who was leading a Hail Mary, and said, "We are praying here, Beth."

"Drink some of it, Mama," my mother said.

"We're having the Blessed Mother's rosary," said Granny.

"Drink some of it," Mama repeated, not letting the tiniest pause pass after Granny spoke.

Granny looked up then with the blue of her eyes sparkling like two lakes, and she took the tea from Beth and took a sip.

Mama started the Hail Mary over.

Halfway through the second rosary--we got away with saying the Apostles' Creed just once this time--Granny stopped us again,

this time to go to the bathroom. She had drunk a glass and a half of tea by that time.

When she was out of the room, Beth said, "Don't think for a second that I didn't put some vodka in hers."

My eyes got wide, but Mama and Agnes looked relieved.

"Y'all go on home," Mama said. "She might want to do this all day and I know you have things to do."

"She might want a nap here soon, actually," said Beth.

"Why don't we just take her back to your house and let her sit out with us while we finish the cherries?" Agnes stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Maybe as hot as it is she'll go to sleep."

"I don't know," said Mama. "When she gets like this she can go on for hours and hours."

"I wasn't kidding about the vodka," said Beth. "I didn't just dash it in there. I threw her a loop."

Four hours and two pails full of cherries later, Mama's voice was crumbling. "Hail, holy Queen, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. . . ."

I had moved off to the farthest tree from the house at the beginning of the rosary and her voice was a steady murmur from where I was. I was no longer saying the prayers aloud, or even in my head, for that matter. Granny was hunched over in a lawn chair, still in her housecoat, clutching the plastic beads and sweating from the curly wisps of gray hair around her ears. Daddy and Michael were tossing balls out behind the garden. I

could hear Agnes and Beth responding to Mama's lead, although Beth had taken over the stepladder and had her head stuck in the high branches, and she was snacking more than she was praying. Pits fell periodically from the leafy heights.

I could hear the crack in my mother's voice from where I was as she breathed the final prayer of the rosary in the hot sunless afternoon. "Pray for us, O holy Mother of God, that we may be worthy of the promises of Christ. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Granny crossed herself with the crucifix of the rosary, her foot tapping the whole time to a rhythm that slowed and sped up with no regularity. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty," she said, beginning again.

"Mama," said my mother, wiping sweat off the back of her neck and dropping a handful of cherries into her bucket, "that's enough. We're not praying the rosary again." I heard pits fall in relief from Beth's perch in her tree.

Granny's whole body began to rock in opposition to the noiseless tune her feet were tapping out. "I believe in God," she said simply.

"No, Mama. I've had enough." Mama coughed and ran her hand through her hair. When she spoke her voice rattled. "We've all had enough."

Granny's head hung down and muffled her voice. "All right, then," she mumbled, "all right. I didn't teach my baby to pray. Never taught her to pray."

"Granny, we haven't even eaten lunch. And it's getting late, and I'm starving," said Agnes, looking at her watch.

"I'm not really very hungry," came Beth's voice from the top of the tree.

"We still lack three trees," sighed Mama, "and I've got to get Michael to his ballgame this afternoon."

"I'm in the way." Granny began to knot her rosary beads around her fingers, and the parchment of her skin gathered in forced, ugly wrinkles. "I should have prayed all by myself."

My mama wound her way between the trees over to me. "Gabriel," she said quietly, "I'm going to have to stay with her for the rest of today. Can you get Michael to his ballgame and stay with him?"

"I guess."

Granny sat in her lawn chair and tied her hands together with the rosary beads, rocking the whole while back and forth, back and forth.

Michael and the Pirates were taking on the Chapman's Florist Twins that afternoon. Thunder mumbled haltingly somewhere beyond the diamond and the clouds hung facedown over the fence, staring, sickened, into the vast bowl of centerfield. When I pulled our car into the gravel parking lot, I was looking for Hershey's

cruddy little moped, but what I saw was Rosemary sitting on the trunk of her car.

I sat in the car for a few minutes after Michael got out and went to the dugout, and I pretended to be fiddling with something in the glove compartment. It wasn't long before a rapping came at my driver's side window.

"I decided to come without calling you," she said as I got out of the car. "I wasn't going to let you weasel out of coming."

Hershey's moped was lying against the tree in the back of the concessions building, coated with dirt. It looked like a runner collapsed into second base and awaiting the umpire's thumb. I swallowed looking at it.

"This game will be a blowout," I said. "There's no need to stay."

"I want to stay." Rosemary's arms were folded. "I want to watch your brother play."

Another car rolled into the parking lot, a dented black Cavalier with a purple foam parrot dangling from the rearview mirror; Page's eager hand waved at us wildly through the windshield as the other hand steered her into an empty space.

Rosemary did not say anything, but she sighed.

"I guess you're both going to want to *talk*," I muttered.

"Does she know where you were graduation night?" Rosemary asked. "Maybe I should just forget you and talk to her."

"She thinks I was at the river with you," I said, "so shut up."

Page got out of her car and came rushing over to us. She had on a shirt so yellow it hurt my eyes, and the glitter paint around the collar was dull in the absence of the sun. "I knew you'd be here," she said triumphantly. "I called your mama and she said you were on your way."

They fell in line with me in the usual way, Page on my left and Rosemary on my right, as we went to take our seats in the bleachers, near Lo-rene and Jan and some of the other mothers.

I turned a trained eye on the field. Hershey was not in the dugout, he was not helping with warmups on the field, he was not propped against the fence in any of the discussions sprouting there; I didn't know where he was, but I willed him to stay there.

"Look," said Rosemary, pointing, and I jumped.

"Look where?"

She studied me for a second. "The tractor pull field."

In the rolling land past right field a vast flat ditch had been dug several years before where water from heavy rains or from hoses made thick mud pools in the summertime. This was where the crowds gathered on hot Saturday nights to watch big machines mudwrestle other big machines. Tonight there were three green tents set up in the flat, on the dirt that looked wet even when it wasn't, and people were milling through poles set up for more tents, dragging cords and tarp behind them.

"It's my grandmaw's church," said Rosemary. "They're setting up revival down there."

"Oh."

"They have a traveling preacher coming," she said. "It's supposed to last the whole month."

"A month of revival?" I gazed down at the business of tent construction. "What would be left to revive?"

Rosemary's father's mother was Church of God, Freewill, of Razor Point, a church of only about fifty members. (Rosemary's father's father had been a Methodist and had seen to it that his children did not even set foot in Razor Point, much less in the Church of God. Amid a lot of holy rolling and vehement yelling Rosemary's family ended up vaguely Methodist, and her grandparents ended up clearly divorced; her grandfather had died since.) Every year, however, this tiny walloping little church held a revival somewhere in the middle of Hope Springs apparently intended to wash the whole town clean of its sins. They would set up tents for a weekend (a month was unheard of) and bring in a guest speaker, and churchgoers of all denominations--except Catholics, of course, unless they were high-schoolers led in by friends afraid for their salvation--ended up filing through the tents to have their sins sweated off, or shouted out. The Church of God, Freewill, of Razor Point was royally successful on this point.

"This guy is supposed to be incredible, according to my grandmaw," said Rosemary. "According to my father he's a freak."

"I hope Win-Way has enough lozenges in stock," I said. "A whole month of unapologetic screaming."

"I've never been to a revival," Page piped up.

My brother and his team had taken the field for warmups, and my stomach had simultaneous hold of my bellybutton and my throat. I glanced at the dugout, and at home plate, and saw nothing.

"*Who*," demanded Page, sitting suddenly upright in her seat, "is that at the concessions stand?"

"Geez, keep your voice down," I said, and although I didn't have to turn to see what she was looking at, I did anyway.

So did Rosemary.

The mothers behind us giggled at Page.

Lo-rene let out a throatful of rough laughter. "He's cute, ain't he?"

Rosemary turned back to me and looked me straight in the face. "He's cute, ain't he?"

"Ask Gabriel," Lo-rene cackled.

"Let's ask Gabriel," Rosemary echoed, her eyes screwed into my own and her lips curving up into something that did not quite seem like a smile.

"Oh my *God*, Gabriel." Page was pinching my arm, and I shook her off. "You *know* him?"

I screwed up my lips and kept looking at Rosemary, who was blinking steadily at me.

"Not really," I said. "I don't really know him."

"I'm sure she *does not* know him," said Rosemary.

Page kept batting at my arm but she didn't say anything else.

Hershey was indeed at the concessions stand with his clipboard under his arm and a burger in one hand, cutoffs slung loosely on his skinny hips and threads hanging in curls down to where his thigh muscle slanted across his leg near the knee. He was not looking in our direction; he was monitoring the warmup through the fence. My brother was not pitching that night. He was playing first base, taking the grounders Wayne was batting to him with a little too much flourish, flipping his glove dramatically before dashing it to the ground to stop the ball.

After a few minutes of intense inspection of the infield, Hershey looked up into the bleachers and saw me, and he grinned and waved. I tore my eyes off Rosemary's face and looked back at him.

First I smiled.

Page grabbed my knuckle and nearly twisted it off.

Then I waved back.

Rosemary shook her head. "You are amazing."

And then he was coming. I saw him coming with his clipboard and my hands went to my hair before I could stop them. I felt the little scattered pods of female attention in the ballpark zeroing in on me.

"You're fixing your hair," said Rosemary, whose eyes steadfastly refused to leave my face. "Oh, my God."

"Quit staring at me," I told her. "You're making me nervous."

And then he was there. He climbed the bleachers as if it were a perfectly natural thing to do, and he sat in front of us. Stuck under his clip was the playbook, which he apparently was going to keep that night, from this seat right in front of me and Rosemary and Page on the bleachers.

"Hey, Gabriel," he said to me, rubbing his hand through his hair and leaving a mess of spikes.

"Hey," I said, slipping a corkscrew curl of my own over my index finger.

Rosemary and Page sat in their own silences on either side of me, one more inscrutable than the other.

"Hershey," I said, clearing my throat when some patch of phlegm behind my tongue stuck to his name, "this is Rosemary," indicating her with my hand as she parted her rose-petal lips to give him a smile, "and Page." I shook Page's fingers off my elbow.

"Nice to meet you," he said. He nodded at Page first and then grinned at Rosemary.

"Well, Gabriel," said Page, "is there anybody else you want to share with us?" She leaned forward and touched Hershey on the shoulder. "She hadn't told us nothing about you."

He shrugged. "I guess she knows there's not much to tell," he said, smiling so that the tip of his crooked nose pointed

charmingly toward his dimples. He flipped open the playbook and wrote in the date at the top of the first clean page.

"Oh, come on," said Page. "Are you in school?"

"I'm going to be a junior at Vanderbilt in the fall."

"Oh, God," said Page. "I bet you cain't stand it here. I bet you think we're all a bunch of hicks."

He shook his head. "My mama's family is from here. She's Wayne Barfield's sister."

"He's helping with the team this summer," I offered in a tiny voice.

"I guess I'll have to use my Vanderbilt manners." Page stretched a tanned leg down beside Hershey, smooth and brown like something fried in butter, and she rubbed the ankle with her fingers. "I'll have to act like I hadn't been brought up here in Hicksville." She opened her mouth wide and laughed loudly through it.

Hershey looked at Page, and then he looked at me.

"Who's pitching tonight for the Twins?" I asked him.

He ran his pencil down the roster. "Clayton Littrell. I think that's the little skinny one with the glasses. You know, I have to do all the books now--that Jamie Pinedweller quit."

"I don't know how to act around somebody from Vanderbilt," Page said. "Of course, I guess Gabriel would. She was valedictorian."

"I know."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "You know?"

"She's got a full scholarship to Tennessee in the fall," Page said. "I've got a scholarship, too, but it's just from the August County Utilities Board, and I'm only going to Columbia State. That's thirty minutes from here. I mean, it's a good school, I guess, if you're from a hick place like this, and you're not smart like Gabriel."

"You're smart," I said in a tiny, tiny voice.

"Well, I can *study*," she said.

Hershey looked up at Rosemary, who had been so silent, and he smiled. "Are you going to school too?"

The stiffness in her look reserved for me had vanished entirely. Soft strokes of pink appeared on her cheekbones as she spoke. "I'm going with Gabriel," she said. "We're going to be roommates."

"God, it'll be like I don't even exist," said Page, stretching her other leg out and shaking her hair. "I'll be like, guess what I did today, in little old *Columbia*, and they'll be like, well, but *we* did *this* in Knoxville, and guess what the score of the *ballgame* was, and what fraternity party we crashed."

Hershey was picking at the wood on the edge of the slat he was sitting on. The bleachers had been painted a smoky blue when they were first erected and then again several years later, but they were peeling badly. He tore off a strip of chipped blue wood and rolled it between his hands.

"I'm going to major in psychology," said Page. There did not seem to be any other voices in the air. "I'll have to

transfer somewhere because Columbia's only two years, but I want to be a counselor. I cain't stand to see other people hurting or in pain. That's just the way I am."

"Psychology, hmm?" Hershey twirled the little ribbon of wood between his index finger and his thumb.

"Gabriel don't *know* what kind of person she is," Page chirped. "Only that she's smart. She'll just have to major in smart."

Rosemary did not quite sigh, but she let out a significant breath. My hair seemed to be sucking in stagnant water from the air and the low-hanging clouds, and I felt it frizzing up, but only enough to be unattractive, not enough to cover my face.

"I don't think Gabriel has anything to worry about," said Hershey.

My hair seemed to relax. I took the splinter of wood from between his fingers, tied a stiff knot in it, and gave it back to him. Page immediately began scratching up beginnings of wood peelings with an idiotic smile on her face.

"Of course she doesn't," said Rosemary placidly. She folded her long fingers together and rested her chin against them. "I'll be struggling to keep up with her."

The game was starting. Hershey wadded up the splinter of wood and threw it at me. I flinched as it hit me square on the nose, and then it fell to my lap and got stuck in the cuff of my jeans shorts, and I let it stay there so I could put it in my pocket later. He turned back to his books and began to write,

and my brother came to the plate and knocked his first ball to the fence. The Twins' coach pulled his cap down over his eyes.

My telephone was ringing by seven o'clock the next morning.

In the middle of the night in the depths of sleep I had crawled down to the foot of the bed and balled up in the covers like a nesting rat. When the call came I did not know what it was. The sound was unbelievably shrill.

I bolted out from under the covers and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?

"Were you asleep?

"What?" My voice was suddenly very bright and full of volume, and things that in sleep had been tinkering in the corners of my brain nearest my mouth came tumbling out. "Oh, no, no. I had to turn off the clock. I was just fixing to get up and vacuum the kitchen anyway."

"Why don't I just let you go back to sleep," Page said, and even though I was just waking up I heard her voice nosedive at the end of her sentence. Coherent ideas were slowly forming in my head and worming their way down to my tongue. "Maybe you'd better," I said. "My kitchen is linoleum."

"Okay." There was silence then on the other end, except for breathing. I heard the television going in the background.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay."

"Okay."

"I don't want to make you mad because I got you up."

I sat up. A strange feeling about my head indicated to me that my hair was not lying in all the correct places.

"I'm up now," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I took the receiver and burrowed a tunnel back down through my covers, down where it was dark and warm.

"Well, all right," she said. Then she sighed, just heavy enough to make static on the phone. "No, I'll just call you later."

"Good Lord. I can't go back to sleep now."

"You sound like you're in a tunnel."

"Would you please get on with it."

"Okay," she said. "God, Gabriel, I couldn't sleep all night. I tossed and turned and I kept waking up and just sweating. I mean, Gabriel, *sweating*, *you* know, I just couldn't sleep at all. I just could *not* sleep. And I would wake up and just ask myself *what* was wrong with me, *what* is wrong with you Page? I just--don't ask me to tell you how I knew instinctively that something was wrong, Gabriel, but sometimes I just have a sense about things. And finally it just hit me, I just realized that I was thinking of just one thing, over and over."

"What thing?"

"It just hit me, Gabriel," she continued, "that I was thinking of one thing, and that was what was keeping me awake. God, I was sweating--honey, you just would not believe."

"What was the thing?"

"Are you ready for this?"

"By now, yes."

"Hershey."

"Oh."

"God," she said. "I tried to call you so many times last night."

I had not been home. Rosemary and I had gone riding around after the ballgame was called in the fifth inning because we were so far ahead; she drove silently, having given up the notion that I was going to tell her anything that she wanted to know--not the first mention was made of Hershey Crawford, which made me unspeakably nervous--and we burned up gas until we spotted Buddy's black car driving up and down past the Quik-Mart like a wheeled vulture. Also, Booley was sitting on the tailgate of his truck at Sudsies--his boot tips did not touch the ground--and so we did not stop. She mentioned that she didn't want to go home because her mother had very quietly called her father a bastard over their cereal at breakfast, and then she drove me home. When I got in at midnight Agnes, Beth, and my mother were still pitting cherries in the kitchen, there were two cobblers in the oven, and Granny sat on one of the barstools without her rosary, rocking endlessly. I had gone straight to bed.

"Honey," Page said, "I think I am in love with that boy. Page Crawford. I been getting used to the sound of that in my sleep--that why I was awake all night, don't you know? Do you not think he is fine?"

"What about Sammy?"

"I don't care what he does anymore," she said. "I wash my hands of him."

"You won't think that once you get good and awake."

"You been telling me all along he don't care about me anyway," she pointed out. "He hadn't called me since graduation and I know he's been working late and stuff but still."

"You listen to yourself and remember this tomorrow when he does call you."

"I don't care if he does. Gabriel, I'm telling you, all I can think about is Hershey. I mean, I think he likes me."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" The pitch of her voice wobbled.

"I just mean. . . ."

"I mean, like, when--you remember?--I was telling y'all I needed to tan darker because I'm so pale, and he said--you remember?--he said, don't worry, the soomin, soomer, something yellow made me look really dark?"

"Cerumen," I said. "He said cerumen yellow."

"God," she breathed. "He's so smart. I never even heard of that."

"Page," I said, turning in my dark den of covers, "cerumen is earwax."

"Oh, gross."

"Uh-huh."

"But you see what I'm saying? He said I looked dark. I mean, he was looking at my legs. But, God, my hair was messed up, and my face was broke out. . . ."

"You looked fine."

"And I'm fat."

"You're not fat."

"Gabriel, you just don't realize." She was laughing now. "Don't you think he was looking at me?"

"I guess," I said. "All I saw him looking at was the playbook. He had a job to do."

"But he could have gone somewheres else to do it, and he sat right there with us. The whole game. See?"

"I know."

"It's like he's the real thing. It's like I been going through all these relationships because they were the preliminaries and this is the real thing. I'm ready."

I rubbed my eyes. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Gabriel, Gabriel, I just don't know how to describe it. He was just like . . . he was just . . . I don't know . . . God." Her last words fell out of her mouth without the benefit of diction, and she started laughing.

"Hello?"

She laughed again. "Hmmm. . . . Oh, what? Sorry," she said. "'Facts of Life' reruns come on at seven. It's the one where Sue Ann smokes dope and . . . writes the book report . . . about, uh, Moby Dick." She giggled.

"I'm getting sleepy."

"All right, all right." I heard her turn the TV off right in the middle of a bite of canned laughter. "It was like, I said something, and when he answered me he tapped his pencil on my knee, and he didn't have to do that. It was like he was just trying to touch me, you know?"

I didn't remember it at all, and I of course had been watching his hands the entire night. I had the curl of blue wood he'd thrown at me on my nightstand.

"Maybe I'm just imagining things," Page said, "imagining that a good-looking guy like Hershey would think I was pretty or would want to go out with me or whatever. I'm not much to look at."

"Oh, please."

"Well. . . ." She sighed. "I know you tell me all the time I'm pretty and my aunts and uncles and all say I'm beautiful just like my grandmaw used to be, and I'm like, *What?*, 'cause I think that's ridiculous, and Sammy tells me I'm pretty, to just look in the mirror and I'd see it. So maybe I should just admit it, but you know how hard I am on myself. I just don't have any self-esteem." She paused. "And I know you think I'm just being silly."

"Yeah."

She laughed. "Well . . . but, God, Gabriel, what am I going to do about Hershey? God, I love to say that name. It sounds so, *you* know, not from here."

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Oh *God*. I just thought of something."

"What?"

"Rosemary."

"What about her?"

"Rosemary." She grunted. "He'll probably like Rosemary. Everybody likes Rosemary."

"He might," I said.

"I just wonder, the way she was looking at him. Do you think she might like him?"

"I don't know."

"God, maybe I should talk to her. I don't want to go after him if she might like him."

I turned over and over in my cocoon of blankets, unable to find a place where my stomach didn't hurt.

"Don't you think?" she said. "Don't you think I should?"

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"Well, I don't know if it would do any good."

Page was silent, and I listened for the hum of the television, but I heard nothing, and when she spoke again her voice was different. "Well, look, she gets whoever she wants

whenever she wants and if I have a chance with him then I don't have to wait around for her to approve. Just because she's all through with Buddy don't mean she should get Hershey, right?" She didn't wait for a response. "I deserve to have somebody like him. Am I right?"

"Mm-hmm." I poked myself a bigger breathing hole in my nest of covers; I felt the space around my head getting heavier and darker and I didn't like it.

"I mean seriously, she can pick and choose whoever she wants and I don't think it's fair."

"Life's not fair," I said.

"Tell that to Rosemary because I'm going after Hershey."

I was becoming irritated at the way she lingered operatically over both syllables of his name and refused to leave them behind to get on with the rest of her sentences.

"Gabriel, he's so gorgeous. And Sammy will die when he sees us together." I heard her flip the TV back on. "Oh *God*, and he *draws*. Did you see the stuff he was just doodling on the sides of the book? I mean, if he could just sketch that good, then imagine what kind of stuff he does at school, in class. I wonder if he'd draw me something if I asked him. Can you even imagine how talented he probly is?"

"He might be just a doodler. He might not have any sense of space or composition on a canvas."

"And he rides a motorcycle."

"A moped," I corrected her.

"I bet he's a hellraiser on it. God, I'd ride with him."

"It's a moped."

"Mmmm, honey, sitting on the back of that bike with my arms around his waist, I could live that way for the rest of my life."

"More like squatting in front of him. I couldn't live that way five minutes."

"I bet he rides dangerous. And you know me. I live on the edge."

Chapter Twenty-Six

In the lime, high-pitched green of the hills of late spring the cherries pop up like tiny bulbous spurts of blood. The finches swoop into the trees to pierce the bursting skins with the points of their beaks, leaving the shriveled remains to swing in the breeze under the leaves. Some swell so full that they turn black and snap their stems and bruise against the ground, where they are hopped upon and sucked dry by the quick little finches. The paler fruits suck in the current of growth from the earth and blush darker with each day, as new sunbeams tap attentively over the hilltop in the mornings, and in the houses the plastic pails lie hungry by the back door.

Cherry juice bleeds into the cracks of the skin when the picking fingers squeeze too hard. Taut skins and fat curves shimmer in the pale spring sun, but then they split violently and inaudibly under careless fingers, in a rush of pale-tinted juice. The less voluptuous make it easily to the floor of the bucket and nestle into each other, stacking in imperceptible increments until the mouth of the pail shows only a sweet, delicious, brilliant red. A few will be eaten on the spot, there in the picking grounds under the smiling sun as the smell of far-off apples and peaches stirs in the imagination, but not because it seems the right thing to do; cherries are meant for sugaring, meant to be buried under lattices and baked until they bleed together, or meant to be shut up in jars and shelved in dark corners of the pantry where the light can be turned out. If

cherries are sucked limp and fingers are licked out in the green picking fields it is with a creeping guilt and with a wince at the tartness that comes simply from being so heartbreakingly young, so very young and new.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When it happened it was like a dream. When she reached home with her sacks of peaches she was awiggle and trying to contain it, trying to respond without color in her cheeks when her children asked how long it would be before pies. Her husband never asked about pies; pies were not a question for him.

She had taken the horse herself to town for peaches; she had worn breeches instead of a skirt. Bugs had got most of their own peach crop but she knew the Schaums had had trees bent to the ground with fruit begging to be picked. And she was hungry for pies and her hands wanted to mash dough and fold pies for frying. She wanted the smell of preserves lingering over the next few days. Once in a while she wished there were a way to have that without actually having to do the work herself, but usually she wanted something to plunge her hands into. Her husband had refused to admit that the bugs had taken the entire crop of peaches when she told him she was going to the Schaums'. He had said he would go out and get her enough peaches for preserves; it was all a matter of being patient enough to look for the best fruit. He had gone out to the orchard, and he had come back with seven good peaches. She had snorted and saddled up the horse.

And these days it seemed she was going into town alone all the time. It was the possibility, the lip-chewing and the smile of furtive imagination that caused her to blush even before she got anywhere, when she was just on the empty road between her farm and the grocery store. She tried not to tie it to the

doctor's face; she imagined simply looking beautiful and windswept astride her horse, taking him unnecessarily fast on the trail so that her breasts bounced underneath her blouse, which could have been for anyone's benefit. She would not have regretted it if anyone saw, even the butcher's boy delivering in his little horsecart. She would have blushed because she couldn't stamp that out of her training, but she certainly wouldn't have regretted it. She knew that the heat made her face dewy, not just plain sweaty like most women's, and it was a tiny pleasure that she could never own up to noticing aloud, but she could love it all the same.

When she got to the Schaums' orchard she was not the only one there to pick peaches. Several other farmers and their wives were filling buckets; the Schaums did not mind because their trees were breaking and the fruit had to come off.

She had honestly not suspected that the doctor would be there. She would never have presumed that God would allow it.

He had a bedsheet tied around his shoulder like a sling, and he was laying peaches carefully into the bag made in the crook of his arm when she arrived. She was still breathy from her horse moving under her, still a little poisoned by her parted blouse and not yet fallen from her other world into the hardness of peach-picking with the other wives, and so before her feet had sunk into the ground she was moving in behind him, and over his shoulder she said, in her lovely crisp English, "They would have given you a bucket if you'd asked."

He recognized her, called her by her name, which passed by her ears unnoticed. "The Brechts took the last one," he said. "You'll have to get yourself a sheet off the line." He smiled at her broadly, and she was coming down to the ground slowly, slowly. "Or share mine with me."

The euphoria bled out of her head and the tendrils of hair around her face quit waving with the excitement of having ridden in and swung off her horse. She was beginning to blush, to feel dread in her stomach. "I couldn't."

"You could," he insisted, "if you would let me have some preserves later on."

She considered this a moment, and replied, "If you can convince my husband to share." The words stuck on her tongue but she got them out. She knew that he had already taken her in with his eyes, had seen that she had on trousers, but there was a complete lack of flirtation in his manner; there was instead an honesty that seemed to be stubbornly amiss in the dreamy cloud of peach fragrance in the air. She had made the required reference to the man who shared her house; now she hoped the doctor would not repeat it.

He only continued to pick peaches, and she eventually joined in with him, placing each one incredibly in the triangle of his arm, careful not to touch him or to bruise the fruit. She nodded to the other women scuttling through the trees with their buckets, and there was no surprise or unmerited concern in their looks as they greeted the two of them; she would know if there

was, because that was what she was good at. Looking, and knowing.

The doctor paused with a peach in his hand, half-rotten, and with a flick of his wrist he dashed it against the ground for the birds. "You've learned English remarkably well," he said, which surprised her, since she had not said anything as she placed peaches so carefully in the sheet.

"Not well enough," she said as immediately as she had thought to be surprised, and she was only a breath away from telling him how hard it was to put words together, when he spoke.

"I'm writing a book," he said--with a combination of hesitation and excitement, she thought, as if sharing this bedsheet were making him feel a sudden intimacy with her, "and I want to write about you."

She wanted to drop the peach in her hand but she had been working hard on her sense of melodrama and she thought she knew what was too much. "Me?" She allowed herself one word.

"I'm fascinated by the people of this settlement," he said, "by the community of faith here."

His sentence had included no reference to her, so she repeated herself: "Me?"

"I want to write a history of this town for its grandchildren and its great-grandchildren," he said.

She passed a hand over the slight swell of her stomach, breathing in the ultra-sweet wash of too many peaches in the air.

"I want to include the people of the town and of the parish of St. Mary's, especially," he said. "One day your children should know what it was like to make a tiny part of America your own."

"They barely remember."

"And their children won't at all." He shuffled a peach in his fingers. "I want to talk to you about what it was like to come here. I want to write it all down."

She thought of his hand marking her name in ink on a clean sheet of paper. "All right," she said, never looking him in the eye, "I'll help you."

She took her peaches home in a different bedsheet, tied in a pouch under her arm, and she rode slowly to keep from ruining the fruit, but it took all her restraint.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

On Wednesday morning, when I counted 34 days until the Fourth of July, I was all alone in the house. Mama had taken Michael to Middlefield shopping for swimming trunks--he'd split his last summer's when he tried them on the night before. I lay in my room for a long time before I felt I could get up, nestled in a cozy bed bepillowed by my mother, boxed in by four walls of rose wallpaper she had picked out on a day when she had the flu but went to the interior design store anyway, spread out inert above a floor picked clean as she moved through my room in the gray hours when I was not quite awake.

As I pulled on my robe and went downstairs, knowing I was alone and enjoying the ugly feeling of my hair standing off my skull in morning recovery, I heard knocking.

From the stairs I looked out the living room window to the porch, where I saw Hershey leaned against the door, scruffing his hair with the heel of his hand.

I scrambled to help my hair recover more quickly. My hands flew to my head and felt great unassailable clumps of hair, and seeing that he could see me through the window, I took my hands out of my hair and went to the door. When I opened it he just stood there, grinning.

"Some hair," he said.

"More than you'll ever have."

"More than would look good on me."

I reached up for a knot and raked my fingers through it, and I motioned him into the house.

He batted my hand gently out of my hair. "Don't straighten it out. Leave it alone."

With him in the house I wanted urgently to be straightening things up, but in my mother's immaculate living room there was nothing askew to be pushed into its proper place, so I tied and retied the sash of my robe.

"Daddy's not here," I said, squinting at him in puzzlement. "He's at work."

"I know." Hershey noticed the piano and eagerly moved over to the bench and sat down. "Do you play this?"

I watched him spread his fingers out over the keys as if he were about to let some arpeggios fly. "Let me guess," I said. "You've had ten years of lessons and you turned down a Vandy music scholarship because you just like to draw better."

He didn't turn around to acknowledge what I'd said. "I don't even know where Chopsticks starts," he said. "I can play that kind of fisty thing on the black keys." He made a fist and demonstrated this to me. The notes were correct but his timing was broad on the ends and pinched in the middle.

"Exquisite," I said.

"You *do* play. Sit down and show me."

"No."

"Sit down."

I fidgeted with my robe. "I don't really want to."

He placed his fist on the keyboard again. "Well, okay," he said, "but this song is the only one I know."

"I have endless patience."

"I have tireless knuckles."

"Why did you come over here?" I asked. "Not to be rude."

"To see you," he said. "I wanted to see if you'd go riding on my moped with me."

"Hmmmm," I said. "Shall I squat again this time, or perhaps just sit on your shoulders?"

"We could ride *to* somewhere. It doesn't have to be a long trip so you'd get uncomfortable--I was thinking we could ride out somewhere on your farm."

I tickled my nose with a fuzzy strand of hair and shrugged. "I'd have to change clothes."

"I'd allow that." He wheeled around on the bench. "Hey--let me pick out what you put on."

I stared at him.

He raised his eyebrows. "No, really."

"I was thinking a simple ensemble, maybe a T-shirt with, oh, say, shorts."

"No."

"No?"

"Show me your room," he said. "Take me to your closet."

I started to giggle. "We're not picking anything out of my closet. We're picking up something dirty off my floor, that I've already worn two or three times this week." He was following me

up the stairs. "Oh, except my mama's already been in my room and snatched my laundry. I forgot."

"Then we'll have to look in your closet," he said, pulling on the banister and leaping ahead of me to the top of the stairs. "This must be your room. I can see the roses." He pushed my door, only slightly ajar, slowly open with one finger as I pushed up behind him, wanting to smell him but not to touch him.

His head cocked back, and he did not enter the room. "What's that noise?"

"Evangeline," I replied. She was noodling in the morning sun in my brother's bedroom. "It's Michael's parakeet."

"Evangeline," he repeated. "Your twelve-year-old brother named his bird Evangeline?"

"I helped." I pushed him ahead of me into the bedroom with one finger on his shoulder, the thought skipping fleetly through the back of my mind that my mother might return from shopping to find a boy in my room. "He wanted to call her Fuzzbutt."

Hershey took in the room wall by wall, and I thought I caught him lingering over where my mother had hung my academic award plaques in a long oaken string over the dresser, but before I could be sure, he was opening my closet doors. He reached deep inside, back to the very back where there were ancient things shut up in garment bags. "Help yourself," I said.

He pulled out a short blue plastic bag that had white frills peeking out from the open bottom. "How about this?" He began to lift the bag up over the dress.

"I don't know," I said. "I've put on a little water weight since First Communion."

"Geez, I thought it was short," he said as he dropped the plastic to the floor and twirled the hanger on his finger. The velvet ribbons threaded through the eyelet trim at the hem of the dress hung down stiffly where they were tied in bows every three inches. The bows were creased in weird places and they looked like evil spiders crawling over the frock I wore when I first touched God.

Hershey touched the long filmy sleeves and said, "You must have looked like a little bride."

"A little bride of Christ."

"Did you have a veil?"

From the top shelf in my closet, so neatly stocked by loving hands, I produced a shoebox, and from the shoebox, another plastic bag. The veil inside was wound around its headpiece so that it would not crease. As I removed it from the bag the coarse netting began immediately to unwind.

"Put it on," he said, still twirling my dress on his finger.

"I can't," I said. "My head's too big."

He raised his eyebrows. "Water weight?"

"It was even too big in second grade. In all the First Communion pictures of me the headband is scooted up to my eyeballs and standing off my head."

"This I have to see."

"I'm afraid to stick it in my hair. It might not come out."

Hershey laid my dress across the bed and took the veil from me; the netting fell away from the silk-flowered headband and hung like a bell in the air. He separated the tight plastic ends of the band and placed them around my skull, pulling my hair back with them. I stood looking at myself in the wall mirror, wishing my hair were not so substantial. With it back off my face the overhead light bore down unmercifully upon the crooked line of my nose.

He let go of the ends.

The band squeezed together and slid up the sides of my head, pushing my hair into a bizarre pouf and only narrowly missing my eyeballs. He laughed.

"I told you," I said, folding my arms. "Now get it out of my hair."

As I stood watching myself looking ridiculous in the mirror, he stood behind me, both arms around me with one hand on either side of the veil's headpiece, but not touching me at all. He pressed the headpiece back into place, pulling my hair back down onto my head, and he held it there for a moment with his hands.

"Hmmmm," he said.

Then he removed it from my head, careful with the plastic teeth of the band that were clutching at my morning hair. "Do you want to put this back up?"

I took it from him and began winding the netting back around the band, feeling the sad, crushed little flowers underneath my fingertips.

Hershey was back in the closet, rooting through garment bags again. I picked up the white fluff of a dress off the bed and put it back in its sack. "Give up," I said. "I'm not wearing a dress to ride on your moped."

He didn't answer me. He had hold of a long see-through bag. "What is this?"

"It's the dress my mother wore in my aunt Agnes's wedding, and I'm not putting it on."

"Why not?"

"It's peacock blue."

"So?"

"My aunt Agnes would have been married standing in Second Creek singing her vows and strumming a mandolin except that the priest made her have her wedding in the church building," I said. "But he couldn't do anything about the dresses."

My mother's dress was a floaty blue vapor made of chiffon, pucker-stitched at the bodice, empire-waisted and sorcerer-sleeved and prone to move without being touched. In the pictures I had seen of her in it she looked breathy. I didn't like those pictures.

Hershey was already unzipping and removing. "Look at all this material, in one skirt," he said. "Come on, think how it would look in the wind on my moped. Think how exotic."

"Think yourself," I replied. "I'd be squatting in front of you. How exotic is that?"

"Try it on."

"Never."

"Please."

"There is something just not normal about this request."

He laughed. "Well, I wasn't going to tell you," he said, "but if you haven't figured it out by now, I wanted to draw you today."

He held up the dress to my body by the shoulder seams, and it swirled against me and breathed of its own accord between us. I reddened and stared down at it, trying to picture Agnes in frosted blue eyeshadow holding this Butterick's pattern up for inspection and falling in love with it. "Why would you want to draw me in this?"

He shrugged, and the blue chiffon shrugged with him, and then lurched at me. "Try it on and we'll see." He placed the seams between my fingers and left the room.

The door shut between us, but I could see the shadows of his feet right on the other side; he didn't walk away. I did not lock the door. With him standing so close to the door that his movement jarred it slightly in its frame, I let my robe drop to the floor.

Standing in front of the mirror I stepped out of the bottoms of my pajamas and stared at the sharp knobs of my knees. I unbuttoned the top slowly, imagining with surprise that I felt breath seeping through the cracks between the door and its frame, and starting to lock the door twice but for the embarrassment of his hearing it, and then suddenly there I was, naked beside an

unlocked door except for plain white panties and a tangled fall of hair. I could not stand full front into the mirror; I could not stand for long without crossing my arms in front of my chest. I turned a little sideways so I would not have to see the points of both hipbones at once.

I slipped the gauzy dress over my head and let it fall down over me. It stopped at the point where the smocking was tight and groaned over my shoulders. I pulled at it carefully; I had tried the dress on years before playing dress-up, but not since my figure had become my mother's, with an extra inch or two in the legs. As I pushed my arms through the ample sleeves the bodice came down into place and hugged my chest. The stitching was gathered in the middle to separate one breast from the other, exaggerating a cleavage already too full and melon-like for such a scrawny pair of legs. My mother, I had noticed in the pictures, had had the same problem, but she had not appeared to care. The skirt flowed out from me like a waterfall that stopped at my ankles.

"Is it on?" came his voice through the door.

"No," I said, knowing he could probably guess I was lying, waving my arms through the air and letting the blue chiffon drip from them as I pretended to fly.

"Let me see," he said, and I heard his hand on the knob.

"No! It's not on!" I began frantically to lift the dress back over my head. It did not want to let go of my breasts. I heard tiny threads snap as one side of me fell heavily out of the

puckered stitching that grazed past my ear; the other breast was trapped until I worked it loose with my finger. My nose smeared flat and my lips pulled grotesquely as the smocking squeezed my skull, and then the whole diaphanous cloud, thus set free, slipped over my head and into the floor. Static whipped the top of my head into a woozy spray of single hairs. I pulled a bra and a T-shirt and shorts hastily out of my dresser drawers and put them on.

He did not react when he saw me. He simply picked up the dress off the floor and laid it across the bed, and I put on my shoes and socks without a word, and then he took me by the hand, helped me off the floor, and led me downstairs.

We boarded the moped in the same way that we had done before, with him on the seat and me folded between the seat and the handlebars so that my knees were poised as shock absorbers. A satchel hung from the back rack; I knew that his drawing materials were in it because there was a big hole in the front and pencil points stuck out of it.

"Where to?" he asked me.

"How about the backyard?"

He revved the motor with the rubber grip on the right handlebar. "Could we go where there's water?"

"Sure," I said. "The creek isn't far into the woods."

His left foot came off the ground and we took off around the back of the house. The motor purred more loudly but could not reach a steady hum because there were so many trees as the woods

behind the house grew thicker; he went slowly and after we were over the hill separating my house from the rest of the farm, he said into my ear, "Can we take the bike the whole way? It might be better to walk." I replied that maybe we should stop and go the rest of the way on foot, and he said, "I guess it's good you didn't wear the dress."

"We didn't generate much of a sexy skirt-ruffling breeze, I suppose."

We leaned the moped against a tree and took the dirt path cleared through the trees down to the water; the trees were the most dense just before the land sloped into the creek banks. Hershey took his satchel off the bike and slung it over his arm.

"It's beautiful down here," he said, stomping just off the path through the undergrowth.

I nodded. "You're going to have poison oak."

"Are there snakes?"

"No, only giant worms and wild hogs."

"Do the hogs have fangs?"

"Of course there are snakes."

We stopped when we reached the bank of the creek, which stretched through the tall weeds and twisted underneath the trees. The high canopy of leaves was highest over the water, and magnificent columnar bands of sunlight reached pencil-thin from holes in the umbrella of greenery down to the water. This place, where the path was cleared to the water's edge, was where my

brother and I used to camp out at night and catch crawdads in the slow pools where the water rushed past, not through.

"Show me a place," he said to me.

"There's plenty of place here, as you can see," I said. "What in particular are you looking for?"

He shrugged. "Just show me something you have a memory of."

I put my hands on my hips and stepped up to the water's edge. I looked on both sides of me at the ribbon of water that alternately buckled and spread, spat and slurred in both directions as far as I could see. The trees were of varying thicknesses but to the southwest there was the most light; I could see the crumble of one of the old stone walls of the original farm in the clearing past the trees.

"Come this way," I said to him, weaving through the weeds along the water to the southwest, against the current. He followed me at some distance. His face was tilted up to the fine shafts of light coming down at him from heaven.

"You're going to fall in if you don't watch where you're going," I pointed out. "You might want to hold on to some of the tree trunks if you're walking this close to the bank. It's slick."

He didn't. He followed me silently but for the soft sounds of his shoes in the weeds.

I led him around a bend in the stream where the bank rose sharply off the water and the naked dirt lay exposed and wet and jumbled with roots. A tree whose girth I could only barely span

with my arms grew diagonally out of the bank and over the water, reaching for the trees on the other side and coming up just short; its greenery dipped lushly into the silenced babble of the stream where the water flowed deep and made a wide pool.

"Mmm, here," I said, stepping up onto the tree with one foot. "You can jump off this into the water. It's deep enough here."

He was still several yards behind me. "Is that a memory?"

"It's a fact," I said. "I can remember doing it, if that's what you mean."

"Got a story to go with it?"

"Uhhhh. . . ." I balanced on one foot and held my arms out on either side of me. "Michael fell off before he got to the middle once and scraped both knees on the rocks on the bank. I think. No, it was one knee. Both knees was that time on the skateboard. Well, he was five, anyway." I shook my hair out of my face. "Does the story have to be interesting?"

He grinned, the first expression I had seen on his face since we'd come into the woods. "Stay up there," he said. He stomped some of the tall weeds around his feet into a mat to sit on and began taking things out of his satchel.

"Can I sit?" I lowered my arms and put my other foot back on the tree. "I'm going to." I put one hand down and eased my backside onto the trunk so that my legs dangled down about a foot from the water.

"I'm going to have to put you how I want you," he said. He had a sketch pad and two flat pencils and one round pencil and a ball of eraser gum all on the ground, and he was watching me as I swung my legs from the tree. "I have to decide how I want you."

"Want me like this," I said, swinging my legs. "Nothing much else I can imagine would be comfortable."

He shrugged and opened the sketch pad. He flipped past several pages and I saw where they had been scribbled upon; the pages were mostly dark and smeared. "Shake your hair back off your face," he said.

I put my hand to my hair and discovered it was still knotted together. I tried to rake my fingers through it.

Hershey made a warning sound, like a parent whose child is about to stick its finger in an electrical outlet. "Hey," he said. "I didn't say straighten it out. Just shake it off your face."

"What a temperamental *artiste* you are."

He picked up the round pencil and applied it to the paper, and I heard it scratching fervently. "Just preserving the subject matter." He ran the pencil in some broad lines, and then there was silence for a moment but for his lead moving into narrower detail on the page and scraping the surface of the paper.

"I forgot to ask," I said, holding my neck stiff so that my hair would not fall back into my face, "can I move? I would

think that if you were good enough at this it wouldn't matter if I moved."

He snorted. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"I wouldn't be except that I'm thinking really hard about it."

He smiled. "I don't care if you swing your legs a little."

"Can I swing my neck a little?"

"A little."

"Can I scratch my nose?"

He sighed, but it did not appear to have anything to do with what I was saying. He was staring at his paper. "I don't know," he said.

"It's going to itch here in a minute."

He was not listening to me. He looked up and beat the end of his pencil on his nose. "I don't know. I think I'm bored with you sitting that way."

I wrinkled up my nose. "Well, then," I said, scratching broadly. "Not that it's so thrilling to be doing the actual sitting either."

He shook his head. "It's not you, goofus, it's your pose. Let's do something different."

"Aren't you going to finish the one you're doing?"

"No."

He laid his sketch pad aside and dusted off his hands and came over to me. "Swing your feet up here," he said.

I did as I was told, and he stepped up onto the tree trunk and grabbed hold of my ankles. "Wrap your feet around this little branch down here. It's pretty strong."

"Hold it right there," I said. "What does how strong it is have to do with the price of eggs?"

He took my feet and crossed them around the little branch that erupted unexpectedly from the gnarled base of the tree and did not look to me to be strong enough to support leaves, much less me.

"I never played on the monkey bars at recess," I whined.

"Bend your knees just a little."

I complied, so that I was sitting facing him.

"Lean back. Can you lie down?"

I lay back slowly so that the bark would not scrape me.

"Let your arms dangle on either side."

I let them drop slowly. My shirt was untucked and I felt a breeze from the water slip underneath and nip at my bellybutton.

He leaned over me and took my hair in his hands. He looked me straight in the eyes as he spread it all around my head.

"When I try to picture what I look like right now," I said, "I have to have a little giggle."

"You look perfect."

"Do I get to keep this drawing?"

He stood up and moved off the tree. "No. I have to turn in a bunch of sketches for an independent study." He returned to

his place by the bank, and when I turned my head a little to watch him, he smiled and shook his head. "Quit moving."

I stared straight up. "There's nothing to look at up there."

"It's beautiful up there. What are you talking about?"

"There's a bird sitting right over my face. An accident waiting to happen."

"A great sketch waiting to happen."

"If you think I would sit still for that," I said, feeling a flake of bark making a wrinkle in the back of my neck, "you have already greatly misjudged my character."

"No."

"Yes."

"No, I mean, no," he said, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him moving back toward me. "I mean, let's move you again."

I groaned.

He stopped at the foot of the tree and sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "Is it really uncomfortable?"

"Just the bark."

"Well, what I'm thinking. . . . Can I put you in a *really* uncomfortable position, for just a little bit, if I swear to hurry? I'll make just a rough sketch and do the rest from memory."

I started to unwrap my ankles from the small branch at the base of the tree.

"No, leave those there," he said. "This is kind of why I put them there to start with." He reached down and locked them back together.

"I'm scared," I said.

"Can you hang?"

I shut my eyes. "I didn't even learn to ride a bike until I was nine."

"This has nothing to do with riding a bike."

"I can't swing with my head higher than the bar, I can't do a handstand, I can't lean over the railing upstairs at church without passing out, I can't dive."

He rolled his eyes. "Can you hang?"

"Ohhhhhhhhh." I moaned in defeat and thrust my hands up to him. "Hurry up, then."

He grinned. "That's my girl." He balanced himself over me and lifted me up by the hands. Then he reached down, taking me under the arms as if he were picking up a small child, and shifted the weight of my body so that my rear end was no longer supported by the tree. Squatting with a sure sense of balance that I did not share, he put one hand behind my back and eased my body off toward the water. "Let your arms hang," he said. "Can your legs hold you up? Do you need more leverage?"

"I need more brains," I said. I let my arms fall and my fingers brush the water. My hair spilled over my head and the ends embraced the pool, floating back and forth in the

disturbance I was creating on the surface. "I need different friends."

"Can you support yourself if I let go?"

"I think so," I said. I was actually hanging more from my knees than my ankles; my body was arched over the tree so that I was only unsupported from the waist up--or down, given the direction my body was now pointing. The branch between my ankles was a security measure. My voice thickened as everything in my body began relocating towards my head. "What the hell kind of a picture is this going to make?"

He laughed. "We'll see," he said, and he eased one hand off my back and the other out from my armpit. My weight shifted a little but I didn't feel as if I were going to fall.

"Hurry up," I said. "Get over there and draw this."

My shirt was slipping towards my breasts. As my weight pulled my body downward my stomach stretched tight and away from the button of my shorts. Part of me wanted to reach up and pull my clothes back together and part of me did not; in any case it would have been a wasted effort and so I left it the way it was. The breeze slipped in and moved around.

Hershey was fast at work again, and I heard the repetitive chafe of pencil against paper, loud and weird in my blood-filled ears. My upper lip was growing fatter by the second and reaching for my nose. "I could not feel much uglier than I do right now," I said. "There's so much blood in my head I can't think straight."

"You look fabulous," came his voice upside down to my ears. I could only see water and dirt; to attempt to look at anything closely made my eyeballs twinge.

"Oddly," I said, feeling heavier and heavier, "I'm starting to get comfortable." My arms drifted out from my body and back in again with the movement of the water.

"You look beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," came his voice, soft and feathery as a dream, scarcely louder than the murmur of the water below me that had tender hold of my hair, the water below me that was both still and deep.

Those words cut through the blood in my ears and dove straight for my brain, and then swam upstream to my heart. I was slung over the water, arched out to meet the water like a bridge and catching it with my hands; there was no fire but the fire of my hair, the lush cataract of my hair tumbling to the water to drink. The gesture of desperation was changed to a gesture of giving, I was arched helplessly and was letting him touch me however he pleased, and for the first time I imagined killing myself and was repulsed.

I heard his voice. "Gabriel."

My thick and blood-filled tongue did not want to make words. "Uhhhhhh," I said.

"You can get up now."

I swung my head around slowly, back and forth. I forced my tongue off the roof of my mouth. "Like hell I can. Get over here and help me."

He was on his way, thrashing through the weeds, and I asked him, "Aren't you still working? Isn't there anything else you need to see?" I felt air up under my breasts and I realized how far my shirt had fallen.

"Nope. I've got it covered." I felt him leaning over me. "Give me your arms."

"They're too heavy," I said, but I lifted them to him and he took my wrists. As he pulled me up to a sitting position I let my head follow slowly, imagining the strands of my hair releasing the water only very reluctantly and trailing droplets as they left.

"Your hair got a little wet," he said. "I hope you don't care."

Blood drained out of my head and resumed its normal slate of visits to my extremities, all now sapped dry and white as ghosts. I blinked my eyes. "Can I see the sketch?"

He did not let go of my hands, but waited for me to right my feet so that he could pull me up to stand. "You can see it, but there's not much of it. I told you I'd finish it by memory." He led me down off the tree and into the weeds and picked up the sketchpad.

I took it from him and looked. The tree as he had drawn it was straighter across the water. The girl flung across it--for I could see with disappointment that she was not Gabriel Sullivan; her face was not swollen with blood and her knees were delicate unfinished points instead of sharp knobs--had only one arm

trailing into the pool. She was very elfin and pointy in an unnaturally lithe sort of way. I saw with tenderness that where the knots were in my hair, he had sketched little clumps of blossoms in hers.

"She's got no face," I said, but I smiled in spite of myself.

"I can do the face later. I will certainly remember the face."

As we were walking back toward the moped, and the noon sun was getting uncomfortable as the hot air clogged in our nostrils, he said, "I wanted to ask you to bring your book."

"My book?"

"Of lists."

I walked ahead of him so that I could let my eyes fall where I liked. I wiped my forehead with my arm.

"I saw it on the floor in your room," he said. "Do you leave it out like that all the time?"

I twisted my hair up off my neck. "I was writing in it," I said. "It's no big secret."

"Could I see it again?"

"Why?" I let him catch up to me.

He considered the question and his feet scrunched in the dry grass, and then he was ahead of me, walking away. "I don't know why."

We rode the moped back to the house with me squatting unceremoniously in front like a totem, and when he let me off in

the driveway I saw that my mother and Michael had returned from Middlefield. I asked him if he wanted to come in for lunch.

"I told Wayne I'd help him with the garden today, actually," he said, "but thanks for asking."

"Sure."

"By the way," he said, "I was kind of wondering if you'd like to help me with something."

"I don't hoe."

"No," he said. "I was thinking about running a little practice for the Tee-Ball kids that are having a hard time, like that Luther that can't keep his helmet on."

"Oh."

"I thought maybe you would help me field balls, or something."

I scratched my head. "I'm not very coordinated."

"Neither are they."

"I would be setting a bad example."

He revved his small sputtering engine with his right hand and twisted the front wheel back and forth. "Well, okay, you don't have to."

I moved my scratching hand from my head to my elbow to my stomach before I realized nothing was itching. "I'll help," I sniffed.

I didn't watch him motor off down the driveway; I went straight indoors to the smiling gaze of my mother. My brother

was running around in his new lime green swimming trunks, the tags dangling from the waistband.

"Company?" my mama asked sweetly.

My brother groaned. "Stay away from the coach," he said. "He's too cool for you."

I looked at his loud green bottom. "Coolness being so obviously important to you."

He looked down at himself, stung. "These are cool," he said softly.

I went upstairs and picked up my book off the floor. I stretched out over the bed and opened it, taking the section marked "Rosemary" in my hand to feel the weight of it, to measure the thickness. I turned to some of the empty pages in the back and wrote, "Leaden arms touching the water." Then, on the next line, "Halo of hair touching the water." Then, finally, "You look beautiful, beautiful, beautiful."

I had forgotten about meeting with Father Smiley until about six o'clock, when my mother called to me from the laundry room to say that she and Daddy were going to the Parish Council meeting, and did I want her to fix me and Michael a couple of burgers before they left? I said no, that I was planning to go myself, and I couldn't see her face because she was in the laundry room

but she didn't answer me. Michael hollered, yes, fix him a burger, and why was I going to a stupid meeting to listen to a priest who made us touch each other in church?

At the meeting itself I did not feel so out of place. A surprisingly large portion of the parish had packed itself into the basement classroom of the old school building, into the whittled-upon desks of absent schoolchildren. There was a heavy smell of disuse in the rooms that would not have been unusual for the end of summer, but the implied permanence of the smell lent it a dankness that repelled the nostrils. Most of the parishioners in the room were the heads of households, but in the crowd were a few of the friends I had gone to school with, and a few present who were painfully slow getting down the stairs, and a few in diapers. Not one of the nuns was there.

My parents and I sat on a splitting green brocade loveseat that used to be in the school library; foam bulged from the armrests and the fabric strained unsuccessfully to hold it in. It was a tight squeeze for my parents and me to fit on the seat, but we endured it because we were close to the front of the room. My father had been on Parish Council the year before, and that meant he was ineligible for election now but would be able to run again the next year; he attended all the meetings without fail.

Percy and Wyvonne Davis fidgeted around near the blackboards where the teacher's desk was set up to accommodate the president of Parish Council. Percy, however, was never able to park himself in the seat, as my father would point out, until the

opening prayer was spoken, and when he did sit down one leg would creep up the other as if he wanted to sit on it but kept having to remind himself that he was in a roomful of adults. Wyvonne was working the crowd like a proper First Lady, her eyes widening in proportion to her smile and her teeth coming at you first. John and Becky Whittington and their six-year-old daughter shared a desk with two chairs off to the side; John bounced the little girl on his knee although she was too big.

Heads turned to look when Father Smiley came in the door, but the rumble of chatter remained even; the room did not filter into the divisions that manifested themselves at Mass, probably because it was too crowded and it would have been too much trouble to try to sit with your own. The priest eased to the front of the room, squeezing hands with vigor all while he moved, his laugh producing too much bright sound that ricocheted off the basement ceiling and walls and did not seem to be in any way absorbed by the solid mass of people in the classroom. When he reached Percy Davis he shook his hand and whispered something into Percy's ear. Percy blinked rapidly two or three times and then nodded broadly at the teacher's desk.

Father Smiley moved behind the desk and stood facing the room, arms crossed in front of his pants and a faint smile fixed to his lips, and as the congregation one by one realized he was there a hush sprinkled over the room and the twenty elected council members took their places at the desks set up for them along the center aisle. As Father Smiley watched this happen the

corners of his mouth stretched farther apart but I could detect no other change in his face. Percy and Wyvonne took chairs to the right of the desk. The small noises of dying conversation shrunk into a shriveled, deferential quiet as we waited for Father Smiley to speak.

He allowed the silence to grow heavy and squelch the clearing of throats before he opened his mouth, standing with one hand gripping the other wrist in front of his fly and still offering the slightest of smiles. His gray hair was feathered smooth and stiff against his head but for one hair which stood up and wagged violently in the air current from the vent under which he stood. "Welcome," he boomed. "We should begin with the Lord's Prayer."

We instantly stood at the cue, a cumbersome rising that caused chairs to scrape and arms to bump, bowing our heads as he began, "Our Father . . ." and there we joined in with him. He did not request that we take our neighbors' hands. When we reached the "Amen" we looked up to see that he was already staring back at us, and we took our seats.

"First of all," he said, "I'd like to thank Percy Davis for giving up his seat." There was polite chuckling. "As your priest I feel I should be at the center of the Parish Council meeting, where you can see me. Percy has agreed to let me direct this meeting so I can get to know you better."

Percy gave a calm nod, and Wyvonne's shiny face was lit by a frozen fuchsia smile.

"The first order of business, of course," said Father, "will be to have the secretary read the minutes from the last meeting. Would the secretary please stand?"

Dale Ehemann rose from her seat and cleared her throat. She was a small older woman with a cap of very smooth silver curls. "May second--President Percy Davis led us all in prayer. April 15 minutes were read. The floor was opened to old business. John Whittington read a list he compiled of possible architects to consult for estimates of the renovation of St. Mary's. Bernie Krauss took the floor to remind the council that the issue of renovation had not yet come to a vote." Dale's little scratchy voice rattled on through new business and to the end of the minutes, which concluded with a Hail Mary, and she sat down.

"Thank you, Dale," said Father. He paced the floor behind the desk as if preparing to deliver a homily. "I'd like to propose that we dispense with parliamentary procedure for this meeting and be a little less formal.

"First off," he said, "just a little business I've already taken care of. I've taken a look at the hymnals you use here at St. Mary's, and, frankly, they're outdated. I've had new ones ordered and I need some volunteers to get the old ones boxed up." He paused and raised his eyebrows at the group, but no one raised a hand; most everyone was looking sideways at Lilah Murphy, who was the champion of the old and familiar melodies we heard every Sunday, and who was sitting near the front of the room. She was squinting, though, and straining her head forward, and didn't

appear to be able to hear what Father was saying. Her lips twitched around her dentures.

When no one responded to Father Smiley, he continued: "We can take care of that later. But the new books I've had sent are more contemporary. I'd like to see if we can integrate some guitar and maybe some other instruments into our worship experience."

The sentences fell like an axe. There was suddenly a lot of sniffing and incredulous elbow-poking in the room. My mother gave a weensy groan which I less heard than felt because she was sitting almost on top of me. Percy Davis and Wyvonne had their heads cocked parallel to each other in a show of earnest listening, and they began to nod slowly; Lilah's face was atwitch from her eyes to her lips and it was difficult to determine if she'd understood and was upset or was simply losing suction between her gums and her teeth.

"If any of you plays an instrument and is interested in forming a group for Sunday Mass, just let me know or contact Elaine Brink." Everyone seemed to be holding his breath. The absence of noise was like a vacuum. Father's hands were clasped behind his back as he paced the floor.

"The next topic I'd like to discuss," he said, which I thought was an interesting choice of words since he was the only one talking, "is the proposed renovation of the church building."

Mama elbowed Daddy and I felt it.

"St. Mary's is a beautiful monument to this community's love for God," said Father Smiley, striving to make eye contact with each person in the room, "and it is a valuable piece of history. What we need to consider"--and he paused here to broaden his smile--"is that it is also perhaps a monument to old ways of thinking.

"A little streamlining may be in order here," he said, and John Whittington gave the faintest of nods as he shifted his little girl to the other knee, "to carry this church and this community of believers into a century where others have already arrived."

I thought there was more elbowing going on in my family, but maybe we were just sitting too close together. I could not take my eyes off the figure at the front of the room; I was afraid to.

"A personal friend of mine, an architect, has quoted us a figure that our ledgers can bear," he said. "I'll be happy to bring his proposal to the next meeting."

I felt a sudden shift in my sitting position and I realized as I fell into my mother that my father was standing. "Father Smiley," he said, and I felt a universe of eyes darting in our direction, "I don't mean to interrupt you, but as this is an informal meeting--"

"Yes, go ahead," Father Smiley interrupted.

"I'd like to point out that renovation is an undertaking that must be approved by a vote of the council," Daddy said. "A substantial number of parishioners feel that our church is a

priceless part of our past and we don't want to see it tampered with."

"Of course, of course," replied Father Smiley, shutting his eyes as he nodded briskly. "This will be dealt with officially, as any other important issue before the council. But I urge you not to think of doing necessary work on the church building as tampering."

"The issue for us has been defining what is necessary and what isn't," said my father, and he sat down.

"Is there anyone else who would like to speak?" Father Smiley's eyes bore down upon the room.

His gaze was like a drill bit in the forehead. Only one person stood, pudgy Bob Finneran of the St. Ignatius Prayer League.

"Father," said Bob, "I . . . don't want to presume to speak for all the organizations of this parish, but those of us in St. Ignatius feel that now that the church is seeing some . . . cash flow . . . due to the closing of the school, it might be best applied to the charitable work we do."

Father Smiley folded his arms and ran his brown finger along his chin. "A generous, Christian, commendable attitude to have," he said.

Percy Davis stepped forward a bit, careful to let Father see he was doing it before he spoke so that he would have the floor. He cleared his throat. "A renovation project would not in any way affect the funds already earmarked for ministry to the poor."

John Whittington spoke for the first time, in the firm deep voice of a former president. "That has never been disputed, Father."

"Of course not," replied Father. "The percentage of the Sunday collection that supports the prayer leagues and the Altar Society and what-have-you will not be touched."

Bob Finneran did not sit down; his shiny head merely turned bright pink. "It's just that . . . that the collections have never been ample enough to finance the kind of work we'd like to do."

"This project is not forever," said Percy Davis. "When it's finished, we can gear the budget toward the Lord's work."

Father Smiley was quick to jump in. "I'd urge you not to separate the improvement of our worship space from charity in your minds. They are both the Lord's work and should be given the right consideration at the right time."

Bob deepened to crimson. "It's just that . . . why change what so many people hold dear to their hearts with money that could feed children that are starving in Pickensville?" He spoke evenly and eloquently but his head seemed ready to shoot off his body.

Father sighed deeply but not audibly; his shoulders became broad and straight and the energy from them then filtered out his nose. He began to try to pace the center aisle, no easy task with all the crowded feet splayed awkwardly from the shared desks. He stepped among the feet determinedly and the people who

could move theirs did so; the rest strained at the knees and ankles to no avail and looked sheepish as he passed.

"St. Mary's," came his big voice, "is a church of yesterday. We are a people of today."

There were not many nods in the room, but there were tolerant gazes and there were hostile gazes.

"I only ask you to think about it," he said almost softly. "I don't propose that we destroy what you love, only that we do what we can to ensure that our hearts and our minds are in the right places when we sit in those pews at Sunday Mass."

I was not sure if he was implying that all the baroque hoopla curling around the arches in St. Mary's was distracting us from praying, but I knew that for me the plaintive gazes I found myself faced with every Sunday were my last tether hold to religion. I tried to imagine what Father Smiley meant by streamlined. I figured it would take paint.

"The question of the church building is not pressing tonight," he continued, "but there is an important issue that I would like to clear up before we move on, and that is my taking up residence in the convent."

Drooping heads snapped erect.

"I don't think it is appropriate to refer to that house as the 'convent' in the first place," he said. "It is the house where the nuns have resided up to now; it is not and has never been a cloister. I will be living there now and so you may refer to it as the rectory, if you wish.

"The old priests' residence is unfit for a pastor to live in and operate from. The stairs to the second floor are so steep that it is incredible that no one has ever been injured climbing them. The wiring upstairs is exposed, the beams are rotted. There is no study in which I can hook up a computer and do the work I need to do to minister to this parish. There are no rooms large enough for prayer meetings. I could go on and on. The list is endless."

I knew that he was probably right. The rectory was a slim and unwelcoming building, however well-furnished and attractively draped Father Igglemarch had left it.

"As for the Sisters of Mercy, whose stay here has been a long and productive and blessed one," he said solemnly as a prayer, "it was made known to me before my arrival that St. Bernard's Abbey in Nashville had asked the sisters back home. As there is no longer a school here, their mission is finished."

The room did not breathe.

"They remain here in violation of their orders," he pronounced.

I looked at his eyes, and I knew he was lying.

After the meeting was over an hour later, having drifted from drama to the distribution of flower arrangement responsibilities for the following eight Sundays, I told my

parents that Page and I were going walking around town. My mother, looking a little pale and purple under the eyes, said she hadn't seen Page at all, had she been sitting behind us? I felt a little color creep into my neck when I told her no, she was going to meet me at the end of Cherry Street, because I felt like it was a strange thing to say, and I could tell my mother thought it was a strange thing to be doing, and I knew that as sure as the Pope was Catholic Page would call for me when my parents got home and blow my cover.

I waited in the shadows on the school playground, now a jungle gym graveyard, sitting against the seesaw crossbar until the meeting crowd dispersed to their cars, still buzzing uneasily although the final topics had been mundane enough to throw water on the fire. I saw Father Smiley come to the carport of the convent and look around for me, and then reach for his keys in his pocket. I came out of the dark timidly. As he opened the door I ran to him, wanting him to hear my footsteps so that I wouldn't have to call out his name.

He heard me. "Gabriel," he said, raising one hand in greeting and waiting for me to reach the little overhang under which his car was parked. "You look as if you don't want to be seen here, hiding in the shadows like that."

As I reached him there seemed to be nothing natural to do with my hands or feet. I couldn't lean up against his car, but I was suddenly no longer running and I didn't know how just to

stand there. "Well," I said, "what exactly would I tell my parents is the reason I'm here?"

"It's never a point of shame to seek spiritual counseling," said Father evenly.

"There's nothing I want to discuss with my parents," I said. I saw the curtains part in a window at the east end of the convent, and Sister Bernard's fat sagging face appeared there briefly and then disappeared again behind the curtain. I noticed that the nuns' car--they had only one for the three of them, a gray Crown Victoria, Sister Bernard being unable to drive it--was parked on the street since Father Smiley's was on the carport.

His brown face was smiling at me with the lips locked closed. "I understand that," he said, nodding. "I respect that. Gabriel, how much do you read your Bible?"

I folded my arms and tapped the tire of his car with my toe.

He nodded his head slowly, as if considering temporary retreat. "Elaine tells me you play the piano," he said. "Exceptionally well, in fact."

I smiled out of embarrassment, not pleasure. "No."

He wrinkled his brows. "You don't play?"

"No, I do. . . ." I felt my fingers go cold as I tried to imagine playing in front of him. "I just don't like to."

He folded his arms across his chest, and I was struck by how young they looked, how pleasantly they connected his broad hands to the rest of his body. His gray hair glinted in the dark, over

the sharp inquisitive glitter of his eyes. "I'd like to hear you play the organ," he said firmly.

"I've never played an organ," I said, but he was already fishing the ring of church keys from his pocket.

I followed him across the walk to St. Mary's, over the path set across the sisters' yard and through their irises, mostly because he was already gone ahead of me and was not looking back to see if I was behind him. Mosquitoes buzzed low in the purple air around my knees and ankles and I hurried to keep up. The one streetlamp that arched over the walk was dim and moth-covered, but I wished it completely dark because I felt like I was sneaking around, creeping into church in an unholy hour.

When the key squealed in the rusted lock, Father Smiley finally turned to acknowledge me again, his narrow smile a half-moon of piercing white under a dim full moon that came near to shining blue. He stepped back to let me through the side door ahead of him, placing one hand on the small of my back, and we stepped inside. The door sunk slowly back in behind us, but as it closed it sent a deep rolling boom through the high cavern of the nave as if it had been slammed. The moon glowed in through the blank eyes of the stained-glass saints and stopped short at the polished edges of the pews, leaving the center of church hopelessly black.

"I'll go in the sacristy and turn on the lights." Father Smiley's voice was unusually quiet but still full enough of energy to reach the walls and echo back at me. He left my side

and disappeared into the dark, and left suddenly under the enigmatic moonlit gaze of Joseph and Mary, I wanted to go with him, but I remained where I was. After a few silent moments I heard clicking, and the lights over the choir loft blazed up one by one across the ceiling, throwing black shadows under the eyes of Mary upon the altar.

I saw Father Smiley's hair emerge from the sacristy before I could focus on the rest of him. "There," he said. "Now you can read."

He led me down the aisle and to the steep winding stairs of the choir loft. My fingers felt like shafts of ice. I climbed behind him and kept a firm grip on the banister; his steps were sharp and fast and he was around the top newel and opening the organ top before I was halfway up the stairs. When he plugged it in and flipped the switch on, the surge of power was audible and the church filled with an electric hum.

"Come sit up here," he said as I reached the loft. "I'd like to hear you play."

The organ was throned upon a wooden platform that set it above the rail and the choir pews and put the organist's head within two feet of the chandelier that hung down from the ceiling into the loft. I climbed up slowly, hiked myself onto the high bench, and stared at the keys.

"What's the matter?" he asked me.

"I'm afraid of heights."

"Really?"

"Really."

He went to the rail and put both hands on it, leaning forward so that his upper body was pitched into the great space defined by the ceiling so near and the floor far below. I knew he was doing it but I couldn't look. "There's no reason to be afraid of anything," he said, voice reverberating, "in the house of the Lord." He straightened up suddenly and held his hand out to me. "Come over here."

I shook my head.

"Look up at me," he said, and I managed to fix my eyes on his broad hand. "At my eyes," he insisted. "Take my hand and come over here."

Bells were going off in my head but I had no idea what they were warning me of. I leaned forward and took hold of his fingers--lightly both because he was a stranger and because he was a man of God--and realized his body was connecting me to the railing, a flimsy old set of wooden newels that barely reached the waist. "Take your hand off the rail," I said, surprised at the sharpness of my voice. "Don't touch it. I can't stand that."

"Come down here," he repeated, his face kind but his voice firm, and he did not remove his hand from the railing. He was pulling on my fingers, pulling me down off the bench, and I came to him off balance, following my hand as he drew it to himself. He brought me down to stand next to the rail, and he kept hold of my hand.

"You don't know how sick this makes me," I said, unable to look ahead at the lights which hung down from the ceiling the length of the church and made real the empty space and the height.

"Look out there," he said, careful eyes upon my face. "Look at what you think you can't look at."

"No."

He let go of my hand, knowing I was not going anywhere because I couldn't move from my spot. He put both hands on my back, edging me toward the railing. My feet were horrified and budged with utmost reluctance, causing me to jerk forward. "Don't push," I snarled, my voice sailing out into the space I was afraid of. "Don't push me."

He pushed me with his hands on my back, gently, bending me at the waist; my hair hung over into the abyss. My hands flew to the railing and gripped it tightly. "Stop it," I said, but his hands slid down my arms to my hands and prodded them off the railing, which took some doing. My fingers clawed at the wood but he had me by the wrists and he raised my arms out like wings. He stood over me and held me out over the railing positioned for crucifixion. Only my feet touched anything solid.

"Don't close your eyes," he said.

My eyes were squeezed shut. "That's not negotiable."

"Have faith."

"Faith in what?"

"Faith. You're in the house of God."

"God's not keeping me from getting dizzy," I said. "He's not going to keep me from throwing up."

"Have faith in me," Father Smiley said. "Believe that I'm not going to drop you."

Cold seized the back of my neck. I had not considered that he might let go. "Please," I moaned softly, the pitiful cry from my throat echoing off every object in the building, "please help me away from here."

His hands tugged my wrists away from the edge; one hand went to my shoulder and pulled me back. I kept my eyes shut and let my feet inch away from the railing, slowly, backwards.

"I find it interesting," said Father Smiley, and I heard the terrestrial evenness of his breathing as he guided me back to security, "that a young woman considering suicide is afraid of falling to her death."

"There's nothing at all interesting about that," I said.

"It says to me that you really don't want to die."

"It says to me that I don't want to be splattered like roadkill in the Ehemanns' pew." I said it, but I knew that what I was afraid of was the space, not what was at the bottom.

He let his hand fall from my shoulder. "You're not close enough to fall now," he said. "Open your eyes."

I did, and I scrambled back to sit on the organ bench.

"Do you want to tell me," he asked, "why you no longer believe God loves you?"

I blinked. The question seemed to have nothing to do with me. "Did I say that? When did I say that?"

"If you believed that God loves you you wouldn't be making the kind of plans you're making."

"Oh." I scratched my chin and plunked down on low C with my thumb. The note was grand and vibrating but very soft because I was not giving it any volume with my foot as I had seen Lilah Murphy do at Mass. "Well, I'm not really thinking as hard about that as I was when I went to confession the other day."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." I played a C chord with my right hand. "Maybe I dragged you out here for nothing. I'm not really inclined to kill myself today." I slurred, abashed, on the words "kill myself."

"Why," he asked again, "do you not believe that God loves you?"

"God?" I shook my head and kept my eyes on the notes I was hitting. "I don't know."

"He loves you." Father's shining eyes were earnestly searching out my own but I did not let them find me.

"Yes," I said, gazing at the pews around me and wondering just where God was sitting to listen to this conversation, "but He loves other people too."

There was only the sound of my playing, the sound of my safe C chords that rang flatly through the dark. Father Smiley breathed and that was all.

"Play something for me," he said finally. "The books are in the bench."

"I don't like to play."

"I'm asking you to."

I was conscious of my fingers now that I knew that he was, too. Before I played another chord I looked down to make sure that I was about to hit all the right notes, and I pressed them hesitantly.

"Get up and let me get something out for you to play from," he said, and I didn't feel as if it were actually a priest speaking to me. I rose from my seat, and he lifted the bench cover and took out one of Lilah's black ring binders. Flipping through it, he chose one selection and set it in front of me.

"'Make Us True Servants,'" I said. "Four flats."

"Go ahead."

"I don't know how to use the foot pedals."

"I suspect you do."

"I've never used foot pedals."

"That's not what I said."

"I've never played on a split keyboard."

"Go ahead."

He might as well have been holding a gun to my temple. I found the first chord, E flat major, and I placed my right foot on the volume pedal and I knew that my left ought to touch the E flat pedal at the base of the organ.

"Exactly," he said.

I began the first verse. The chords were easy to read but my fingers were shaking because I knew he was watching them, and they slipped off the keys. I gave the song no volume and I followed the chords clumsily with the movement of my left foot to the proper pedals.

"Louder," he said.

I stopped. "No."

"Keep playing. You're doing beautifully."

"I can't do it. I keep separating the chords. I keep putting space in between. I can't make it smooth."

"You just have to get used to playing an organ as opposed to a piano."

What I remembered then and what I remember now is the St. Mary's School Talent Show which I entered in first grade, playing the Ave Maria on the piano, the chords I knew sweet as a dream and my fingers tiny, but the nerves coming from someplace I had not known before--had they come from my stomach, I would have had warning, but they came from outside me, perhaps from the bloodless faces I could see over the music stand--and sucking the heat from my fingers till they were blue and dancing uncontrollably, wobbling and sweating, and when the last chord came I knew that the people must have been sorry, sorry for a tiny child who had attempted something larger than herself. But at home I was playing Mozart and this Schubert big-note stuff was only shit and nothing more. Oh, Gabriel, that was beautiful, amazing for such a little girl.

"It's all separated," I told him. "I can't do it right."

He took hold of my hands and dropped them back on the keyboard, and I let them smash all the keys down. The noise was awful.

"I can't," I said. My throat was aching. "Please don't make me."

"Gabriel," he said, "close your eyes and play this verse again. I know you can do it with your eyes closed." I did not release the keys on my own, and he removed my hands from the keyboard and held them just above the keys. "Please cooperate," he said.

I tried for the first chord again, and I shut my eyes. I could remember all the chords from the page, and my feet knew what to do without my having to think about it, and I played the whole verse for him. But I could hear a separation still, a lack of cohesion between some of the notes, a tiny silence where there should have been noise, and I put my face in my hands, my elbows crashing onto the lower keyboard. "Four flats," I said. "Don't make me do it again."

I didn't raise my head at all, but I sensed the tiniest movement in my hair, I thought I almost felt his fingers touching my hair. "I want you to be our organist," he said. "I want you to take Lilah's place."

My face came out of my hands and my elbows came off the keys. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to give me an answer tonight. I'll let you think about it a little."

"Is it because you don't think Lilah will play from your new book? Because she likes to play from the old Latin hymnal?"

He stood behind me, breathing.

"Or because she's about three beats behind you coming into church?" I asked. "Or because she's deaf as a doorpost?"

A soft laugh came from his lips, and he reached over my shoulder to turn the organ switch off. "It's getting late."

"Well, just so you know," I said, sliding off the bench, "I like the old stuff too. I don't think you should have bought new books without telling anybody."

He had no response to this, but as we descended the stairs from the loft he told me that I needed to meet with him again. He was not satisfied with my attitude toward despair or with his attempt to discover why I had some. I thought about telling him that it had seemed less like despair to me and more like a craving for something sweet, a taste of ice cream in the dead of summer, but we would have been there for another hour and by that time I wanted to go home.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The peach trees groaned. They held out their arms in the dripping afternoon heat of July, crying along the roadside as the long, slow line of cars from the factory swallowed the highway in pieces like a snake. The grunting engines jammed the one lane south, cigarette smoke trailing from the open windows and past the loan payment books lying upon the dashboards with their covers ripped off and their yellowed edges curled up. The droves of red eyes came like a swarm of bees, glutting the turn lanes once they reached town and descending upon the bank and the post office like a plague. The sun would be past the highest point of its arc, swinging down and sizzling up the road, and the peaches hung smooth and bulbous from the arms of the trees in the dazzling light, their heavy fragrance in the air.

The surfaces of the peaches were plump and undisturbed, but the cars were rust-eaten and dented. The trees sagged and cried because no frost had nipped their buds in April and they could not hold all the fruit that had grown from their branches. They stood with elbows bending outrageously and painfully as the cars gradually disappeared, leaving a sparkling trail of winking cigarette butts upon the road.

In the park where a hundred scrawny youngsters gathered to the baseball field--even the fat ones were scrawny--the peach trees in the tiny orchards in the hills buckled to the ground with the weight. The crowds in the bleachers could see them past

right field and past left field, sagging, crushed, fodder for the birds, reminders of something that no one could name.

The revival tents were staked in the heart of the valley, in the mud pit, near a little cluster of crying peach trees, and the good folk who were running the show stopped to fill baskets for the faithful with lush fruit. The branches once lightened did not bounce back into place but hung there with the ghostly weight of the peaches picked, and the preacher nodded at this with a wise eye. He plucked one for himself and cut away the fuzz with his pocketknife, sinking his teeth into the fattest curve and turning his head away so that no one would see the juice running down his chin.

Chapter Thirty

She could have this baby. She was no longer afraid of this baby. She could let her hair down, wear her riding breeches until they split off her body, squeeze a peach with the pain so that the juice ran down her arm and the flesh fell to the floor in limp shards, dew her delicate face with a sweet frost of sweat, and scream ferally until her family ran from the house as the windows shattered one by one. The baby would come out like the devil, a vile red squirming snake, but she would take its head with her two hands and pull it from her body breathing prayers to the Mother of God. She would wash it off while the strings of birth still hung from her, and she would take her barren pen and write on its forehead in ink, "Mine."

She should have done that a long time ago. There were children of hers that she liked but she had never marked them.

Chapter Thirty-One

I continued to keep track of how many days remained until the Fourth of July, but when I tried to think about driving over the bridge into Boone Creek, the picture in my mind wasn't very clear. So I kept counting days. But I wondered how I was going to manage the details--was I going to drive my parents' car? I hadn't thought of it before. I didn't want to wreck their car. Now that the numbers were getting smaller and the picture was getting dimmer I was becoming uncomfortable. I was inclined to lie in my bed in the morning and think of how I looked stretched over the water, hanging from a tree, instead of how I looked framed in a car window. I didn't feel much like writing in my book. The whole thing made me angry at myself.

Twenty-nine days were left at the next Pirates' game, which was against the Jays to make up for the one Peanut Springer had called off, and Beth called to tell Mama that she was bringing Granny. I had seen Michael picking at the scabs on his arm all morning, because they weren't healing; in fact they were getting darker and oozier because he wouldn't leave them alone. He saw me watching him and turned away; he didn't pick or scratch when Mama was anywhere around.

Beth and Granny were already there when Mama and I got to the park, and so was Booley Carson. He was sitting a couple of levels above them, looking around, up at the trees, out at the field, at Beth and Granny, around.

"Mama," I said, "can I go home?"

"Maybe Hershey will come talk to you and Booley will go away," Mama said. "Maybe he's here for some other reason."

"Maybe he'd go out with Beth," I said.

Page and Rosemary both wandered in on their own a few minutes later; they seemed to understand that I was no longer going to volunteer information about my brother's ballgames, for whatever reason. But they showed up anyway. Page had called a few times during the week and asked innocently about how my brother was doing, and wanted to know if we might take him to practice some night and then go to Middlefield to the movies. I had been busy; she had understood. I had not called Rosemary after I had met with Father Smiley, which left me with no one to tell about it. I had been uncomfortable with it at first, riding around in her car with her blowing off the miserably humid weeknights and looking out for Buddy in the same old lame way, but then it wore off and I didn't feel like telling anybody anything. I was contained in myself and wondering what Hershey would think about the whole thing. I was having trouble dreaming myself to sleep.

It was the first night of revival down in the tractor pull pit. The one dirt road down into the arena was covered with parked cars thinly coated with its dust. The preaching hadn't begun yet; the people were milling around in the giant flat tractor pit and trickling into the main tent one by one. The air was laced with the scent of peaches because the Beautification

Committee had once filled the park with the trees, and this year they were overproducing. They looked heavy and sodden.

"Once they start hollering," Granny said to Beth, pinching her arm and gazing down into the tractor pit, "take me home."

We sat like stacked dominoes waiting to be toppled over. Booley would have fallen between Beth and Granny, who would have pushed over Mama between them on the level below, and she would have mowed a line right through me and Rosemary. Page was off to the side and would have stayed upright.

"I've done decided," Page whispered to me, "to say something to Hershey. He keeps looking over here."

He was over by the dugout, shading his eyes from the sun, and it was impossible to tell what he was looking at.

My mama leaned down to me and whispered to me, "He's looking over here. Look back."

Granny squeezed Beth's arm and said out loud, "Tell Gabriel that Carson boy is here somewhere. I saw him." Mama shushed her sharply.

Rosemary had pictures that she'd had developed from the graduation ceremony, two packs of three-by-fives with glossy finish. Once she produced them from her purse every mother in the stands wanted them passed one by one as we went through them, including Lo-rene, who could barely hold them between her fingernails. Page leaned in and giggled over the shots and complimented them and acted as if she might appear in one of them.

After about ten or so frames of Rosemary spraying her hair and pinning her cap and posing with her father and with her mother--since there was only the three of them they could not be all together in a shot--there were the photos her father had taken at the high school of us before the ceremony. I remembered posing with her in front of the door of the library and so I looked for that picture among the others.

Rosemary got to it first. "Oh, you'll love this one," she said. "I'm going to let you have the double because it's so good."

She held it up, and over my shoulder my mother said, "Oh, Gabriel, that's so good of you. I wish we'd gotten some of all you girls together." Rosemary smiled and began twirling a strand of my hair in her fingers.

Page shrugged. "My mama wanted to take some, but. . . ."

My eyes took in the whole picture in a second--it was just the two of us, from the chest up, Rosemary's tasseled head tilted toward mine, which was turned full front to the camera--and my fingers wanted to take the picture from her and tilt it all around and make the sunlight pour over it differently and fill in all the shadows. "Next, please," I said.

Picture day was the same in second grade as in ninth grade: the packets lay face down and unopened on the teacher's desk so that you could dream about your face for hours on end. How might it be? Might it be that sweet smile where your lips clung to each other and did not part? No, you remembered having laughed

when the man said bellybuttons. So it might be like that beam of sunshine you sometimes gave yourself in that space between having dried off after a shower and starting to pull on your underwear, where your hair fell over your eyes and you knew you could be in a magazine if only the magazine knew where to look for you.

It never was. In second grade I ran home with the pictures and then stood in the bathroom and clawed my face until it bled. In ninth grade I waited in earth science class to receive my packet of proofs while Rosemary stood in the doorway, unaware that they had even come back from the studio. She was kissing her boyfriend, was it Chuck or Chris or Andy back then, there in the doorway because the teacher was in the lounge smoking a quick cigarette before the Pledge of Allegiance and Chuck or Chris or Andy's homeroom was next door. I saw lips on the forehead, I saw lips around the earlobes, and then I saw a tongue. Then I heard a bell and the mouths parted, Rosemary flying back to her seat, the teacher sputtering in on a cloud of smoke, and the pictures were distributed before I had a chance to prepare myself. I hoped, I hoped, I hoped, and I saw Rosemary's slender fingers slide under the flap of her envelope. Oh, God, I look like such a nerd, I heard her say. I pulled the staple out of mine and peeked inside with one trained eyeball, never allowing the full blast of purple classroom light inside the envelope, and then it was over. There was no need to claw my face to shreds anymore but I took the staple out of the paper and drove it into my finger.

Granny, who had been sitting wrapped up tight in a sweater even though it was hot enough to melt hairspray, was all right until the game started. But once Jerry Dog and his crew started whipping up their boys into the customary frenzy, and Daddy and Wayne drew the Pirates into a protective huddle, she started rocking back and forth on her seat.

"Is Michael good?" she asked in her tremolo voice.

"Of course he's good," Beth replied, and added in a whisper, "He's the best on the team."

"Well, that's important," Granny said.

And the game was underway. Neither Michael nor Jerry Dog's son Abram was allowed to pitch since they had both pitched earlier in the week--a local Little League rule forbade two teams to use the same two pitchers every time they faced each other anyway--and both sets of bats responded to the weaker pitchers with a bang. The Pirates opened the first inning by filling the bases and scoring three runs, two off a double from Michael, who was batting cleanup. The Jays' defense, however, running its martial squatting drills from the field under the command of Jerry Dog, hassled each batter thoroughly and well, played cleanly, and managed three outs before more damage was done. The bottom of the inning was a mirror of the top. The Jays got all over the pitching of Tanner McDonald, who threw nice polite balls to a slightly tricky corner of the plate, and sent them flying all over the field. But Tanner managed to trick enough of them to get his men off the field after three runs.

Granny grew especially agitated during Michael's at-bat, because Jerry Dog was growling ferociously at his boys to play at the top of their game. I felt her rocking behind me. When Michael doubled to the right corner and the mothers rose to their feet, she clapped her hands for him but seemed to shrink into herself to get away from the noise. Beth kept a grip on her arm.

The next few innings continued in the same way; the offense for both teams was bat-happy but the defense was sharp enough to keep the score under control. By the end of the third, when the tally was 7-6 in favor of the Jays, the fathers who worked firsts at Futures began to arrive from Middlefield and crowd the bottom row, rounding out the timbre of bleacher noise. It was also at this time that cheering came from the tractor pull pit; the revival had begun. The cars for which there was no longer room in the arena began to line up in the ballpark lot; mostly from other towns, the cars' occupants streamed past the ballfield and down into the pit.

I decided to go to the concessions stand to get a Coke. I thought I heard feet in boots follow me off the bleachers but I wasn't sure. By the time I got to the concessions window, I was sure.

There was nowhere to go; he was coming right for me. I couldn't even keep my eyes off him.

"Hey, Gabriel." Booley used his body to keep me from walking past, a movement that was as graceful as his two-step.

"Hi." I saw over his shoulder where my entire party of friends and relatives was watching.

"I want to talk to you," he said. His voice was shaking. He was sweating, I could tell, into his white T-shirt.

"Now?"

"Might as well. I don't care if people hear."

I saw the young mother scooping ice behind the concessions stand screen stop, her scoop hand poised in the air above the bin, and two kids putting ketchup on their fries turned around to look. I frowned and grabbed his elbow.

"Come around the back of the building."

I took him into the shadow of the oak tree around back, two fingers holding his elbow up and pulling him along by it. It was a nice elbow, with sinew.

"You don't give me a chance," he said, straightening his arm but being careful not to shake off my fingers. I let go anyway. "You're done mad."

"I'm not mad."

"Please just go out with me once," he said. "I thought I could wait but I keep thinking about you going off to school and I cain't stand it."

"Don't you ever use the telephone?" I asked, still able to see my retinue in the stands trying to watch without craning their necks.

"On the telephone you can hang up."

"Oh, believe me," I said. "I can hang up right here."

He ground the toe of his boot against the tree trunk and blushed. "You're not a mean person, but you're always mean to me. I don't get it."

I felt as if I were speaking to a child. "I am so a mean person. In my bones, I'm mean."

He looked at me then, suddenly, cockeyed. "Stop it."

I felt sweat roll down the back of my neck, under my hair, and I wondered if it would ever, ever rain again. I looked at everything but Booley's face.

"Just give me one chance," he said. "You won't be sorry you did it."

"Funny," I said, "I'm feeling pretty sorry right now."

"I'm begging you," he said, his voice embarrassed and trembling and quiet as death. So he did care who heard after all. "Just once. I'm a man"--it sounded ridiculous coming out of his mouth--"and I don't want to have to beg you but I will. I am."

"What do you want?" I asked, feeling blood creep into my neck and slink toward my chin. "The movies? Fast food?"

"I want to take you somewhere nice and treat you like you deserve to be treated."

I kept looking all over the ballfield and he said, "What are you looking at? Look at me."

"I don't want to go, Booley," I mumbled, staring at the toes of his boots.

"What did you say? I cain't understand you." But it was clear he had; there were shameful tears coming up in his eyes.

I began to feel painfully sorry for him and mad at him at the same time, and I couldn't bring myself either to repeat what I'd said or to take it back, so we just stood there in the thick heat for a moment that was longer than my entire life had been up to that point. He couldn't bring himself to repeat his question either. He stood awkwardly over me, pretending to be still waiting for my response, his fingers in his belt loops and the tiniest agonizing swallowing sound coming from his throat.

I knew the both of us would never be able to move until I said it. "Just call me and we'll work something out."

He stood still, truly unsure of what he had heard this time. "You said what?"

"I said call me."

"To . . . to go somewhere with me? Out?"

I rolled my eyes and stuck my tongue down between my bottom teeth and lip. I wouldn't look at him.

He knew he had won with his tears, and so it was a sour victory. We both stood in the shade of the tree, two glum posts, until he finally said, "Okay. I'll call." He remained only a second longer, and asked, "Do you want me to go home now and not bother you anymore?"

"Don't ask me that."

He was gone.

When I returned to the bleachers Granny said, "Gabriel's got her a feller."

My mama put her hand on my shoulder.

Page had gum in her mouth, and she pulled one end out and stretched it as far as it would go. "Boo-*lay*, Boo-*lee*, Boo-*lie*," she sang, flopping her tongue on the "L"s so that the gum caught between her tongue and teeth and stretched vapor-thin.

Rosemary asked, "What did he want?"

"He wants to l-l-love her," Page replied through her gum, which stretched so hard over her tongue that it broke.

"I didn't ask you," Rosemary snapped.

I swallowed. Page's gum-chewing grew muffled and inconspicuous.

"Did he ask you out?" Mama asked.

"Who, that little Carson boy?" Lo-rene leaned in from another conversation she was having with Jan Finch. "Is that who Gabriel likes?"

"Who likes Gabriel," Mama corrected.

"Gabriel's feller," Granny sighed.

"Cute," said Lo-rene, separating some glopped eyelashes with the blade of her fingernail. "He is cute on a tractor. He helps Jimmy haul hay."

Page did not venture to speak again until the end of the fifth inning, when the score was Pirates 11, Jays 9, and the front-row daddies were revved up and lined along the fence. Steady, strong singing was piping up from the tents in the pit.

"I bet Hershey's about to get all over Beau for missing on that last swing," Page said. The beginning of the sentence was tentative but was gaining momentum by the time she got to the word "swing." "Don't you know it just drives him crazy when the boys don't do like he tells. I bet he's about to get all *over* Beau."

Jan Finch heard her. "The pitch dropped out," she snapped. "No way he could've hit that thing."

Hershey didn't look like he was about to get all over anybody. He was helping Lucas Gooch fix a buckle on his shin guards.

The last inning was noisy. The fathers along the fence were rattling the metal and spitting nervously behind themselves into the gravel. "Let's put this one away right here!" they shouted to their sons, and the mothers behind them echoed shrilly with more specific suggestions: "Tyler, tie your shoe before you fall on your face!" Page was watching Hershey and giggling at his every move. "Would you look at him, thinks them boys cain't do nothing without him telling them how." Rosemary's teeth were grinding, and Granny was rocking passionately in her seat despite Beth's grip on her arm. "Watch him for me," she was saying again and again. Jerry Dog was barking at his boys in syllables so terse and loud that I couldn't understand what he was saying. I leaned forward and put my head in my hands and my fingers in my ears.

Tanner McDonald looked wee and tired on the mound as the sixth inning dawned, but since he'd made it so far into the game, Wayne and Daddy didn't want to take him out. (Tyler Barfield was the third-string pitcher, but even his own father hesitated to put him up on the mound. Usually when Tyler pitched there was a lot of discussion on the bottom row about what a good quarterback he'd make.) So Tanner lobbed balls in to Lucas to warm up, trying not to sag, trying to look earnestly ready to pitch his way out of the inning. But the first three batters clobbered his gentle little pitches, bringing the Jays within one run of a tie, and Wayne and Daddy headed for the mound.

"Good wood, boys!" Jerry Dog's face was a high boiling red, his feet agitated.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, take Tanner out of there," Mama said. "He's exhausted."

But Daddy was demonstrating proper follow-through to Tanner, exhorting him not to give in but to clench his teeth and strain for the correct form. Wayne nodded and spat. My mother grunted under her breath.

When the game resumed, Tanner clenched his teeth and strained, and although his elbow looked good, his pitch was like a butterfly fluttering sweetly toward the plate. Jerry Dog's next batter, big Dakota Mooney, whacked the wadding out of the ball and sent two runners home.

The next batters up, however, were as small and as tired as Tanner, which made aiming for butterflies a tricky process. Two

strikeouts and a lazy drip to third base brought the top of the last inning to a close with the Jays up by a run.

"Are we going to lose?" Granny asked. "Will Michael get to bat?"

"We won't lose." Beth patted her hand. To the field she screeched, "Show 'em what you're made of!"

"In my ear," I said to her. "Right in my ear."

Singing swelled from the tents. Just then the baby in rubber pants crawled by in the gravel, weaving in and out of the bleachers with dust all around its mouth. I hadn't noticed its parents anywhere. The baby was almost spit upon by a Pirate father who was careless over his shoulder, but then it disappeared around the bleachers.

Our boys were not made of much by the bottom of the sixth. They were dirty and streaked. Michael led off, but Jerry Dog instructed his pitcher to walk him, which caused rumblings from our side of the field and from the lineup of paternal heads visible to their sons through the fence links.

"Reach over there and swat it," one of them hollered at Michael, who waited and rolled his eyes while the pitcher tossed the ball to the outside.

But before the Jays' pitcher, a tubby boy who was sometimes the centerfielder, could get set up on the mound for the second pitch, Michael hopped around to the other side of the plate and dug in to take the pitch as a lefty. This stirred up a hearty

cheer from the Pirate daddies. My own father just rolled his eyes.

Rosemary giggled. "Can he *do* that?"

"He practices it a lot," I said.

"Now hold it!" Jerry Dog hollered, waving his arms in a sloppy "T" for time out and charging up the baseline toward the umpire. "He cain't do that in the middle of the count."

My father held out his arms and shook his head. "What do you care? You were going to walk him anyway."

"He cain't do that in the middle of the count," Jerry Dog reiterated, his ears like glowing embers. "Can he, ump?"

The umpire, another short and portly man whose head was sinking in soft folds toward his chest, began to take off his mask.

"Are you telling me, Wilson," called Wayne, spitting, "that you cain't get your boy to throw a bad one to the *other* side of the plate?" Everybody laughed except the pitcher's mother, who sat stiffly on the Jays' side and looked to Jerry Dog to defend her son.

The umpire wiped sweat off several levels of his neck. "Look. If you're gonna walk him, who cares what side of the plate he's on?"

Jerry Dog chewed gum quietly as the veins in his face began to boil. "They cain't do that in the major leagues," he said, smiling softly at the umpire.

"This ain't the major leagues." The umpire pulled down his mask, and the Pirates cheered furiously.

Jerry Dog turned then, looking at his chubby pitcher, and gave a sign across the brim of his hat. He stormed back to first.

Michael tapped his bat on home plate as the umpire squatted back into the dirt behind the catcher. He raised it behind him as easily as if he were batting from the other direction. I had tried that myself at home on several occasions when Michael was practicing, with results that were silly at best and dangerous otherwise. When I tried to swing with my left hand over my right I felt like I was all screwed together wrong, like I was missing a finger or an arm or something, or, as I sliced the bat down in an arc from my left shoulder to the ground (I couldn't go straight around), like I was wielding a hoe.

The Jays' little gumball of flesh on the mound nodded at Jerry Dog and let fly his offering to the plate.

Michael grinned at him and tipped his bat as if he were going to swing, but then it was obvious he wouldn't have to.

The pitch beelined for his shoulder, the shoulder of his pitching arm. He didn't have time to get out of the way.

My mama was up and off the bleachers before the sound of the smack even got all the way through the diamond.

Beth let go of Granny and leaped to her feet, cupping her hands around her mouth. "You *stupid . . . cheap, idiot*!" she

screamed at Jerry Dog, struggling for her words, a split second before everyone else chimed in.

"Geez, Beth," I said. "There's preaching going on just down the hill."

Michael was holding his shoulder as Daddy, Wayne, and Hershey met Mama on the field, but he was barely wincing. He hadn't been hit that hard, but my mama was right on top of him, rolling up his sleeve.

Page sat up straighter. "Let's go down there and make sure he's all right."

Rosemary said, "Gabriel, why don't *you* go down there and see if he's all right?"

I nodded. "Why not?"

Both sides of the bleachers were screaming at each other when I got down to the little huddle forming around my brother.

"It doesn't even hurt," Michael was saying.

"Look--it took the scab off your arm," Mama muttered. "Wayne, do you have any bandages in the dugout?"

Daddy held Michael's upper arm between two big fingers. "I think it's about time we asked Jerry Dog to leave. He doesn't need to be out there on the field after this."

Mama looked up at him. "Do you honestly think that poor child hit Michael on purpose?" she snapped. "He hasn't hit anything he's aimed at all night."

Michael eyeballed me. "What do *you* want?"

Hershey, who had been watching silently, shushed him. "She came down here to see if you were all right, Michael."

"That's okay, he knows better," I said. "I just want a piece of his arm to put in my jar of formaldehyde at home."

Wayne returned from the dugout with some butterfly bandages. "I don't know what the hell happened to the Band-Aids, but here."

Mama took a bandage and pinched Michael's scab together with her fingers. She took the backing off with her teeth and sutured his mildly torn flesh together with the bandage.

Hershey grinned at me. I wasn't sure why.

When I returned to the stands Page was sitting forward in her seat so that her neck muscles were straining. "What did Hershey say was wrong with him?"

"Well, Hershey believes it's a strained intestine," I said, "but, having some experience with arm injuries, I think I'll have to side with Mama on this one."

"Did he hurt his pitching arm?" Rosemary asked.

"It just knocked his scab off. He'll be his lovable little self again in no time."

Beth grimaced. "He really should get a doctor to look at that thing."

Page sat back in her seat.

Daddy made no motion to ask the umpire to eject Jerry Dog. Mama said a few words to Michael as she escorted him to first base, and then she came back to the bleachers. Jerry Dog, who had ignored both the cluster of familial concern around my

brother and the abuse he himself was being dished from the bottom row, stood with his plump pitcher upon the mound and spoke to him just a few inches from his face.

By the time the game resumed, I just wanted it to be over. It was nearly dark, and the tractor pull pit was getting boisterous. The singing was not impassioned, so far as I could tell, but steady and loud. Tyler Barfield stepped up to the plate, smudged and red-eyed, and when the first pitch came to him, a bad one too far north, he lined it hard--straight at the second baseman, who stepped quickly to his bag, where Michael was sliding in, and then fired for first.

"Bang, bang!" cried Jerry Dog as the ball beat Tyler to the base and cinched the double play. His assistants clapped manfully, with joyous barks, in their matching shirts. The Jays' side rose to its feet.

My brother crawled up out of the dirt at second base, dusted off his knees, and jogged for the dugout, with Tyler behind.

I wondered if my wishing it was over was losing the game for my brother.

The next and possibly last Pirate to the plate was Justin Wright, the shortstop. Jerry Dog ordered his team to hunch over--"One!"--and begin their chatter, which clashed with the drone from the revival tents.

All the noise seemed to be bothering the pitcher as well as Justin, and he sent two sloppy lobs to the outside.

"Oh, the glory," came the song from the tents, "oh, the glory of the place He has for me."

"Annyannyannyanny," sang the Jays.

Justin seemed to twitch a little. The third pitch came up high again, but he reared back and swung anyway, popping the ball up so high that in the deep dusk you couldn't see where it had gone.

The Jays scoured the sky above them for the ball.

Daddy hollered, "Run, Justin!"

"Glory is His name," came the singing.

Jerry Dog looked hard for that ball up in the lights, his face a hard collection of blood and vessels, and then the light broke over his eyes. "Jarrett!" he barked at his third baseman. "It's right over your head, son! Get under it!"

Jarrett looked up obediently. He didn't see it.

Jarrett's mother in the stands rocketed to her feet. "Good Lord, boy! It's right on you! Get your glove up!"

Justin rounded first and sped on toward second.

Jarrett winced. He didn't see the ball, which was just as well. He stuck his glove over his face and peered through the leather weave between his thumb and index finger, and watched the ball drop effortlessly into the pocket for the third and final out.

"Damn it," said Mama.

The Jays' bleachers rejoiced. Jerry Dog didn't smile, but pumped his fists in the air as he stalked across the field to

shake hands with my father and Wayne. His only gesture of relaxation was to allow his tortured little wad of gum to loll about on his tongue as he opened his mouth to sigh.

The mothers on our side groaned. "We finally finish a game with Jerry Dog and it's gotta piddle out like that?" Lo-rene grunted. "I ought to whip Jared's hide for swinging at that godawful pitch in the third inning."

Jan Finch sighed and rose from her seat, picking her shorts out of her butt and rubbing at the bleacher marks on the backs of her thighs.

My mama squinted at the Pirates dugout, where the dirty lot of boys had fallen together for the speech following their first real loss of the season. "Has my son taken off that Band-Aid?" she asked me, poking my shoulder. "Can you see if he has on his Band-Aid?"

Hershey was listening somberly to the words my daddy was speaking to the group.

"Would you like me to go check to see if he has on his Band-Aid?" I asked sweetly.

My mama smiled. "I would love it if you would."

Page spit out her gum and fastened it to the underside of the slat she was sitting on. "I'll go with you."

Mama put a hand on her shoulder. "Page, why don't you tell me about what you're going to study at Columbia State?"

"Well, I . . ." Page stumbled, but I was already gone.

"This game is about attitude," my daddy was saying when I reached the dugout, "and you can't let what the other team's coach does affect your attitude about the game."

I peered in through the fence and saw the edges of my brother's Band-Aid substantially rubbed away. The faces of the boys were long and plain, without expression, but their toes batted restlessly at the dirt.

Hershey saw me. I smiled.

He slipped out the side of the dugout and came around to where I was standing, dropping the play books in the grass. "Want to get me a Coke?" he asked.

"I'll have to get some quarters from my mama," I said.

"I was kidding."

"Let's go get some anyway."

As we rounded the fence for the bleachers, with the eyes of everyone upon us, Hershey suddenly put his arm around my shoulders and wobbled me back and forth, toward and away from him. His other hand he used to pull his damp shirt away from his neck. My face, already hot and glistening, filled with blood and began to sizzle right off my skull.

"Going riding around tonight?" he asked.

"I guess," I said. "It's Friday." I minced steps to avoid stepping on people as he pushed and pulled me around. "Wanna come?"

"Sure," he said. "But I stink." He flapped at the neck of his shirt with his fingers.

"I don't care." Page and Rosemary were staring. My mother was beaming. Granny was rocking so hard that people who were still sitting down at the other end were swaying gently and looking down to see what was the matter. Hershey dropped his arm from my shoulders.

"Hey, hey, hey," Page roared. "Look who was too big a snob to even come talk to us during the ballgame."

"Hi," said Hershey.

"Watch out, snob." After we were standing right in front of her Page did not adjust her volume for distance. "I'll have to be calling you snob from now on."

Hershey nodded at my mother and smiled. "Hey, Mrs. Sullivan."

"Hershey, have you met my mother?" Mama asked. She touched Granny's arm and squeezed a little closer to her. Beth moved in from the other side and together they muffled her movement. "Mama, this is Hershey Crawford, Charlie's assistant coach. He's Wayne's nephew. Hershey, this is my Mama. Just call her Granny."

My eyes bugged out.

"No, call me Catherine. That's the name my mother gave me," Granny said, more lucid the stiller she was forced to sit. "Not Granny."

Hershey extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Catherine."

Granny laid her hand limply in his as if she expected him to kiss it. "Hello, Hershey. I can't really see why your mama would name you that."

"Me either."

"And this is Beth, Charlie's sister," Mama said quickly.

Hershey and Beth shook hands, and Beth said, "I saw you warming them up today. Good arm to first."

"Thanks."

"We're going riding around now," I said, "in Rosemary's car, so I won't be going home with you and Daddy."

Rosemary raised her eyebrows.

"Good," said Mama. "You girls haven't all been out together in a long time."

"And Page," I said, "I understand if you have plans with Sammy."

Alarm flared up in her eyes and she sat up straight. "With who? God, no. You mean Sammy *Wellman*? We don't do stuff all the time. Thank God. I mean, if I thought he was the guy I was *dating*, I'd be scared. He's an idiot."

"Tell Michael I'm sorry about the game," I told Mama, and I leaned over and kissed Granny on the cheek. As I got closer to her face Beth was making mischievous, encouraging eyes at me. I crossed mine back at her. "And can I have fifty cents for a Coke?"

"Don't waste a lot of gas," Granny said.

Page was angling for the backseat from the time we all headed for the parking lot, hanging to the rear of the group and uttering sentences that required her to stop in the gravel for the physical emphasis of the end punctuation. "I just cain't believe the Pirates let a crappy team like Jerry Dog's beat them!" she cried, stopping and splaying her fingers with her arms out straight at her sides, rolling her eyes. "But, hey, it's not like we didn't score any *points.*" She stopped again. After several of these small short outbursts she was several feet behind us.

"Runs," I said, but I decided to let her have the back seat with Hershey since she was so determined. As I opened the door to the front passenger side I could feel her sly smile on my back.

As we pulled out of the park grounds onto the highway Hershey spoke up from the backseat, scooting up into the space between the two front seats. I saw Page in my side mirror, hunching forward on her seat.

"Where do you guys usually ride around *to* on the weekends?" he asked.

"Wherever," Rosemary said. "There are all the back roads to Razor Point and Foxburg and Pickensville, or you can go up to Middlefield to the movies. . . ."

"Or to Alabama, but that's farther, about forty minutes," Page interrupted. "In Middlefield you can cruise the strip too."

"The strip," Hershey said. "I guess you don't have one of those here." We were approaching the modest cluster of lights of the Quik Mart area.

"We don't have a strip," I said. "We have a spot. We don't have cruisers. We have sitters."

"God, Gabriel," Page said. "The spot. Listen at you." She spoke to Hershey. "Gabriel thinks she's so damn funny."

As we got nearer to Sudsies and the other buildings, Hershey said, "Pull over here."

Rosemary slowed down. "Here at the laundromat?"

"Uh-huh." He laughed. "I just want to sit out on the hood of the car awhile."

"To watch the world go by," I murmured.

"Sure," he said.

Rosemary stopped the car and we all got out, Page climbing out after Hershey on his side of the car.

"God," she giggled. "I cain't believe you'd want to just sit here in Hope Springs on the hood of a car."

"Why not?"

"It just seems like you would be bored in a place like this. *God* knows I am."

"There's not room for four people across the front," I said.

"There is if we squoosh up." Page stood behind Hershey and put her chin on his shoulder. He didn't move.

"There's not room for four people across the front," I said.

The whine of a siren preceded flashing red lights over the hill from the north, and suddenly an ambulance came roaring down the highway. The lights bounced off our faces as it went wailing past, turning our eyes and the eyes of the loiterers across the street temporarily red. Several of them scrambled into their trucks and squealed out into the wake of the ambulance. They followed it south and out of sight.

"Somebody's dying," said Rosemary.

"Sure you don't want to follow it?" asked Hershey, easing himself out from under Page's chin and onto the hood of the car.

"Oh, somebody'll come back and tell where the accident was," Page said. She hopped up on Hershey's left side and swung her legs back and forth. "Ain't that crazy? I bet you think it's stupid."

"No, we used to do that in Ohio, or some people did, I guess."

I sat down on the ground so that Rosemary could have the other spot beside Hershey. He looked at me and shrugged. Rosemary leaned up against the car beside him but didn't hike herself onto the hood.

Page flicked her bangs with her finger. "Did you really want to go follow the ambulance? We could. I think it would be fun, if you want to."

"Nah," he said.

"Well, if we don't we'll have to just sit here." Page popped her ankles. "Which, we do that every Friday and Saturday around here, but, *God*, I don't want to bore you."

"I'm not bored," Hershey said. "I'm watching all the hair go by."

Page giggled and elbowed him. "God. The hair go by. Listen at you. Well, I still don't know if we should sit here, I mean, I know Rosemary don't like to just sit still anywhere, especially out in the middle of town."

Rosemary's tongue poised itself as if to lick her bottom lip but it froze there.

Hershey looked at me but spoke to Rosemary. "You don't like to sit still? What does that mean?"

Rosemary's tongue stayed grotesquely on her lip.

"It's not that she don't want to, it's that she cain't," Page mumbled clearly through clenched teeth, averting her eyes mysteriously all over the parking lot. She sat up and leaned into her lap, her eyes finally resting on me.

Hershey looked to me for an explanation.

Rosemary looked at me without moving her tongue.

"But I don't want to *say* anything," Page said.

Then, in the same humid blackness from which the ambulance had come, a pair of headlights which looked no different from any of the others passing through town crested the hill and came through the stoplight. But this pair belonged to a deep blue

Legend which slowed into the laundromat parking lot and came to a stop beside Rosemary's car.

Rosemary, whose tongue was now back in her mouth and possibly down her throat, shifted against the surface of the car, her face gone a delicate pale; she looked all around her with quick rabbit eyes as if she were searching for a place to scamper away.

"Oh, my God," said Page, half-grinning with excitement and the thrill of accidental prophecy, and her eyes were gauging all our faces. Rosemary's was shriveling, Hershey's was blank, and mine I couldn't see. "Oh, my God, now what?"

Buddy Scurlock opened the door of his car and put one leg out, looking at all of us while he turned his lights off notch by notch--high beams to low, low to parking lights, then off. His seat belt alert beeped until he took the keys out. "Hi."

"Hey, there, Buddy," I said.

He got out of the car. "Hey, there, yourself," he replied.

"Buddy," I said, "this is Hershey Crawford, and Hershey, this is Buddy Scurlock, a friend of Rosemary's."

Buddy looked at me funny. Hershey got off the car and stood politely. Page slid off beside him.

Rosemary's foot twitched as if she wanted to kick me with it, but she was incapable of moving.

"Hello," Buddy said to Hershey. They exchanged a quick pump of the knuckles and brief nods, and Hershey looked at me with eyebrows raised as Buddy stepped past him towards Rosemary. I

felt that everyone there was, in some way, intermittently but urgently, looking at me.

"I just saw you guys standing out here and thought I'd stop by," Buddy said.

"We're just hanging *out*," said Page belligerently, rolling her eyes and touching Hershey's sleeve and then nodding at me.

Buddy looked at me.

"What, is my *nose* on crooked?" I asked.

I remembered that Rosemary and I were in Middlefield at the movies in June of the year before, on a night when she was supposed to be out with Buddy but had said she wanted to be with me instead. He was there when we came out of the theater. In the shadows his features were dim and beautiful; he wasn't mine but he gave me flutters when I saw him. He asked Rosemary to walk with him for a minute, would I mind? I couldn't mind. As the crowd thinned out the two of them paced the parking lot, and I remained next to the building in the bright ugly lights, next to the poster showcase. They disappeared behind the dumpster in the rear and that was when there was no one left in the lot, when I could hear the two of them speak to each other, and I leaned against the building, so alone.

I kept my face pressed to the bricks and listened to the noises behind the dumpster. I listened with all the power of my ears to find out what it must sound like when two people spoke intimately to each other--what must those words be like? Rosemary's voice was full of hurried breath that rushed up out of

her lungs. "You're not listening," she groaned softly, and the words were full of air. Her feet scuffled in the gravel. I imagined his arms going round her and heard short words issue from his mouth, and then as I stood there aching with sweat and anxiety I realized I had heard something else, only it had not sounded the way I would have expected it to sound and so I had not realized it had made a noise at all--and then as I ducked into the alcove of the exit Rosemary flew out from behind the dumpster holding her shoulder. Buddy stepped in behind her, walking quickly, taking her shoulder lovingly in his two hands and kissing her on top of the head. It was several minutes before I was able to come out of the bright lights of the exit and into the shadows with them. Buddy looked me full in the eyes--the bulbs had blinded me, I could barely see him--and insisted on taking Rosemary home, and she didn't argue, and so I drove back to Hope Springs alone.

"I, uh, had a couple of free passes to the late movies in Middlefield," Buddy said. "Not to steal Rosie from you, but I was kinda hoping she'd go with me."

"I don't think she *will*," said Page.

Rosemary sucked her voice weakly out of her guts and spoke with a dry mouth. "Gabriel and I were going to just . . . I'm spending the night over there."

Buddy tucked a strand of her hair behind her shoulder with one tender finger. "I could get you back to Gabriel's afterward--I know where she lives."

Rosemary gave a polite downward turn of her mouth and shook her head. "No, I just want to stay with Gabriel."

Buddy cleared his throat and blinked out at the laughing dawdlers across the street in the video store parking lot. Ugly shafts of light from the signs and lightpoles along the highway ignited his even profile and his arresting mouth. "Please," he said.

Rosemary wiggled. I felt sick. Hershey's eyes were on the pavement. Page's mouth hung half-open, corners slightly up, her dull eyes glittering and scampering from me to Hershey and back again.

"Please," Buddy repeated, politely.

"No."

His hands were in his shorts pockets; he twisted a little and even I couldn't help noticing the interconnections of muscles in his legs.

Then one hand came out and reached for Rosemary's fingers, but she shot back when he touched her, so much that she bumped Hershey, who didn't even look up.

Buddy didn't move his hand. He reached again for her fingers and took them gently, grazing his thumb once across the back of her hand.

Rosemary let Buddy take hold of her, but a helpless and pitiful moan filtered through her clenched teeth as her eyes clamped shut and two tears rolled down her cheeks.

Buddy dropped her hand and she drew it greedily to her chest.

By now some of the other people in the parking lots were looking. Buddy shuffled his feet and then he leaned over and kissed Rosemary on the cheek. "I'm sorry," he said, and he moved through us to his car--he had to step over my leg and say "Excuse me," to Hershey. He opened the door and got in, started the motor; the radio began playing and he didn't look back at us, but turned the vents so that they were blowing on his face, and he shut the door. As he drove off I watched his taillights gleam until they were gone.

Rosemary kept making that same noise that was making the hairs on my arms poke out like porcupine quills. I stood up and brushed the asphalt crumbs off my shorts. Hershey leaned over then and put his arms timidly around Rosemary; she didn't react except to acquiesce when he pulled her over close to him. He looked at me, his eyes round and wide, and shrugged. His left arm passed in front of her wailing mouth and she gurgled.

"Rosemary, he's gone," I said, putting one hand on top of her head.

Page jumped off the car and elbowed into our threesome. "God, Rosemary, are you all right? I cain't believe he would *dare* show his face out here," she said, inching up into Rosemary's face. "I mean, God. What does he think, we're all just going to sit here and let you leave with him?" Half a grin was itching to spread over her face.

The noise streaming out of Rosemary faded a little but stayed constant. It seemed to come not only from her mouth but from her eyes and ears as well.

Hershey patted her back gently, still ignorant and demanding an explanation from me with his eyes, and as he patted her the sound of her crying popped as a baby's does when you burp it.

"Oh, honey," said Page, and Rosemary slit her eyes at her, "no boy out there's worth crying over. My God." She straightened up and spoke to us. "If there's danger, *you* know, and there could be, because there ain't no telling what Buddy might do, I think we should get the police. I mean, believe me, *I* know what a guy can be like if he gets mad." She cut her eyes mysteriously.

Rosemary groaned.

Hershey grunted in exasperation. "Is he *hitting* her?"

"Not anymore," I said.

"But that's the thing here, is what I'm getting at. The thing is, he's hitting her."

"He could hit her anytime," Page said. "He's always around town looking for her. It gives me the creeps." She shivered voluptuously. "I just don't know what we should do."

I sighed. "He's not going to come back out here and wallop her, for crying out loud. Forget about it."

Rosemary was getting Hershey's arms all wet, and he pulled her closer and jostled her a little as if to remind her of where she was. I kept my hand on her head even though it was a little

awkward the way she was leaning over, because I was afraid to let her go as long as his arms were around her. Also, I was touching him a little; his knuckles brushed the underside of my arm.

Rosemary's crying was steady, low, and eerie. "I wish you'd stop it," I said. "Say something I can understand. Make a human noise."

Through the slits of her eyelids I saw only a dark brew of tears and the inscrutable brown of her eyes.

Page leaned into her face again and said, "Maybe we should call your parents. I think we should get them to come get you, okay?"

Rosemary showed the first signs in five minutes of understanding human speech. "Sh-sh-shut up," she hissed into Page's eyeballs, which were directly in front of her mouth.

Hershey leaned down and peered under his arm at Rosemary.

Page pretended to be looking all around her, perhaps for the police. "Let's call your daddy," she suggested. "He'll know what to do."

"Page," I began, but Rosemary was already pushing Hershey's arms off her.

"You're not calling my *daddy*," she spat, imitating Page's speech.

Page faltered. "I . . . think someone needs to come get you. . . ."

"Well, my *daddy's* not home," Rosemary sobbed. "He's not home tonight."

Page recovered a touch of her mysterious smile. "Let's just try to call," she said, taking Rosemary's wrist.

"*He's not home!*" Rosemary screeched, shaking her off. I could imagine her breath making Page's bangs creak backward.

Page's face changed completely.

"Well, I know where he is," she said, turning to leave for the video store, "and I'm going to go call him."

In ten minutes Rosemary's father was there, but by then she had stopped crying. He took her aside and held her to him, and they had a conversation that Hershey and I couldn't hear, Rosemary's arms dangling limply at her sides while her father's squeezed her back. Page never returned from the video store.

"Thanks," Hershey whispered to me, "for throwing me right in the middle of that without any warning."

"I didn't think it was necessary to recount Rosemary's entire history of domestic abuse in the car on the way here."

"Has he ever really hurt her?"

I watched Rosemary lean dispiritedly against her father. "Well, you saw how she was."

"But is she just afraid of what he might do, or has he really hurt her?"

I twisted my hair in my hands and pulled at it. "The worst thing I remember is when he pushed her down the steps at his house."

"God, how awful."

"Don't worry," I said. "She stopped on the landing and by that time he was sorry anyway."

"You're horrible."

"Well, yes."

"I can't imagine anyone hitting her at all."

"Why not?" My voice was sharper than it was supposed to be and I coughed.

"Or maybe," he continued, ignoring my question, "I can't imagine wanting to hit her."

I folded my arms in front of me. "I wonder if we should go get Page."

"Do we have to?"

"Well, I'm sure she's over there just waiting for someone to come after her."

"I'm sure," Hershey replied, "that getting a ride home is something she has practice at."

I shrugged. "I don't want to just leave her."

We crossed the road and went into the video store, which smelled not only of the chicken fingers that were kept for sale on a rotating heated platter by the cash register but also of cigarette smoke. It was crowded, especially in the back behind the movie racks where a pool game was going on, and I heard

somebody saying that the ambulance had gone to Pickensville, that someone had put his fist through his ex-girlfriend's window. I didn't see Page at all. She was gone.

"How'd she manage to leave without us seeing her?" Hershey wondered.

"If you go out the back door and across the Howells' yard her house is just a half mile down the road," I said. "She could walk. I guess she just slipped out."

"Hmmm. Imagine that."

"I'm trying to."

Rosemary left with her father after he led her to the passenger seat of his car. He waved to us absently, looking around for someone, it seemed, and then they were gone. I wondered, as I had been wondering since she had left for the video store, where Page had found him.

At home that night, before I turned out the light, I got out my book and added a last date onto the page marked "Rosemary and Buddy." He hadn't hit her, but it seemed that I should mark the date anyway.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The couples on the bleachers--couples who did not sit together but who could be matched by their wedding rings--looked alike. They had the same lines at the corners of their eyes and lips from saying the same things to the same children and from frowning and laughing at the same jokes. They still said things that were different, or at least it seemed that way late at night when their bodies were not touching, but if they had only got up from the bed and looked in the mirror, they might have seen that they had been saying the same things. The same lines were at the corners of their mouths and eyes. And they were easy to match together from a distance.

They didn't start out the same, although some started out more the same than others. But the magic mix of gravel and freshly mowed grass made a fairy dust that lingered upon sweaty necks and in the cracks of shoes; in the stickiness of a shared Sno-Kone any two could be caught, on any purple evening thick with mosquitoes, with no thought to what separated them in the saner seasons.

Nell and Parson Mitchell, for example, when they sat close enough--which was not really all that often--shared a single line across the middle of their foreheads. Both their skins were folding over that one central line, their eyebrows hung from it, his more heavily; they squinted with the same honesty when little Blade Mitchell hung too far off first base in a smooth-skinned, clear-eyed, careless wish for second. Parson never was much for

the books, but Nell was salutatorian of her class--she spotted him for the first time, you know, as he was lunging for home from third, the dirt spitting furiously from his cleats, the plate a bright star in his eyes as he thrust his belly into the earth.

Chapter Thirty-Three

She was having no more headaches, and the baby was still and quiet inside her, and so she had no reason to call for the doctor. When she was alone in her room, she would stroke her stomach and whisper angrily, "I know you're not sleeping."

There were other ways to hear about him. He had not sought her out as she had hoped, but his name rode swiftly along the route of preserves and altar cloths that ran by the doors of the ladies of town. Lise Ehemann, whose farm lay shored up against her own across the stone barrier, came to take her oldest two daughters into town for piano lessons along with Lise's own girl, and that was the way she heard about the doctor and Eleanor Lilly, the daughter of the lumber mill clerk, and a Baptist.

She wondered just what she would reveal about herself, whenever the doctor decided to ask. She wondered if he was working on his book every night, at home alone. She wondered if, with a touch of her hand in the lamplight, showing him her pages would make him see just how beautiful and exhausted she was with this heavy baby angling for the doorway between her legs.

And she honestly wanted her daughters to learn to play the piano beautifully.

Chapter Thirty-Four

As I lay under the covers the next morning I had a feeling he would come to see me--for me a feeling like not quite being awake--and sure enough, my mama came up to get me about ten o'clock. The butterflies in my stomach were already tinkling around by the time she was sitting on my bed, glowing brighter than the sun through my window.

"Guess who's here," she said, bouncing on my mattress a little.

"Don't know."

"Yes, you do. He said to tell you to hurry up, and not to brush your hair."

"He did?"

"I thought that was strange," she said, but I could tell by her tone of voice that she didn't care whether it was strange or not.

Hershey wanted to go to St. Mary's, to see the inside of the church. He had his pad and pencils with him. I didn't tell my mother either of these things, since she thought the fact that I didn't brush the sleep out of my hair was strange enough. Mama was cutting up broccoli to freeze in the kitchen--there were three buckets full and Daddy wasn't done picking yet, and strawberries and cauliflower were piling up on the counter waiting for her to do something with them before they rotted. She followed me out on the porch and waved gleefully as we left on the Moped.

I took my father's keys to open the church building; ever since he had been a councilman there had been a set of church keys on a rubber band in a drawer in our kitchen.

"Why do they keep this locked?" Hershey asked me as I slid the key into the tarnished lock on the door. He had his drawing pad under his arm. "Don't people ever like to come in here and pray during the day?"

"Yes, and some of them like to come in and steal things."

"Like what?"

"Like chalices or candelabras or monstrances."

"What the hell is a monstrance?"

"It's big and pointy and gold," I said, turning the key. "That's all you need to know."

"Ohhhh. . . . Gold chalices, and gold candelabras, and gold . . . monsterses, and whatnot."

"You bet. There's a lot of gold whatnot in here."

"Is there a black market for that kind of thing?" he asked me. "I would think it would be a tough sell on the street in Hope Springs."

We entered the vestibule; the heavy door thundered shut behind us. "You can always melt down that stuff and sell it to the Baptists," I said. "They're building some kind of calf or something."

"Hey. My mama was Baptist."

"Hey. What's she now?"

"Uh, a First United Reformed Procrastinator, or something."

"And yourself?"

"I don't know."

"You don't go to church?" I asked him, pushing open the glass doors that led inside.

"My parents don't go, I don't go, my sisters go at Christmas," he said. "My grandpa is a deacon and he thinks that if we had gone to church my parents would still be together."

The morning sun filled each colored sliver of glass in the windows and pressed its brilliant shape onto the pews and floor.

"Wow." Hershey dragged his toe across the colored pools in the center aisle. "So how is your friend Rosemary?"

"I haven't talked to her."

"You haven't called to see if that noise has stopped coming out of her?"

"I feel sure she shut up as soon as she got home," I said. "Her mother doesn't like noise."

His eyebrows drew together. "You don't think she's in any danger? From that Buddy of hers?"

"He's no buddy of hers," I said. "And no, I think he'll pretty much leave her alone."

"Oh." He studied the colors on the aisle floor. "Did people really steal stuff out of here?"

"Several times."

He walked slowly toward the altar like a bride and looked all around him, his steps echoing on the yielding old wood, and

then he turned around and saw the choir loft in the rear of church. He grinned at me.

"Not one chance," I said, keeping my eyes on his face. "Not one chance do you have of getting me up there and hanging me some strange way from some hook or ladder or railing."

"You knew I brought you here to draw."

"There are lots of things in here to draw."

"Are you afraid of heights?"

"You really want to draw *me* in here?"

"Up there."

"No. And somebody might come in."

"It's locked."

"My father is not the only person in the whole wide world with a key. Remember the priest? He works here."

"I'm not going to draw you naked, for crying out loud." He was still smiling. "Are you afraid of heights?"

"Heights to me really don't exist," I said, "because where they are, I am not."

"You will be if I throw you over my shoulder and haul you up there." He made a move toward me, and I flinched backward and fell into a pew.

"You're scared," he said.

"Of course I'm scared, asshole."

"Such language in the house of God."

I looked up into the eyes of Mary whose plaster hands were held out to me and I blushed.

"I was kidding," he said.

Just then a metallic echo rang through the church, and a ray of light pierced the altar floor from direction of the sacristy. I stood up hastily. "Father Smiley," I whispered.

Hershey snorted. "Father *Who*?"

Father Smiley looked surprised to see us there. He was dressed in jeans and a golf shirt and blew in through the sacristy door as if he had serious business to take care of. When he saw us, he paused only a moment before the full brilliance of his smile threatened both his ears.

"Hi," I said.

He acknowledged me with a nod. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Father, this is Hershey Crawford, a friend of mine," I said.

"Father Smiley," said Hershey, extending his hand, and his mouth rolled out the vowels with such gusto that I was afraid he was going to laugh.

"Hershey, like the candy?" Father Smiley asked, pumping vigorously but briefly, exposing every tooth in his upper jaw.

"Uh-huh."

"Nice to have you here in our house of worship, Hershey."

"I came over to get some, uh, wedding music out of the organ bench," I said, "wedding music, because I'm playing for a friend's wedding this week."

Father Smiley's smile lost no wattage. "I don't think there are any weddings here this week."

"It's a, well, it's a Baptist wedding," I said. "It's a piano wedding, uh, it's just a bridesmaids' march that Lilah told me was in the organ bench."

"I see," said Father Smiley. "And how are you feeling, Gabriel?" He focused from some point over my head down to my eyes.

"I'm fine."

"I hope I'll see you Sunday?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I have some boxes to sort through in the back now, if you don't mind, so I'll leave you to search for your music," he said. "It's wonderful to meet you, Hershey. Join us for Mass sometime." He clapped both our shoulders and went back into the sacristy.

Hershey grinned at me and pulled at my hand, leading me toward the choir loft stairs. "Such *lies* in the house of God."

"When a priest asks you a question, never answer 'uh-huh,'" I grumbled, taking grudging steps forward and making Hershey pull my weight. "Didn't the nuns teach you any manners?"

"He seems too young for a 'yes, sir,'" he said. "Or too something, anyway."

"That would be, 'yes, *Father*.'"

"Quit stalling. You have to get your music." Once we were almost all the way up the stairs he whispered, "Who *is* that, anyway?"

"Who is who? Father Smiley? He's the new priest."

"That's not what I'm asking." The stairs creaked under us. "He's certainly a toothy gentleman."

"Yes."

"Very time-consuming vowels."

"He's from the Deep South. Alabama or something."

"He may be from deeper south than you think." He flipped open his sketch pad and slid a pencil out of the wire coil, and he set them both down on the organ bench.

I shrugged.

"Father Smmmmmmiley," Hershey laughed. "Good God."

I motioned for him to be quiet. Our voices were bouncing off the walls.

"So where is Father's little black suit with the neck notch?"

"His Roman collar?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know."

"So does he usually wear jeans? Can he *do* that?"

"Of course he can do that," I said irritably. "I don't know what he usually wears. He's new."

"He's new."

"You heard me."

"He wanted to know how you were *feeling*. Why did he ask you that?"

"You sure are nosy."

"Not that that surprises me," Hershey said, lifting the cover of the organ an inch or two and peering up into the dark expanse of keys and knobs. "That seems like a logical question to ask you."

"Put that down."

"I want you to play the organ."

"Why did you say it seems logical for someone to ask me how I'm feeling?"

Hershey spied the ladder to the bell tower and was there in an instant. He slammed the organ lid, jumped up onto the wooden platform the ladder was mounted on, and gazed up into the column. "Shit. Can I climb up here?"

"Why is it logical that he asked me how I'm feeling?"

"Get up here and ask me."

"I'm not getting up there."

"Take my hand."

"No."

"Can I climb the ladder?"

"God Almighty," I said. "I could go somewhere else just to stand and talk to myself."

"Can I climb it?"

"What if Father Smiley comes out?"

"I'd enjoy seeing the smile peel off his face."

"I've seen him when he wasn't smiling," I said, blinking daintily and twisting my fingers behind my back.

"Gross," he said. "What are you getting at?"

"Not a thing."

He sat down on the platform and rested his elbows on his knees, leaning against the wall. "What I meant was, it seems logical to ask you how you're feeling because you always seem like you feel bad."

My nose prickled. "Oh."

"Do you?" he asked in a whisper. "Do you feel bad?"

I opened the organ and folded back the lid. "I'll play for you if you promise not to watch."

"Why did he ask you that? Did you confess something to him?" He seemed entranced by his own questions, and his whisper was weird.

"What if I did?"

"Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

His voice was normal again. "Tell me what's wrong."

I plugged the organ up and the low hum filled the church. "Promise not to watch my fingers. I'm going to play now."

"Okay." He hopped to his feet. "Fine. I'll get it out of you later. Right now I'm going to climb this ladder, you're going to play like an angel, and I'll pretend I'm climbing up to heaven."

"Uh . . . okay." I got a hymnal out of the bench and sat down. Even though his back was to me and I heard his feet go tentatively at the narrow wooden rungs, my fingers shook and went cold. I opened up to "To Jesus' Heart All Burning" and tried to hold my hands over the keys to practice the notes in the air before I started, but my fingers trembled so hard that I gave in and pressed down.

The sound of the first chord flooded a church already awash with colored light, and the saints stared placidly as the sun filled their empty white eyes. The floor pedals rattled and buzzed a warning when I touched them with my foot. I kept the volume down because I didn't want Father Smiley to come back out, but the sound was still full, and I could no longer hear Hershey climbing up the steps.

When I got to "While angels course along/Blest be with loudest song," my pinky finger caught two keys and fudged the high "be." I stopped playing and reared my head back to see where Hershey was; I saw two feet dangling from the hole into the bell chamber. I shut my eyes.

"Heaven," he called down, "has bats."

"*Ssshhhhhhh*."

His feet disappeared; then his face filled up the dark hole. "Why did you stop playing?"

"I messed up."

He rolled his eyes.

"Bats?" I asked.

"And bat poop."

"Mmm."

"Come up here."

"We need to go."

"We're not going until I draw something," he said. "I don't think I'll really be inspired to draw anything until you come up here and touch the bells."

"I can walk home," I pointed out.

"Please come up here. I won't let you fall."

"There can't be room for both of us up there."

"There is."

"I don't like bats."

"They don't like you either."

"I don't like bats."

"Most of them are dead."

"I can't."

"I'll step down and hold your hand."

"Are you crazy?" I said. "What would I hold the ladder with?"

"The *other hand.*"

I felt my throat tighten. "Why do you have to make me feel so stupid?"

His face disappeared and was replaced with his two feet groping for the first rung. He climbed down much more quickly than he had gone up, and dropped from the middle of the ladder

down to the platform so that the sound of his landing shook the walls of church.

It was only a moment before Father Smiley stepped out of the sacristy onto the altar and squinted up into the choir loft. "Is everything all right up there?" he called out.

"Hershey tripped," I answered, my voice reverberating in the empty nave. Father Smiley paused, but then waved his hand and returned to the sacristy.

Hershey came up behind me and poked one arm through mine to fiddle with the stops between the keyboards. He pushed buttons so that they popped in and out. "I can't believe you said I made you feel stupid."

I turned the power button off.

"Will you sit for a minute," he asked, "while I draw you? Turn it back on."

"You haven't even finished the first drawing you did of me."

"How do you know?"

"I'm guessing."

"I *have* finished it."

"Let me see."

"It's not here."

"Liar. It's in your sketchpad."

"You can't see it yet."

"Then when?"

"Someday."

"Someday?" I barked. "What kind of baloney is that?"

"Not someday like when it's hanging in a gallery. Someday like next week, or something."

I was startled to have to imagine myself hanging in a gallery. "What's wrong with right now?"

"I haven't finished shading it yet, but it's finished."

"Whatever that means." I turned the switch on and let electricity crackle through the church. "So draw me."

He took his pad and pencil over to the platform and sat in front of the ladder. "Play," he commanded. "Something churchy."

I tried to think of something in a C chord that I couldn't mess up. I carefully pressed out the first notes of "Humbly We Adore Thee."

"You could sing," he offered.

"I don't sing."

"Oh."

For the next half hour I heard the whisk of his pencil behind me, and I played endless variations of the same song, adding and subtracting flutes and harps and chimes with the buttons as I went. My fingers got warmer and didn't make so many mistakes. I would even have considered changing the song to a different key, except that I knew his eyes were not only on my fingers but all over me, observing.

Finally, I said, "I can't play this anymore. I'm tired."

"It's okay. I'm finished." He closed his book.

"I can't see it?"

He didn't seem to hear me. "Hey--is there a cemetery around here?"

I took him to the edge of the lot where the chalky, somber towers that marked the oldest graves loomed over the new stones that were shiny and had lambs or lilies carved in them. He left my side immediately and began to wander through the stones, politely avoiding the sunken ground over the coffins.

"I don't want to draw any more today," he called back to me, squinting at the murky script on the tiny slab of a baby's tombstone, "but I might come back here later."

"Just for your future reference," I answered, "I refuse to pose in any strange or unusual way in a graveyard."

"Do you have grandparents here? Show me all your kin."

"All my kin? You can't spit without hitting my kin in here."

"Where are your grandparents?"

My father's parents lay side by side under a rough-topped hunk of granite, with entwined wedding rings carved under the name in grand Gothic letters, "Sullivan." Underneath, on the left, it read "William George" and then, on the right, "Ellen Murphy."

Hershey ran his hand over the rough top of the stone. "Do you remember them?"

"Remotely."

"Is your other grandfather still alive?"

"No, he's over there." I pointed to the black stone three rows over that had one side uncarved, waiting for my Granny.

"Do you have ancestors in the old part, up there?"

"Of course." I led him up the hill to the original part of the cemetery, where the stones were taller than a person and were a bloodless white, carved mostly in German. The last towering obelisk on the right side was marked "Helder."

"These, I know, were my great-great-grandparents," I said. "His name was Stefan. Hers isn't marked on the stone. These were Granny's mother's parents, and she said they were mean as snakes."

"The woman's name is on there," he said, "but you just can't read it. It's worn off."

I peered at the faintly raised marble letters, but I knew what was there. "It just says, 'Mutter,'" I said. "I did grave rubbings of all these when I was in grade school."

"Well, what was her name?"

"Granny told me--I don't remember."

"Mutter," Hershey repeated. "Mutter, 1852-1929."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Where the stones are a chalky white like tired skin, standing straight like rigid backbones, the moonlight floods a last grace on tired souls. And contrary to everything you've ever been taught, the souls are still there, chalky and bitter, trapped in the last molecular pebbles of the bones that remain. The old graves are haunted at night by delicate, brittle exhalations, by all that is left of the female voice when it is all cried out.

There are no mustachioed souls in the cemetery at night, no husky voices or faint halos of a fine tobacco. The men all escaped with their own last sighs.

The newer graves gleam. They are amber and onyx and slate, with the first and middle names clearly carved in black. They are never empty at first, while the turned earth is still fresh, but somehow the souls inside work themselves out as the bones turn to powder. They escape when the last frail cell collapses, with a great lusty sigh that starts in the highest soprano register and cascades down to middle C and into the crusty rattles of the faded voicebox. It is something these particular dead women have learned to do. They could not quite let go when the last breath tickled their lips, but they hear the sounds of hell up the hill where their grandmothers lie exhaling, and they are gone by the time grass pokes its head into the velvet chamber.

Someday perhaps the newest graves of all will be empty as empty can be. The sound of worms chewing will echo mightily because nothing will be there to absorb it.

Chapter Thirty-Six

After the hay had sat in the sun for days, dry and dead bales marking the green fields, the storm came that nearly took the roof off the barn. She watched the sky from her window, and continued to watch even after the rain fell like angry shards of glass and she heard a tree branch smack the side of the house. The children were under the kitchen table. The clouds twisted and spun together, and she turned her belly toward them. It was slightly round now, and had popped up from between her legs into the place where the baby would grow.

They knew later, or had heard from Otto Einstadt whose farm abutted town, that the storm had touched down right before the train tracks and had blown away Otto's barn. It had grazed the roof of their own, leaving a crooked line of broken boards on the south side, and took down two big oaks near the creek. Lightning had peeled the bark off the smaller one in clean, terrifying strips.

Her husband let a few days pass so that the wood could dry before he went down to cut the tree for winter firewood, taking Joseph (Fritz was yet too young) and the neighbor, Adolph Ehemann, with him. They had only been gone an hour when Joseph came tearing back toward the house. She saw him coming when she stood at the kitchen window drying a dish for the tenth time, unable to put it away. She did not feel like running toward the door to see what was the matter.

When he reached the kitchen door, Joseph threw himself inside and gasped for air to say, "Papa . . . ."

The alarms inside her no longer went off, but she knew she should tell Joseph to take the horses and ride into town for the doctor, and she did. Then she set down her dish towel and made for the door, one hand on her belly. She walked at a brisk clip through the maze of bales toward the creek. Adolph called to her when he saw her at the top of the hill, dewy and determined and grasping the belly that made her uncomfortable, and when she came down into the flowered grasses she saw the tree trunk, pierced with the teeth of the two-man saw, rolled over onto her husband's leg. The saw had bent backward under the force of the tree and caught his skin, bleeding him slowly at the knee.

She came quickly the rest of the way down, calling to Adolph in German, "Can't you roll it off him? He'll be crushed!"

"I can hear you," came her husband's voice quietly.

Adolph said, "The only place it's going to roll is right over him, unless someone can help me roll it uphill."

"I can put my weight against it to keep it off him," she said, untying her apron and wiping the sweat off her husband's forehead with it.

She was letting her dresses go loose now at the waist, wearing nothing binding, and her husband squinted, gazing at her stomach.

Adolph shook his head. "You'll hurt yourself."

This baby would not dissolve if she carried an entire tree under each arm, she knew, but it made her laugh to think of telling that to her husband or Adolph. So she had to wait, tending to the narrow and precious concern of her husband's wet forehead until Joseph came back over the hill on horseback. He was followed by the young doctor and two men who worked at the nearby sawmill, Emmitt Boles and Lawrence MacDonald. MacDonald had a small cart hitched to his horse. She felt ill in the head.

Her husband rolled his eyes back in his head. They were good eyes, but they were vague. "What if . . . ?" he whispered to her.

She sighed and put her hand briefly on his cheek as she rose from her knees to step away from him. "Karl, we cannot even think of that."

Adolph and Emmitt and Lawrence and the young thin doctor worked immediately to saw off the end of the tree and haul the rest far enough off the ground to allow her husband's body to pass between as they heaved it down the hill. It nearly caught Lawrence's toes as it thudded into the dirt, but he jumped back just in time, and the log spun broadly and built up a head of steam for the creek. It thundered into the water, scattering a host of black starlings into the air.

The doctor moved in on her husband's leg like a vulture. She could see that there was blood, and that there was something awkward about the way the ankle lay against the grass, but the crushing was not as severe as she had imagined. "It won't have

to come off, the leg, I mean?" she inquired of the doctor, not bothering to whisper; Karl's eyes were closed.

Dr. Blair was completely quiet, not even acknowledging her question as he wrapped the leg in clean, soft cloth, over and over up to the knee. As he tied off the last piece, he looked up at her and said, "I have to have him in town overnight. I expect he'll be taking a fever shortly."

The men made a stretch-chair of their arms together, and they got Karl up the hill that way. His face was stoic, but his eyes kept darting to the side, looking for her. But she did not walk beside him; she brought up the rear, placidly stroking her stomach.

All through the afternoon and evening his fever held, and as word spread, the ladies of the town came to the Brechts' store under the doctor's office, where she sat in the parlor gulping tea because she was thirsty, from a jar tenderly provided by Mrs. Brecht.

Is he in a lot of pain, they would ask. *Poor Karl.*

I don't know, she would reply, *I'm not allowed in to see him,* hoping the doctor would not appear and ask her why she had not been upstairs in so long. She rolled her head back and squeezed at her stomach, but no one noticed.

She had sent Joseph home and told him to wait with the rest of the children. Now there were ladies coming up to her side and whispering, "Don't you worry. I'm going out to your place with a chicken for the babies," or "I've got stew on; how much will the

children eat?" Suddenly the thought of all these women in her home made her angry, angry, angry, and she took Lawrence MacDonald's horse and cart without a word to him or anyone else and drove herself home. There was no one there but her children, and she made them dinner all by herself, telling them their father would be fine, turning away well-wishers at the door.

The doctor himself rode out to her farm near midnight, clopping up slowly and getting down off his horse slowly, and she met him at the gate. "His fever has broken," he said, looking tired, "and he'll keep the leg. I'll try to set it in the morning--it's a bad break, and it may not heal completely."

"Will he walk?"

He sighed. "Probably."

She was feeling nothing, except a small spark in her stomach. "Would you like to come in? I'm sure you're tired--I have tea on."

"I should probably get back. Mrs. Brecht is washing Karl down." He rubbed his red eyes. "Don't you want to come back with me and see him?"

She looked out at the stars, where they hung low over the familiar black bank of darkened trees. "If you come in and have some tea, we could talk about your book, the one you wanted to talk to me about."

"Or maybe," he said softly, stroking the damp neck of his horse, "you could come relieve Mrs. Brecht."

She impatiently wound a strand of hair around her ear that had been coming loose from the bun for some time. "I . . . have to get the children in bed. I'll come later." She spun around and made quickly for her front door, listening for but not hearing the sounds of his mounting and then hooves vanishing into the dark. She was not sorry she had asked, she would not be, she would not be.

The sound of hooves did not come until after she closed the door, as she leaned against it with her ear to the wood.

She put the children to bed as she had said she would, but she did not go back to town. She lay in her own bed, dreadfully awake after spending a day wanting to do nothing but sleep. She thought about how precious was the unconsciousness that the world slipped into and out of each night without wondering uneasily where it had been--if only she could lie there and have her muscles melt away, and then her thoughts, leaving behind only this blasted, half-formed baby on the sheets. But she couldn't sleep.

Karl was home by Sunday, bedridden, but temporarily, and she led her children alone and steel-faced into church. The youngest cried the whole time. Women came up to her in a faintly perfumed mob after Mass and clucked, *Poor Karl. He must be in such pain. Is there anything I can do?*

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"I'm making you an appointment tomorrow," Mama was saying to Michael as I came downstairs Sunday morning. "Don't touch it anymore."

"I want to touch it," Michael said. "It itches." They were already at the table, Daddy and Michael with bowls full of dry cereal waiting for Mama to bring milk from the kitchen.

"Don't sass your mama," Daddy said, cutting a banana into his bowl. His hands were really too big for the knife, and oddly shaped clumps of banana fell from the blade into the corn flakes.

"I'm not sassing," Michael said. "I'm just saying."

"What, is your arm worse?" I asked.

He held up his forearm over his Froot Loops. The pink scratches from his bicycle wreck were swollen and had black crusty scabs at their peaks. Fine blue lines had begun to radiate under the skin from the sore to the healthy flesh around it.

"My God," I said. "You're rotting."

My daddy set his knife down completely on the table even though there was still a big hunk of banana left to cut. "Watch your mouth." He picked it back up again.

Mama brought the milk. She kissed my hair good morning and set the jug on the table. "He shouldn't pitch this week."

"Should be okay," Daddy said. "We've only got one game against the Angels on Tuesday."

"I don't care if we have to play Jerry Dog every night of the week," Mama said. "He doesn't need to be using that arm."

Something looked different when we got to church but I couldn't say what until we were seated in our pew. I noticed that the nuns were not in their usual pew, kneeling for their rosary before Mass, but then I realized that there were new hymnbooks in every missal holder, bright burgundy books with gold writing instead of the old brown hymnals. Mama and I both reached for the new books at the same time and started flipping through. I looked for my favorite song, "Humbly We Adore Thee," in the index in the back, and breathed a sigh of relief when it was listed there. But when I turned to it, I found that all the words were different.

"'Take My Hands' isn't in here," my mama breathed into my ear just as I realized that none of the eight verses of "Humbly We Adore Thee" was what I was used to singing.

When the morning bells stopped ringing, I looked to the hymnboard to see what would be the opening hymn. Lilah plunged terribly into the first chords of a song called, according to the hymnbook, "Dance with Me, O My Lord."

I stared at the music. It had tied sixteenth notes and expected you to sing on the offbeats.

Father Smiley's voice rang out from the back of church as the hymn began and he strode forcefully toward the altar. He knew the hymn and executed the melody perfectly. The altar boys' little legs worked furiously to follow him up the aisle.

"To live is to love, to love, to live
To believe is to share the joy you give
My faith in You is what will lead me home
Dance with me, O Lord, and be my joy."

The tricky arrangement of notes would normally have made it okay for the last two lines of each verse not to rhyme, but the last words were where braver singers were coming in since they couldn't figure out how to sing the song. There seemed to be general confusion when "joy" did not turn out to rhyme with "home."

Only Lilah and a few others sang with Father Smiley. The heads of the congregation were plowed forward into the new books, trying to figure out the syncopation which Lilah, being aware of only quarter and eighth notes in four-four time, was utterly ignoring.

When Father reached the altar, Lilah squelched the volume immediately so he would not be tempted to go on to another verse.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," he roared pleasantly.

"Amen," we replied.

"I am so happy that we have the opportunity to find new ways of praising the Lord," Father Smiley said, bringing his

outstretched hands together and nudging the altar boy holding the missal aside so that nothing stood between him and his congregation. "Please be patient as we learn these new hymns together. I know it will take a while before we are all comfortable with the melodies and the words, but I know that the Lord is pleased with your efforts."

Again at offertory Father's voice was the only strong and clear voice in the church, belting out Hymn #127, *God My Light and Shadow*, whose impish phrases were pounded into oblivion by Lilah's heavy fingers. Even Father's forceful singing could not keep the song afloat.

Just before Communion, at the time for the Lord's Prayer, we all looked at each other nervously and began shuffling around in the pews in anticipation of having to hold hands again. Father did not venture down off the altar or give any kind of speech this time, but he grabbed the altar boys' hands with such gusto that we all snapped into each other's like Legos as if it were the most normal thing in the world, raising them high and strangely for the ending as if we had just had some kind of mutual epiphany.

For the Communion song, Lilah wisely chose an instrumental, since the singing was always the worst then anyway, because people were concentrating on other things, filing out of their seats and partaking of God and filing back again. My father always got out of the pew first and then stepped back to allow us ahead of him.

Lilah was playing *Ecce Panis Angelorum*, slowly, whose beautiful phrases she knew by heart, and I heard the wooden pedals go loudly under her feet as if she were stomping on great two-by-fours. The supporting bass sound regularly came a half-second after the chords from her fingers. I wondered if she ever looked to the angels over the high altar and pretended they were the ones screwing up. I doubted it.

When it was our pew's turn to join the Communion line, I stepped in front of Daddy and into line. I felt Michael behind me because when he folded his hands he always tried to catch some of my hair between his fingers. I felt a tug on the middle of the back of my head.

Different parishioners took their communion in different ways. My father received it on his tongue, but my mother always took it in her hand and stepped aside to place it in her mouth. My personal favorite was Granny's first cousin, Ethel Ehemann, who received the host from the priest in her hand, took one huge and ceremonious step to the side as if she were Christ's bridesmaid, faced the altar, raised the holy wafer above her forehead and gazed upon it, and then placed it painstakingly upon her outstretched tongue. Then she would make a Sign of the Cross you could run a large dog through, nodding to the altar, and turn her head back toward the aisle so hard that her whole body followed. By the time she would get to her seat there was usually a big bottleneck in the communion line.

As for me, I never took it exactly the same way twice. It was as if I never knew what to expect when I got there, and the shock of finding myself faced with God in a chalice made me forget what I was doing. I always felt off-balance when I got to the head of the line. If I didn't step forward on the right foot I felt like I might fall, except that Michael usually had hold of one of my hairs.

That Sunday I decided to receive the Body of Christ in my hands. I didn't want Father Smiley to see inside my mouth.

When the person in front of me took his turn and then peeled off to return to his seat, I wobbled a little as I stepped forward and extended my hands. One hair on the back of my head tugged at my scalp. I looked up at Father Smiley's eyes.

They were calm and sparkling, with the tiny raised host reflected to infinity within them. I noticed how his dark fingers contrasted with the speckled white of the wafer. I could see inside his mouth as he spoke. "The Body of Christ," he said.

"Amen."

He didn't place the host in my outstretched hands. He passed right over them. In what must have been shock at his doing so, my mouth dropped open wide enough for him to slide the little sucker right between my lips and onto my tongue. I coughed a little, stepped to the side, and lost one of the hairs on the back of my head.

When I got back to my pew, I watched to see if he gave anyone else Communion in his or her hands. The first person I

saw approach him with her hands outstretched got exactly what she had asked for--her salvation, in the palm of her hand.

After church was over, Elaine Brink came up to Mama and was telling her that the nuns were no longer going to Mass here at St. Mary's. "They've started going to St. Francis," she said. St. Francis of Assisi Parish was in Middlefield. "And they still won't move out of the convent."

"You know," my mama said, "there's only two bathrooms in that house."

Elaine shook her head and shut her eyes. "And only one shower."

"I declare."

"We're going to have to meet with the bishop," Elaine said. "I bet he doesn't even know what's going on."

I left them whispering in the pew and went outside, where the bright white sidewalk was throwing an intense mix of heat and light back into the faces of the parishioners who lingered to socialize after Mass. Father Smiley was in the center of the group, squinting and shaking hands. He looked up into the glare of the Sunday morning, tugging at his collar where sweat was already developing, and he saw me come down the steps. He shook one last hand and laced his way through the gathering of the faithful toward me.

"Hello," he said when he reached the steps, extending his hand to me. "And how have you been, Gabriel? I've been thinking of you a lot."

Heat was collecting in my hair. "I'm okay."

He leaned in toward me. "I'd like you to come see me Thursday night, if you would."

"Why?"

The traces of a smile lingered over his mouth even when he was no longer grinning. I could see a lot of his teeth. "I want you to tell me more about how you're feeling."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not feeling nearly as much as I was when I talked to you last."

"How about eight o'clock?"

"I don't know. . . ." As I was stalling, a little girl came up behind Father Smiley and leapt up to tap him on the shoulder. He whirled around and picked her up, and she squealed.

"I'll see you at eight," Father Smiley said to me, and he whisked the little girl, who had been encouraged to poke the priest by her mother, back over to her beaming family. Father laughed and set her down on the ground, and extended his hand to her father.

After an afternoon at Granny's, during which Granny and Ernie both threw up--Granny for God knows what reason, Mama said

it was the heat, but she made it to the toilet, and Ernie because he was pitching a fit with freshly swallowed eggs still in his tubes, and he only got as far as the living room couch--I came back to my room exhausted. The heat was knocking at the windows, reaching sneaky fingers under the sills and barely being beaten back by the air conditioning, and I lay among my white pillows not knowing whether I was asleep or awake. After a long time of lying there numbly in the late rosy light, I heard noises. I rolled over.

Rosemary stood in my doorway, breathing a little hard from having come up the stairs. She looked fierce, her lips parted. She had a yellow piece of legal-pad paper in her hand.

"Hey," I said.

"Your mama let me in," she said, and then her face splintered into a big smile of lush lips and teeth as she exhaled quickly.

"I would hope so."

"I knew if I called she'd say you were asleep. You sleep too much."

I picked at a pasty string in the corner of my mouth.

Rosemary joined me on the bed. "I made a list of stuff that we'll need for our dorm room," she said, slipping her sandals off and tucking her feet under her behind. "Help me think of other stuff to put on it." She spread the yellow sheet of paper out in front of me.

"I haven't called you," I said.

She smoothed the paper against my wrinkled white sheets. "Do you have a pen or something? Or a book to put this against?"

"I didn't call to see if you were okay."

She lifted her head to look at me, and a swath of dark hair fell over her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She smiled and ran her long fingers down the list she'd written in red ink. "I want us to pick out a pattern of Con-tac paper together. To cover the walls, because I know they're going to be ugly. My mama's already bought me a cream comforter--I would have asked you, but she went out and did it by herself, and I figured it would be easy for you to match."

I crawled up to sit beside her. "Have you talked to Buddy?"

There were tears in her wide eyes as she looked at me. "Come on. I worked on this all day yesterday."

"No," I said. "I want to know how Page knew where to find your daddy Friday night. If you want to Con-tac-paper the walls, fine, but the walls are cinder-block and the grooves in between are going to make the paper warp."

"I saw in a magazine where you can put a window valance up on a shower-curtain rod," she said. Her smile was wide and nervous, and the word "rod" wiggled in her throat.

"Fabulous," I said. "How did she know where your daddy was?"

Rosemary still smiled at me, and she reached for my hair to stroke it back off my forehead. "Do they sell carpet in the dorm lobby the day we move in?" she giggled.

"Stop being weird and answer me. How did she know?"

"I don't want it to look like a dorm room," Rosemary said. "I want it to be like a hotel."

"*Good Lord*!" I burst out, exasperated.

Rosemary wadded the list in her hand and threw it in the floor, the tears floating on her bottom lid. "*He . . . was . . . at . . . her . . . house*," she enunciated meticulously, the words making spit come between her teeth. "He was at her house." Then she laughed apologetically, keeping the tears in, and she sniffed. The laugh petered out.

I leaned over and picked up her list off the floor, uncrumpling the wad and smoothing it with my hand. "Thank you," I said quietly. *I thought of Page, her form shrinking as she walked across the street to the video store from the Sudsies parking lot, going for the telephone to ring Rosemary's daddy, knowing what she was interrupting. Rosemary in a veil of tears must have trembled, Page and her loud mouth must have trembled as she spoke words never before spoken, and I had stood there calm as the ocean, knowing nothing.* There were no words in my head as I stared at the paper. *Shampoo, conditioner,* Rosemary had written at the top of a list of toiletries the length of the page. "We can go to Wal-Mart when we get to Knoxville and get

all this crap," I said. "No sense doing it ahead of time and taking up trunk space on the way over."

"Oh." She wiped her eyes.

"God," I said, reading on. "Don't buy *Vaseline*. I have a tub of it I've only used half of since I was in maybe kindergarten."

She tugged at my hair. "I want my own."

As we were making our way down the list, Rosemary marking with one of my pens which items to share and which to keep separate, we both heard a noise on the stairs. We looked up, and Page was standing in the doorway, looking anxiously from me to Rosemary.

"Your mama let me in," she said quietly.

"God, she'll let *anything* in," I said.

Her face lit up with an ear-to-ear grin and she came running over to pounce on the bed. "Gabriel, you're such an idiot," she cried, leaping over Rosemary and planting her shod feet on my comforter. "I swear, what have you been doing? Sleeping? Again? Are you on drugs? I call over here and your mama's like, She's asleep, and I'm like, Well, wake her up, and she's No, I don't think so. So I came over. What are y'all doing?"

Rosemary was calm. Her eyes looked sincere. "We're making a list of things to take to UT for our room."

Page rolled onto her back, kicking her legs into the air and fiddling with the dirty heel of her slip-ons. "Oh." It was

crowded with all three of us on my bed. "Don't let me bother you."

"When do you leave for orientation?" Rosemary asked me.

"Oh, in a couple of weeks or so, if I go."

"If you go."

"I might not go."

"Why aren't *you* going?" Page asked Rosemary, popping her ankles over our heads.

"I didn't register in time." Rosemary furrowed her brow intently over her list. "I could go with you, though," she said to me.

"Uh-uh," I said. "I have to stay in the dorm. With a roommate."

"If you go," Page squawked. "Hey--I came to see if you wanted to go riding around. We could go get Hershey."

Rosemary laughed shortly. "Yeah. Let's go get Hershey."

I picked at a worn spot on my comforter. I had never heard Rosemary say his name before.

Page let her feet fall to the end of the bed so that we all bounced up and down. "Or I could go get him and meet y'all in front of Sudsies."

"Okay," I said. "Go ahead."

Page rolled languidly off the bed. "You mean it? Y'all will come out?"

"Sure."

She compared the tan on one of her arms to the tan on the other as she walked to the door. "God. The tanning bed makes me so orange."

When she was gone Rosemary said, "So, are we going?"

"No," I said.

Her mouth dropped open. "You're going to just let her go drag Hershey around town and not even show up?"

"That's the idea."

"I feel sorry for him then."

"Oh, he won't go," I said. "If I'm not there, he won't go."

Rosemary looked hard at me. "Does he come over here and stuff?"

"My daddy's the coach."

"No, I mean to see *you*." Her full lips stayed in the shape of the vowel even after her voice ran out.

I fixed my eyes on the list of dorm-room things. *Alarm clock, towels, toothbrush holder.* "I don't know . . . he doesn't usually step through the door and announce which of us he's here to see."

"Well, I don't know, either," Rosemary said, "but Arna Giles told me at Ruby's that her sister was driving by St. Mary's the other day and saw you and Hershey going inside."

"Oh, for God's sake."

"What were you doing in church?"

I grunted. "Fondling."

Rosemary yanked my hair. "Gross." She did not seem to have any sweet trace of a smile lurking anywhere on her face.

I rolled the list up between my hands, awkwardly since the paper had already been wadded up, and tapped my forehead with it. I leaned across the bed to my nightstand and opened the little drawer on the front, taking out the folded piece of paper inside. The edges were a little fuzzy.

I did not hand it to Rosemary; she took it from me. When she unfolded it she blinked slowly, her long eyelashes coming together and then drifting back apart.

"Hershey drew this?" she asked.

I nodded.

"This is you?"

"Well, it's my hair, anyway."

She stuck her bottom lip out a little and nodded, and then shrugged. "It's good." She folded it up and gave it back to me. "Now can we talk about Vaseline?"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

What can you take from one life into the next so that you don't forget who you are? The trophies and plaques are no good, they're too obvious and rude to the people who must share your quarters, and besides, you can't drive a nail into a cement block to hang a plaque. You can't take your own bedclothes; you have to buy new. Otherwise, what will your old room look like when you come home? (Because you will come home often, and to see your own bedroom stripped naked would force you back down into the kitchen to recoup the part of the present that still matches the memories.) Your teddy bear likes to sleep here, in the only bed he has ever known, and you don't want to take that away from him like it's being taken away from you. You'll leave him as well.

You'll leave everything except snapshots (and your clothes, because your mother and father will refuse to start all over there) because to see these bits of what you thought you were in such a cold, ugly, uncomfortable place will knock you off your feet. You'll put the snapshots up on the corkboard they attach to your own *personal* medicine cabinet, horrified at the way familiar eyes stare out into a room they've never seen. You'll sit on your new garish bed in your old clothes and rock back and forth until at least the squeak of the mattress becomes familiar. It is the first thing you'll know.

When you make an acquaintance down the hall who has a car, you can go with her to Wal-Mart. You can pick out shampoo,

conditioner, and Vaseline in a way your mother never would have, experimenting with brands, because you have to start somewhere. You will feel sick and stupid doing it, hearing your acquaintance with the car loudly relishing the purchase of the cookies *she* picked out *herself*, like she picked out the pink curtains for her room even though her mama hates pink.

God, oh God, oh God. There are so many people in Wal-Mart. You will have no idea which one of them you are.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Joy poured through her front door with the cool air when the ladies of the church heard that Karl would not lose his leg after all. Oh, the pies and the *Butterkuchen*! She saw Joseph's eyes blink in relief as the pantry filled with warm things wrapped in clean cloths; she had not made anything but biscuits and sour jam and coffee in three days. One of the ladies offered to cut Joseph a piece of pie, and when she heard this she snapped out of her fog and said, "I'll cut it for him," and she did. She cut him as big a piece of pie as she thought he could eat, and he laughed incredulously. "I can eat twice that," he said, but it was all right; hers was the hand that would feed him.

The joy stayed and washed up and frittered through the house in search of loving things to do, although they tiptoed past the room where Karl lay asleep and spread their strange fragrances in the hallways. She wanted to chase them out with a broom. But she couldn't. They drifted out on their own in chattering groups as night was falling, leaving behind the stacks of home cooking that glittered in Joseph's eyeballs.

When she was the last one in the kitchen, staring dumbly at all the linens she would have to wash and plates she would have to return, small footsteps padded down the stairs and into the room with her. Anja, tiny and sleepy, leaned her thin face into the doorjamb. "I didn't get any pie," she said simply.

She looked at Anja's curly head and tears came to her eyes. She leaned over and scooped her up, setting her upon the

beginnings of her belly. She nuzzled her face into Anja's hair--it was so much curlier than hers had ever been, and certainly moreso than Karl's, so how, how had she given her baby such fine hair? she wondered. "Of course," she sobbed. "Of course I'll get you some pie."

Chapter Forty

There had barely been any sun in my window when I awoke Monday morning to a regular thumping sound, a dull thud against carpet that made the glass in my picture frames wiggle ever so slightly. It was coming from across the hall.

When I stumbled into Michael's room to see what was going on, I found him lying on his back on the floor in the sun--where the light in my room came in hazy and rose-colored, it entered his in clean white beams that landed in precise places on the floor. Michael had Daddy's short barbells on the floor, and he was doing flies, only the barbells hit the floor every time his arms came down, which I knew wasn't supposed to happen.

"That's ten pounds apiece," I said.

"That's what it says."

"Mama's going to kill you. Look at the flesh pucker up on your elbow."

Daddy usually lifted weights early in the morning, before work. He sometimes set up his weight bench in the garage for Michael to lift on, to give him the proper shoulders, chest, and triceps to power a fastball.

"Daddy said to get up early and do my flies," Michael grunted, his smooth elementary-school neck widening as he raised his arms by his sides. They wobbled. "I don't pitch this week."

"Mama's going to kill you," I said. "Your arm looks gross." His scratches were deep purple.

"I keep my arms straight for this," he said. "I don't have to bend my elbow. It's not pulling my scabs off."

"Your arms aren't so straight," I pointed out.

"Shut up."

Evangeline made happy throaty noises in her cage. I walked over to her and pressed my face against the bars. She did not move from her perch, but stayed unruffled in the center of the cage, in the sunlight, singing softly.

"Leave her alone," Michael said.

I dropped my jaw and let loose a hot wave of morning breath over the bird's head. A plume on her forehead waved a little but she kept warbling from deep in her small body.

"Daddy's off this morning," Michael muttered as the weights hit the floor again. "I have to do weights."

I had forgotten that Daddy had taken the week off so he could bale hay in the pasture. "Well," I said, "maybe Mama will kill him instead."

There were footsteps on the stairs, and then Mama poked her head in the door. "What are you doing here?" she asked me. "I was looking for you. You have a phone call." Michael's weights fell to the floor as he finished his set, and Mama gasped. "What are *you* doing in here?"

"My arms."

"A phone call?" I asked. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," she replied, "and it's a boy calling, and *you*, sir, better put those away right now."

I answered the phone downstairs. When I spoke into the receiver, a male voice answered. "Hello," it said, and my chest vibrated.

"Hello," I repeated, a laugh catching onto the last syllable. "Hershey?"

"No," the voice replied, drawing out the "o," and my chest fell flat. "It's Booley."

I collapsed against the bar and wound the cord around my neck. There were spilling colanders of freshly picked snap beans and greens lined up there; Mama had to can that day as fast as she could manage to get those put up before more came in. "It's seven-thirty. What on earth do you want?"

"Is it too early?"

"For what?"

"I just thought I'd call--I'm doing hay with your daddy today, I mean, I'm coming over there in a few minutes, so I'll be over there for lunch. . . ."

"Uh, I won't be here," I said. I heard him swallow.

"I thought if your mama made lunch we could eat on the porch together or something, but if you're not going to be there. . . ."

I was silent.

"I thought maybe . . . I thought we could talk about going out, if you still want to, we could decide where to go or whatever."

"Let's decide now."

"You want to go?"

"Just tell me what time, all right?'

"It could be Friday, or Saturday, whichever. . . ."

"Friday," I said, sniffing in a colander of green beans. "Seven-thirty."

"Where do you want to eat? No--nevermind, I know where I want to take you."

"Okay."

He sighed, and when he spoke his voice was muffled, as if he had the receiver too close to his mouth. "Well, maybe I'll see you today."

"I pretty much stay out of the sun," I said. "I'm going to go eat breakfast now."

After I hung up the phone I picked up a bean out of the colander and broke it between my fingers. Juice beaded up at the snapping point, the white bean poking out and glistening. I smelled it, at once clean and earthy, and tears came to my eyes.

Mama and Daddy argued that morning over Michael as I ate my breakfast, Mama in her housecoat and Daddy in his overalls, because Daddy wanted Michael to help him haul hay but Mama insisted she was taking him to the doctor. Booley and another boy Daddy had got to help him drove up--I heard the truck coming, and dashed to the laundry room lest I be seen through a window--

and so Daddy didn't have time to stand in the kitchen and fight; Mama won. "Like a twelve-year-old boy makes a lick of difference rolling hay," she said, and she took Michael on to the emergency room in Middlefield, where the closest hospital was, because she didn't want to wait until she could get an appointment with his doctor.

Sure enough, when they came back, it was with a prescription.

"His arm is *infected*," Mama said when she came in the door, glaring out the window to where Daddy was driving the tractor in the sun.

"It's bacteria," Michael said proudly, picking at the new flesh-colored bandages he'd received in the emergency room.

"Don't touch that," Mama said.

But Mama lost her battle the next night, when Daddy insisted on letting Michael play first base against the Angels, and made him do tricep lifts on the bench in the garage before the game, even though Mama was sure he'd get dirt in his sore if he slid into a base. Mama's face looked like you could bounce beans off it, and Daddy walked around with a sheepish grin on his face, because although he wanted to have his way, he didn't want her to be mad. I saw him walk past her in the kitchen and ruffle her hair. She didn't smile.

The Pirates won the game, of course, and my whole family was there to see it. Joe and Ellen came, with all six kids, and Mama took Joe Jr. onto her lap and bounced him around, which was the

first time her face broke all day. She was rubbing her faint smile into his hair when he started fidgeting and crying, and Joe took him from her and belted him into his own lap with iron arms. He murmured in the child's ear, "Who's that on first, huh? Who's that on first?"

Will and June brought Ernie, who slipped away from them and stole under the bleachers, where he befriended the half-naked baby that belonged to the scruffy couple who cheered for Lucas Gooch. I looked down between the slats under my legs to see him take the baby's little fist in one of his hands, and stuff gravel in the baby's rubber pants with the other.

Agnes and Beth brought Granny, all wrapped up in a winter shawl and sweating tiredly. My uncle Terry was working, and Agnes's daughters stayed home because they didn't like baseball, but I could not really have imagined them there anyway. They were so disinclined to engage in any kind of conversation that to get a feel for their personalities required a lot of imagination.

Lo-rene and her group of friends did not sit with us because we took up nearly a whole set of bleachers, but she did stop by to run her new French manicure through Joe Jr.'s hair. "So fine," she breathed, winking at his father. Some of her lashes stuck when she did this and she had to reach with two square cream-and-flesh striped nails to separate them. "His hair is just like silk."

"It's like Ellen's," Joe agreed.

Lo-rene ignored that and went to sit down.

Neither Page nor Rosemary came to watch the game. Rosemary's aunt and uncle, I knew, were in from Clarksville and the family was going out to dinner, but I had no idea why Page wouldn't be there.

After the game was over, and it was over quickly, Will suggested we all go out to eat in Middlefield to celebrate Michael's victory and new bandages, and so as we were heading to our cars, I lingered behind so I might say something to Hershey. But Lo-rene had cornered him by the tree behind concessions, and I passed on by. He waved to me, and I heard Lo-rene say, "Little League has just got so much more exciting since you been here."

He called me later that night. When Mama told me it was a male I made her ask who it was, not thinking Booley cunning enough to lie, and sure enough, it was Hershey. He was calling to tell me he'd lined up a bunch of Tee-Ballers for a teaching session the next night, and would I help? I told him I would. Mama was hovering around in the kitchen even though there were no dishes to do because we'd eaten out.

Hershey kept starting to say something but clearing his throat instead.

"What?" I asked him.

"Mmmm," he started, and he cleared his throat.

"Quit it," I said. "Say it or don't."

"Well," he began, "did Page say anything to you about coming over to see me the other night?"

"What, Sunday? I kind of told her that Rosemary and I'd meet her out town, but I didn't."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Why didn't you come out there?" he asked.

"Meanness." My mama was staring at me. "Why, did she throw rocks at your window and try to drag you out town?"

He sat there for a minute just breathing into the phone. "No."

"No?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"There's no problem. I mean, she stopped by Wayne's house and all--I was just wondering why you weren't there."

When I hung up the phone, Mama was looking in the refrigerator for something that didn't seem to be there, but she shut the door and looked at me, her lips parted and her eyes shiny.

"What?" I said.

She smiled with her mouth open, mostly with her eyes, as if she were in the middle of an idea. Then she asked me, in a barely voiced whisper, "Has he kissed you?"

"No," I said, hoping her face would not fall flat, and it didn't; she just shut her mouth and left the kitchen. But I went upstairs to bed with a sour feeling in my stomach all the same, counting on my fingers and tallying 27 days until the Fourth of

July. I thought to myself, *I could rent a car.*

Chapter Forty-One

How can you keep yours from chipping? I got mine caught in the press at Murray and near tore my finger off--but I got Kelli to save it, she put on a new one for free.

You need to get you a square shape, because square is stronger.

I don't know as I'd want it to be stronger, because if it hadn't of broke, my whole finger would have gone with it down to the knuckle.

No, I don't mean that, I mean to keep it from chipping. You need to get you a square nail, and get four coats: base, color, topcoat, and lacquer. That lacquer is like cement. You could drive a car acrost it.

I don't know, my fingers don't look right with a square nail. See how mine's like ovals?

That don't matter. You cain't see the old nail once the new one's on.

Well, yeah.

Course, you got to be careful with zippers. Blue jeans is the death of a manicure.

Well, they stick so damn far off your finger. They don't point the same direction.

But they are so pretty. I just feel like a different woman.

And Coke cans. I have to get Dale to pop it open, unless I can slide a whole finger under there. But then I usually end up spilling it all over me.

Chapter Forty-Two

Infirmity brought a sweetness in Karl that left her sad and tired. It was not in a smile or even a brief touch on the cheek but in a soft silence instead of hasty words, chewing, or interminable clearing of the throat. He was trying to tell her thank you, and maybe other things as well, but the expression in his eyes that let her know he hoped she was deciphering his message left her with a deafening, blinding sadness. It was a tender sadness, though; she could touch him on the cheek and smile, and maybe that was enough.

Still, when the Ehemanns, who had been in town for piano lessons, stopped by with the doctor's message for her to come and visit him at her leisure, she left Karl with his foot propped up on the kitchen table and got a horse ready. But not with the sense of anticipation that she remembered from before; the baby seemed to be sitting on the part of her stomach that tingled.

"I hate to take you away from Karl when he needs you," the doctor said to her when she arrived in his sitting room upstairs at the Brechts', who thought she was getting Karl a tonic.

She was wearing her husband's trousers and no hat, which would have raised Mrs. Brecht's eyebrow except that she was taking care of a critically injured man and obviously could not be bothered with the protocol of normal social behavior. When she sat down before the doctor she didn't know how to put her legs, but it felt best for her stomach to lay them out straight and a little apart, so she did. He seemed relieved.

"Would you like to talk?" he asked her quietly.

"About what? About Karl? He's fine. He's not even up as much as he should be."

"No, not about Karl." The doctor opened a drawer of his desk and took out a leather notebook and a pencil. He sat down across from her.

She waited a long time for him to speak, wondering if he was listening to her breathing, which was gradually quietening and evening out from the ride over and the climb up the stairs.

When he did speak, he asked, "Would you like to tell me about coming to America?"

She paused, feeling a tiny patch of dew form across the bridge of her nose, and she studied his features as meticulously as she could without embarrassing him--his dark eyes blinked at her in anticipation--and then she laughed. "Is that what you asked me here for?"

The doctor sat back a little, abashed.

"No, no," she smiled, reaching over to his knee with one hand. "I just. . . ." She put both hands to her face and peeked out from between them, stretching her skin a little. "I've been taking care of a sick man all day, you must understand," she laughed, but with less mirth than before. "I've been washing linens to return to ladies and none of them marked which was theirs." Her face reddened under her hands.

He looked at her earnestly. "Would you like to stay a little while?"

"I need to stay a little while," she whispered quickly, glancing at the stairs.

He began scratching his pencil against the blank paper, and she noticed how smooth and soft the lead was, making lush black marks on the page. "Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Of course."

He smiled. "What was the trip here like?"

"Oh." She twisted her hair in her hands. "Oh, do you mean the train, or the boat?"

"Well, both . . . start with the boat."

"Of course you ask me to start with the part I can't remember so well." Her eyes changed as they stopped looking at the room around her and went elsewhere. "I came only with my sister. We knew we would land in New York, but we also knew we did not want to stay there. We planned to take the trains to Cincinnati."

"Karl was not with you?"

"No, I met him in Cincinnati after we arrived. My sister thought he was handsome and I did not, but it seemed it wouldn't matter because he was wanting to go south to farm. I wanted to stay in the city and so did Sophie."

The doctor smiled as he began to write in his notebook. "But you married Karl. How did that come about?"

Her eyes narrowed; she was staring off at the far wall. "I don't . . . it is not a romantic story, just ordinary. He started coming around the shop where we worked, and Sophie knew

he was coming to see me, so after a few weeks she stopped talking about how handsome she thought he was." She shook her head but did not move her eyes. "But you asked about the boat, and all I can tell you is that I slept nearly the entire trip. Sophie brought me food down into the . . . what are the small rooms called?"

"The cabins?"

"Yes, the cabin. I stayed in that small room most of the time."

"Oh, did the waves make you sick?"

"Not sick in my stomach, no." She kneaded her hands in her lap. "I just don't remember the boat well. I know I didn't see the statue, the . . . Statue of Liberty, although Sophie says I did, that we watched it together from the bow. But I would remember." She was no longer smiling, and the doctor stopped writing.

"Don't stop writing," she said. "I like the sound of the pencil."

"Where is Sophie now?"

She swallowed. "She stayed in Cincinnati. She lives there alone. I have not seen her in fifteen years."

She found that she was unable to look at him anymore. She stared at the rich pattern of the wallpaper above his head, cream with raised pink flowers.

"Is Sophie your only family?"

"Here, yes. But not in Germany. I have a whole big family there still and I write letters."

"And your parents?"

"Papa died before I was schooling age. Mama saw us off at the docks. We write still, you know, but her letters do not, they are not, they do not make as much sense as they used to." She laughed shortly. "Her brothers are crazy and I think she is not so far behind."

"So she has never seen your children?"

"*Nein*, no."

"Have you ever thought about bringing her over to live with you?"

"She would never leave Germany. She has my papa's farm and my papa's grave, and the tree where he proposed marriage to her is in the field behind the house. She would never leave."

The scratching from his pencil quickened to match the flow of her words. "Do your children speak German?"

"They know some, but we speak English in the house. My children are American children. But what you asked before about my mother never seeing my babies, maybe that is the hardest part. She writes to them in German, when she remembers that I have children, and then when they get the letters, they cannot read them. I have to translate, although they know the 'hello' and 'goodbye' and some other words. It is as if nothing from either world touches."

"But it must be a comfort to have so many Germans in the community."

"Oh, yes, and in some ways, at some times, the landscape is not so different, and when we get together and cook food from the old country, it doesn't seem that we are so far away."

The doctor smiled, and after he was through writing he leaned forward again on his knees. "I could tell that this was a German town the second I stepped out of the coach. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because everyone was so tall." He laughed. "I'm not short, but when I walked down the main street for the first time, I felt intimidated." He looked at her legs, which she had drawn together after she had begun to speak about her mother. "You are quite tall yourself."

She rubbed at her shoulders with both hands. "Mmm."

"Are you as tall as I am?" he asked.

She was embarrassed. "I don't know."

"Stand up," he said, and she did. He turned around and placed his back against hers, holding his hand flat at the top of his head, searching for hers with his fingers. With his other hand he reached for her arm to pull her closer for better accuracy. He didn't let go.

"You're almost as tall as I," he said, "because I can feel your hair where my top hand is."

"My shoulders are lower," she said.

"You have such long, graceful limbs," he remarked, and she was a little shocked, but they remained pressed to each other; he seemed unwilling just yet to let go of her arm. Then there was a scuffling at the bottom of the stairs. Mrs. Brecht's voice came up the well: "Doctor, doctor, the Millers' baby is in trouble! Doctor, are you still up there?"

They broke apart at the sound of her voice, and he scrambled for his coat and bag. "I have to go," he said, squeezing her hand, and he flew down the stairs.

Chapter Forty-Three

The shouting coming from the tractor-pull arena was exuberant the night Hershey convened his first Tee-Ball practice session. The preacher's words were hard to decipher, coming from inside the tent at the top of his lungs, but each string of words elicited a mighty "Amen!" from the assembly. One of the little boys, who was kicking a baseball around on the ground, said to me shyly, "My grampaw and grammaw's down there."

"They are?" I said. "What are they doing down there?"

He giggled and hid his face, rolling his eyes at my stupid question. "Talking to Jesus."

Hershey had rounded up a group of about twenty Tee-Ball players whose parents were both interested in having him teach their sons and who did not attend church on Wednesday; this made a substantial number of the kids Catholic. Some of the Protestant parents grumbled, because they all wanted their children prodded and examined by a Vanderbilt baseball player, but they also wanted them in church. None of the children present was the son of any of the Tee-Ball coaches. Several parents who dropped their children off tried to remain in the bleachers to watch and encourage, but Hershey shooed them off.

The first thing Hershey did was to have me line all the players up in a row along the third base line, facing him as he stood on the pitcher's mound. One particularly vocal child piped up as I shoved him into place, "Are you really going to be a Major League baseball player? My daddy said you were."

Hershey wiggled his eyebrows at him. "Who's your daddy?"

The boy seemed perplexed at the question. "You know, my mama and my daddy."

Hershey laughed. "Oh, *that* daddy."

The kid started to ask his question again, but Hershey was already ordering the group to number themselves off one-two starting at the home plate end of the line, which they did with loud, explosive pleasure, twice, because the first time the voices got ahead of the actual numbers and they lost count. Then Hershey held up his two hands on either side of his head. He alternated between the hands holding up either one or two fingers; when he held up one, the "ones" in line were supposed to jump forward and back, and when he held up two, the "twos" were supposed to do the same. The kids had no idea what this had to do with baseball, but their bright eyes were riveted first to Hershey's right hand and then to his left, back and forth, peripherally comparing their own jumps with those of their nearest neighbors in line. Hershey had to call a couple of them down for trying to jump too far.

The fifth child from home plate was the translucent Luther Cordell, who stuck out his tongue as he jumped. Many of the others were dressed in shorts--for baseball as leisure, not as business--but Luther was in his uniform, a Holcomb's Restaurant T-shirt and Wrangler blue jeans, unbelievably narrow at the hips and too long over his cleats, which were crushed in at the toes with laces straggling. A neighbor had brought him to the edge of

the park and he had walked all the way to the baseball field by himself. He had a fresh haircut buzzed close to his pale scalp.

Hershey did not quit the hand game until the boys had stopped laughing, until he had every wide eye focused upon his hands and the jumping ceased to be competitive. They were moving almost perfectly together, as I watched from home plate, where I sat patiently waiting. When Hershey dropped his hands to end the exercise, the boys stood silent and still for a moment. Then one fidgeted, and the rest fell at ease.

"Why did we do that?" one midget asked.

"That," Hershey replied, "is going to help you get a hit every time you come up to bat."

"Uh-*uh*."

The remainder of the session was spent practicing swinging without jerking and running without flailing; I noticed that Luther was making progress and seemed very pleased with himself. All the little boys were offering their inspired best, and I heard a lot of laughter. After the practice was over and each boy had been collected by the proper parent (Luther left with another little boy), the field was hushed and peaceful, the revival tents muted down below. Hershey was rounding up the last of the equipment when I first noticed an older woman leaning on her elbows against the fence. She had her hair up in a bun on

the top of her head, where her hair was the most silver; the underside at her neck was dark and lush and soft. She was wearing a plain blouse that showed her sweat, and a long, dark skirt which hung only inches above her rubber-soled shoes. She was watching us, and when I saw her and made eye contact, she smiled.

I smiled back, and she came along the fence toward me, opening her mouth to speak.

"Who's that?" Hershey asked me softly.

"Hidy," the woman said, nodding. "I just come up the hill here"--she gestured back behind her--"to let y'all know we have pizza down there, it's Young Folks' Night."

She had come from the revival tent. I couldn't help but look down there. There was busy milling around the outside of the tent, and tables had been set up.

"We saw, Brother Jim and I saw," she continued in a soft, firm voice, "that you were up here on the field with the little ballplayers, and we wanted you to come and join us." She nodded, wiping the sweat from her neck, her eyes wide and grayish blue. "Brother Jim McAllen is the speaker tonight, and he's wonderful. And we're having a pizza party, with Co-Colas."

I looked but couldn't find Hershey in the corner of either eye. "I've already eaten."

The woman smiled without wavering. "Well, come down and have some fellowship, then. We sure would be awful glad to have you."

"I. . . ." I couldn't think quickly enough. "I'm Catholic."

The woman nodded, as if she understood completely. "That's all right. We just want the kids to meet and get to know each other, you know, have some Christian fun."

I felt Hershey at my elbow. "I don't think so," I said.

The woman nodded again, and looked at the ground. "I just have to ask you, then," she said, and her eyes came straight back up to mine, "have you been saved?"

My skin prickled. "I'm Catholic," I repeated helplessly.

"Well, what I'm asking you is, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?"

I shifted from one foot to the other. "Well, yeah," I said. "I guess."

"You don't need that church," she said suddenly, gripping the fence earnestly. "You don't need that false worship. All you got to do is accept the Lord."

I stared at her. Drops beaded on her upper lip.

"Please just consider coming down to hear Brother Jim," she said, relaxing her grip and straightening her skirt modestly. "We would really love to have you."

Rosemary's grandmother never used to babysit us nights without Bible story time, without good meeting evil in the living room. Rosemary's silky hair ran under her fingers, and with the other hand she would hold mine back so that my ears hurt. Brush this one hundred times a day, to look like my Rosemary, Joshua

fought the battle of Jericho, and baby, you don't have to earn your place in heaven. Her lips would be close to my ear. Don't you let nobody tell you you got to do good works to impress Jesus. And I wrote down on a piece of paper that night, brush one hundred strokes.

"Maybe," I said, thinking a refusal would make the woman stay longer, but I said it as indignantly as I dared to.

She hesitated a second, her face horribly open, and then she was gone back down the hill.

"Geez," Hershey said, finally coming out from behind me.

I waited until I could no longer see the bun atop her head. "Really," I said. "Like I'd go eat pizza with Brother Jim."

"You wouldn't go?" he asked.

"No way."

"Oh, come on."

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you insane?"

He grinned and dropped the bats he was holding on the ground. "Let's go down there. Just to see what it's all about."

"I *know* what it's all about."

"Well, to make fun of it, then."

"My daddy would roll over and die."

"Don't tell your daddy," he said. He had hold of my wrist and was leading me toward the fence, staring down at the busy tent. "It's not every day you get to go to a revival."

"Well, practically," I said.

"I just have to see this."

I sighed. "Can we sneak down there? I don't want to be *noticed*, for God's sake."

"I want a piece of pizza."

"When you eat their food, you become one of them." I resisted his pulling. "That's Rosemary's grandmother's church, you know."

"Really? Rosemary doesn't go there, does she?"

"No, she's Methodist."

"I thought she seemed a little serene for revival."

I knew that if he went down to the tent, I would go, too. He honored my request to sneak in by circling around centerfield and descending into the tractor-pull pit from the thick trees behind, holding on to my wrist the whole time. We passed a stand of peach trees surrounded by rotted, wasted fruit. I grumbled and told him he couldn't have any pizza, but I felt a rush of pleasurable adrenaline as I tumbled along in the brush behind him. When we got to the edge of the woods, we were at the brink of the pit, and we stepped sideways, one foot at a time, down into the red clay that sank softly beneath our feet. We were coming in behind the great lit tent in the dark, whose back flaps were tied loosely together so that you could see the crowd inside.

I saw lots of people I had gone to high school with around the front, all in one mass, as nametagged church fellows laced through them shaking hands to prevent coagulation into small groups.

"God, it smells like *sausage*," Hershey moaned softly.

"Please control yourself."

"Come on, Gabriel, it's free."

"Nothing is free! This is a revival!"

"Please?"

"You don't understand."

But he was off before I could stop him, and I didn't want him to let go of my wrist, where his fingers had grown warm, and so I followed him. He squeezed me, but as we approached the tent and came into the light, he let go.

We fell into the informal food line, which was really wider than it was long as people shoved in closer. The pizza was set up along four tables manned by church ladies in long dark skirts, with the soft drinks at the end. I saw the woman who had extended us the invitation pouring Sun-drop into plastic cups.

A large man in a dark suit came up behind me and Hershey and clapped us both on the shoulders. "Good to have you folks with us," he said, and he continued to speak to us as he moved to lay hands on the people in front of us: "What church are you a member of?"

"I'm not from here," said Hershey.

"St. Mary's," I said.

The man kept moving, he was already touching the next people, but he nodded slowly and meaningfully at me, shutting his eyes and opening them again.

When he was sufficiently past us, Hershey grinned at me.

Before long there were kids behind us as well as in front, and the one right behind me was a classmate, Dina Wampus, who had been an all-district basketball player and president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She touched me on the elbow and said, "Well, Gabriel, it sure is good to see *you* here."

I smiled, and she continued, "I've heard Brother Jim speak before, and watched him help people get saved." She leaned in close, looking at Hershey with wide, smiling eyes, and whispered in my ear. "Is that Wayne Barfield's nephew? I heard he plays baseball at Vanderbilt."

"His name is Hershey, and he's here for pizza," I said.

"Oh." Dina swallowed. She didn't move any farther from me, or peel her eyes off Hershey. "So, when do you leave for school?"

By the time we got to the pizza I was tired of talking to Dina, who was a big UT fan and seemed to be feeling me out for football tickets, and Hershey's stomach was growling so loud I could hear it. He took three big slices of sausage pizza on a red plastic plate.

"Don't you want any?" he asked me.

"Blecchhh."

He frowned as we drifted toward the soft drinks. "You're a bad sport."

I wanted to get out of line before he got his Coke so that the woman with the bun on her head wouldn't see me, but she made

eye contact before I could escape. She smiled generously, far into her cheeks, and asked Hershey, "What kind of Coke, hon?"

Stout-bellied men in dark suits were ushering the line unhurriedly into the tent, pausing to talk to some of the teenagers with their pizza.

"I don't want to go in there," I hissed into Hershey's ear.

"That's the best part," he protested. "You could make a hell of a list in there. Count anti-Catholic slurs."

I looked around for a way to sneak around the men and leave the way we had come. I turned to see that the line had grown--and that Page and Sammy were standing at the end of it.

She was looking right at me.

I turned to Hershey. "Well, look who's here."

He did. "Mmm," he grumbled, taking a bite of pizza. "Hold my Coke, I can't do all this at once."

"I'm going over there."

"Go right ahead. I'll wait here." His face was turned down to his pizza, his eyes dark.

I left him and walked over to Page, even though she folded her arms and nuzzled into Sammy's chest to avoid eye contact.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked her, grabbing her arm and pulling her face out of Sammy's armpit.

"I could ask you the same thing." When she looked up, I was not surprised to see that she was looking at Hershey instead of at me. Hershey, meanwhile, had turned his back to us.

"I'm here for pizza. I hope that's what you're here for."

"Well," she whined, her voice squeaking off at the end, "actually, Sammy's aunt and uncle goes to church at Razor Point and all, and they said Brother Jim was a good speaker."

Sammy nodded. His beefy hands were stuffed in his back pockets, and he never quite looked at me.

"Oh," I said. "Have a good time, then."

"You're not going inside?"

"Not if I can help it."

"What about old dogface over there?" Page tipped her chin at Hershey. "Not that he could even come over here and say hi or nothing."

"When he fills up, we're leaving."

Hershey was eating pretty fast, I saw. When he started on his second piece, he turned to jerk his head at me. "Come on, Gabriel," he hollered.

"Hey, there, Hershey!" Page yelled at him, but he turned his back again. She snorted at me. "You can just tell him my boyfriend and me said hello."

When I got back to Hershey he was polishing off the crust.

"What was *that* all about?" I asked.

He shrugged, his cheeks bulging. "She gets on my nerves."

I rolled my eyes. "Is *that* all."

"Let's go in."

"No."

"God, aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Can't we listen from behind the tent? You can see inside a little bit."

"What if they have snakes? We wouldn't be able to see."

I laughed. "They're not going to handle snakes, for crying out loud. This is recruiting. They don't want to scare people off. Besides, it's Missionary Chapel of God that does snakes, not Razor Point."

"Oh."

We wound around the line of kids waiting for food, past Page and Sammy who watched us but didn't acknowledge us. We mingled in the crowd of people, many of whose faces were those of strangers from other towns, and progressed out of the circle of light around the tent and into the dark.

Hershey clutched his plate with his last piece of pizza on it. "I could eat two more slices, easy."

"You're not going back."

The back of the huge tent, with its loosely tied canvas flaps, was at the lowest point of the pit, just before the soft clay sides sloped back up into the woods. We found a grassy spot and sank to the ground.

"I'm getting dirty," I said.

We watched through the narrow slit as the crowd settled into the tent. We really only had a view of the seats nearest the center aisle, and the podium Brother Jim was to speak from. Hershey finished his pizza, leaned back on his elbows, and let

out a colossal burp. Our knees touched where I sat cross-legged and he had his legs outstretched.

There was no lengthy introduction for Brother Jim. As soon as the last of the pizza-eaters came through the entrance, he bounded up onto the dais and gripped the lectern. He was, in fact, the man who had asked us earlier what church we attended.

"Welcome!" he boomed into the mike, which caused the speaker system to crackle and emit a high squeal. I wondered what it was about preachers' voices that knocked people flat. "I'm glad to see so many fresh faces here. Now I'd like you all to bow your heads as my friend Jason Hassill says the opening prayer."

Jason Hassill was a rising junior halfback who had prayed many times before the Hope Springs football games. He stepped up to the mike from the first row, closed his eyes, and cleared his throat. "Heavenly Father," he began in a small, mumbling voice, "we just ask you to bless us all here tonight, just gathered to hear your holy Word, Lord. We just ask that you just touch the hearts of everyone here tonight, Lord, we just pray that we come to understand that Your way is the only way. Lord, just bless us here tonight. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."

"Amen," answered the crowd, and Jason stepped down to let Brother Jim back on center stage.

"Thank you, Jason," Brother Jim said. His hair was super-smooth and shone peacefully in the spotlights directed at him. "I hope you're enjoying your pizza. Just keep right on eating

while I'm up here talking--I don't mind at all, that's what the food is here for, it's the Lord's bounty, give thanks."

"Amen!" a couple of people shouted.

"Just don't chew so loud that the fella next to you cain't hear," he said, and the crowd laughed. "The Lord giveth, but Brother Jim may taketh away." The laughter was broad, with a little applause scattered around, and it took a while to die out.

"Let's hear from anybody out there with pepperoni! Give me a yell!" Brother Jim raised his hands in the air, and part of the crowd screamed and clapped and hooted.

When that died away, he cried, "And who's got sausage?"

There was more hollering and applause. "Whoo-whee!" Hershey cried, sitting up and throwing both hands over his head. "Me, Brother Jim! Me! Me!"

Brother Jim put his hands on his hips indignantly. I saw that he had chunky gold rings on the fourth finger of each hand. "Well, that leaves just plain cheese."

The rest of the crowd roared, and Hershey belched again.

"And, *finally*," Brother Jim bellowed, raising his arms, "who's got . . . *salvation*?"

The crowd noise condensed quickly to a tiny hum.

Brother Jim stepped down, his eyebrows arched dramatically into furry carets. "What?" he nearly whispered, and the tent fell silent. "*What?* Do you mean to tell me," he wheezed as he approached the first row and snatched a plate of pizza from the young man in the aisle seat, "do you mean to tell me that you

know beyond the *shadow* of a doubt that you've got pepperoni on this plate, you screamed and hollered to tell me so, but you don't know for sure if you've got *eternal salvation?* What does that say about you?"

"What *does* that say about him?" I whispered to Hershey.

"I have no idea."

"And, young fella," Brother Jim croaked as the first drop of sweat barreled down his nose, "you're not alone. I'm not singling you out." He held the plate aloft. "Everyone in this room's got pizza. Yes, everyone in this *room's* got pizza-pie. You told me so. You screamed your very *lungs* out to tell me so."

"Well, hardly," I said.

"But I ask who's got salvation, and nobody . . . said . . . a . . . *word.* Not a *word.*" He handed the plate back to its owner.

"He'll never eat that *now*," Hershey said.

"Now aren't you glad we're not in there?"

"Nobody's eating."

"And you sit there so happy," Brother Jim continued, stepping back up on the dais. His voice became conversational again, and he even chuckled. "So happy. You know where you are, but not where you're going, and you're not worried a lick. Because you're human. Fallen. Forgetful. In . . . need . . . of . . . *Jesus.*" His shoulders, which I had not even noticed creeping up toward his ears in his excitement, returned to their proper places alongside his chest. He swallowed and dabbed his

face with a handkerchief. "I've got a story to tell you," he said.

"Now, you young people who are here tonight, my message is for you, and make no mistake, I applaud you for being here. I *applaud* you. You being here shows that you want to be right with the Lord. You want it. You're not out cruising around town in your hot rod, or indulging in whatever trash and smut and garbage is on at the movie theater. You're here because you crave the Word. You *crave* it.

"Now, in my ministry, which is a blessing from the Lord, I have had the chance to witness before thousands of young people like yourself. And I've heard many, many tales about the faithful falling from the fold, only to return and beg the forgiveness of God. Many, many personal stories. Many tales of triumph and tragedy. Many tales of darkness and light.

"And I'm going to tell you one that has stuck with me. About a young person like all y'all listening. Someone right with God. She was seventeen, she'd got saved right under the palm of my hand when she was sixteen. We took her to the creek and poured water over her head and she just cried, and cried, and cried, and said she felt Jesus come into her right then." There was satisfied acknowledgment of this from all over the tent, some "Amen"s and "uh-huh"s. Brother Jim's consonants became crisper. "Of course, we don't require anyone to go into the water, do we?"

Some church members hollered out, "No!"

"We don't re-*quire* anyone to go into the water because we know it's a personal decision. We're right with the times *and* right with God. It's a struggle to be both, but as long as God comes first. . . . We don't re-*quire* anyone to go into the water, mind you, but God come over the heart of this young lady and said, Regina--that watn't her name but I want to protect her, I'm right with the times--Regina, I call you into the water. And there she went. Practically *run*-ning for Second Creek." There was laughter.

"Now this young Regina was a brilliant student. God gave her a talent for His glory, the talent for knowing her books. Regina wanted to be a nurse. She wanted to study her biology, her medicines, to help sick people. She was a blessed young lady.

"Now Regina had an op-por-*tyoo*-nity, this was the summer after her seventeenth birthday, an op-por-*tyoo*-nity to take a special study course away from home for a few weeks. Oh, a chance to get away from the parents!" Brother Jim paused to allow laughter. "A chance to be on her own! And for this gifted, blessed, God-fearing young Christian girl, it was a *responsibility*. A call from the Lord to better herself.

"So her parents dropped her off at the dormitory--this *special study course* took place at a college, a u-ni-*ver*-sity--and they left her with lots of hugs and kisses, with her teddy bear, oh, I think his name was *Ralph*"--Brother Jim chuckled heartily--"and they told her they loved her, and that God would

watch over her until she got home. And she said, Mama, Daddy, I love you too."

"She's going to die somehow," I said.

"Well, it watn't long before this special study course got started, and on the first day of her first class--it was biology, by the way, and they cut up the dead body of a cat on the first day, can you believe that?--Regina found herself sitting next to what she thought must be the most handsome young fella she had ever seen."

"Oh, God," said Hershey.

"And Regina bowed her head and said, *Oh, thank you, Jesus.*" Brother Jim smiled slyly, and the crowd laughed and applauded. "And this young man returned her first smile at him. Finally, as they was cutting the stomach out of that little kitty-cat together, he got a great big sniff of them *pre*-servatives and asked her out on the spot.

"So they went for ice cream together that night, Regina got vanilla, the boy got chocolate, and as they walked home, he reached for her hand to hold it, and she let him, but she says, 'Harold,' 'cause that was the boy's name, 'Harold, there's one thing we got to get straight from the start. I'm a Christian.' And that boy took a long look at her and replied, 'That's an awful good thing to hear. So am I.'

"And Regina was never so happy in her life. She and that Harold began to date, and after their summer school was over, why, they kept right on dating. Turned out their towns was only

an hour apart. And they went to church together on Sundays. Why, Harold would even drive in on a Wednesday when his folks would let him, and him and Regina would go to service. And her mama and daddy told her, 'Regina, that is a fine young man you got there.'

"Now, after a few months, Regina and Harold was getting serious about each other. Regina looked at that boy with holy love in her eyes, and she thanked her Savior every day for bringing him into her life. Now one night they was walking along, out on the backroads on her daddy's farmland, and then, suddenly, Harold took her by the shoulders and kissed her. Not a loving kiss, shared by two people who love in Christ, but a lustful kiss coming from his body and not his heart."

Hershey lay down on the muddy ground, put his hands over his eyes, and groaned.

"Well, Regina stopped him cold and asked him what on earth had come over him, and he says to her, 'Now that we know we are meant for each other, it's all right.' It's *all right*, he says. And Regina knew better, and that young lady told him, 'No.' No. *No.* 'Read your First Corinthians,' she said.

"Well, Harold backed down. He said, 'All right, Regina, because I respect you.'

"But it kept happening. More and more, Harold would make carnal advances toward Regina, and she found herself praying for the strength to say no to him, to remain true to the Christian

ideal. And she found herself asking God whether Harold was really the one sent to her to be her husband and life partner.

"Finally, one night, when she again with the help of God resisted Harold's wandering hands, he just snapped, right there before her very eyes. 'It's not Christian,' she had said to him, and he just pushed her away. 'Christian!' he yelled at her. He yelled. 'You don't honestly *believe* that stuff, do you?'" Disapproving murmurs rose from the seats. "'You don't honestly *believe* that there is a God up there, watching everything we do, making rules for the way we're supposed to live? Regina,' he says, 'Jesus wasn't God. He was a man who died and didn't come back. All we have is the here and now. Living is only for this moment, right here.'" Brother Jim laughed shortly and shook his head, and others in the congregation did the same.

Then he was shouting. "'You're wrong,' Regina says, and she pulled herself up straight and let the tongue of *God* speak in her! 'God loves you, He died for you, and all you have to do is accept Him for your salvation.'

"Well, that made Harold mad as the devil, and he says to her"--and here Brother Jim slowed down dramatically--"he says, 'I will *never* accept that.'"

Brother Jim stopped altogether, letting the tent fall silent. Then he whispered, "I . . will . . . *never* . . . accept . . . that."

He looked slowly around him, searching for the eyes of each listener before he went on.

"Harold got his way," he said softly. "Oh, yes, sir, Harold got his way. He took Regina in his arms, believing not in the Word of God, the Holy Bible, and he had his way with her. She screamed, and she struggled, and in her mind she was not taken, but her body yielded to Harold's superior strength. He took her virginity, yes, he did, he raped her, but he could not touch with his dirty hands Regina's loyalty to the Lord. He didn't take that from her. Not her loyalty to the Lord."

"Regina never saw Harold again after that night, at least not until"--Brother Jim paused and then began to crescendo--"she . . . looked . . . into the eyes . . . of her newborn . . . *baby . . . son*, nine months later!"

The church women near the front shook their heads and said things like, "Lordy," and "Mmm, mmm."

Hershey sat up. "I take it back, I'm not curious at all."

"I told you so."

"I am the opposite of curious."

"I told you so." I knew already what I would write in my book that night: *the white canvas tent, the smells of sweat and cheese, and carnal kisses in the pale moonlight.*

"Can we go now?"

As we climbed hand in hand back up the side of the pit into the trees, sidestepping rotten peaches, I heard Brother Jim's voice through the bright slit in the tent: "Regina never got to be a nurse. The world is full of snares, children, full of snares."

Chapter Forty-Four

Red Rover, Red Rover.

Religious fervor comes and goes like weather fronts. The time before revivals smells like the time before rain, with dust stirred up by an ill wind. Sometimes there are tents, but often the flashing-bulb arrow sign in front of the civic center says, "Brother Anthony Rollins, October 21, 7:00 PM," give or take a letter or two, or "Rev Bill Hudson, Holyoke Prim Baptist Farthing KY, Dec 2, with supper." Traveling preachers usually sign up for a town's largest venue, and days before they arrive their entourages of plainly dressed men with skinny ties quietly obtain keys to the civic center and spend an afternoon setting up rows ot tables and chairs.

High schools buzz a week in advance, because often bold T-shirts announcing the coming of the speaker of the Truth are sent out to churches for their teenagers. These are mostly Baptist churches. Most of the shirts remind the young people, who routinely forget, that "His pain is your gain," and so, just like any other offer of something for nothing, the campaign causes them to pause and marvel at their luck. And also to spread the word that there is free salvation to be had at the Civic Center Friday night, and free pizza as well.

Have you been saved?

Yes, replies the cheerleading captain. *I chose the Lord when I was twelve.* (At a revival.)

I've been saved. Have you been saved?

Well, replies the student council vice-president, *I go to church, but I haven't ever had the, you know, big experience.*

You're going to hear Brother Anthony, then, aren't you?

Oh, probably, replies the student council vice-president. *Whatever night the pizza is.*

Have you been saved?

Uh, replies the Catholic student. *I'm Catholic.*

Well, you're going to hear Brother Anthony, aren't you? He's a real good speaker, and there's pizza, and it's just, you know, a lot of fun. He's real funny.

I hadn't really thought about it, says the Catholic student, who, if pressed by a nun, would no longer be able to name all of the Joyful, Sorrowful, or Glorious mysteries of the rosary. *Who else is going?*

They all go, in the end; the cheerleading captain pays attention primly, the student council vice-president is overcome with feeling and makes the long march down the aisle to declare before God and everybody that he has sinned sexually with his girlfriend (the cheerleading captain), and the Catholic student is hung up somewhere in the spiritual yonder unsure of where he came from or where he is going. But he knows that Jesus is good--no one disputes that--and everyone is sweating and crying and rapt as Brother Anthony cajoles and shouts, and in this rush of feeling he lunges to the front and accepts the freebie (he never thought it was free before). He is seduced by its simplicity. And he is welcomed, oh, so warmly, into the fold.

Monday at school is a day of tallying and sizing up the forces. The Catholics will always take the loss. They will always suffer the lack of competitive advertising and will wait painfully for the lapsed to come back to Mass. The Catholic kids know, or would know if they thought about it, that they don't all believe the same things, but they rankle when one of their own gets a T-shirt with the bloody face of Jesus on it. There is, after all, gloating from their Baptist friends who saw the moment of salvation happen.

A week later, the shirts die out, and the Catholic student who has one is still deciding whether to let his mama see it, and the cheerleading captain's breasts are being fondled by the student council vice-president in the art-supply closet.

Red Rover, Red Rover.

Chapter Forty-Five

Church on Sunday morning was without Karl. She took her brood alone, and as the nuns crossed their path on the way to the church steps they smiled solemnly at the children.

She sat between Joseph and Fritz because they had fought in the buggy on the way over. Now they wriggled to try to send shock waves to each other through the conducive, motherly medium of her body. It was like just before they were born, she thought, when they were kicking and punching to send the message that they were ready through her skin and muscles. Well, she had held the screams in then, and she would now too.

Perfume smells were drifting back to her from two pews ahead, from the paper-pressed curls of nineteen-year-old Katie Meisterand, who sat between her parents and whose loins had never borne any kind of shock whatsoever. Thick lavender ribbons curled down from the small bouquet of silk pansies that fastened Katie's braids, and two pews back she imagined that they were generating a tremendous purple smell. She smelled it collecting in her nostrils. Joseph did, too, and he held his nose. It was the first time he'd sat still all morning.

After what seemed like a long while she didn't smell it anymore, and then the bells were sounding in the tower, and then a heavy pair of late footsteps echoed quickly down the center aisle. Katie whipped her braids around to look, unleashing a wave of potent smell over the pews behind her, and broke into a smile that was met with another.

Dr. Blair's late and heavy footsteps stopped at the Meisterands' pew.

Two pews behind, between her two boys, she watched him genuflect and squeeze into the pew beside Katie's father, and she Katie blush so hard her dimples were purple. Katie's mother smiled faintly under cathedral eyebrows and Katie's father offered the doctor a grim, pious hand for the shaking.

Heads turned and surveyed, and then turned back to their missals held ready for the opening hymn.

She had not missed the signs of formal wooing. Eleanor Lilly, the daughter of the lumber mill clerk, had either been only a rumor or had been passed by. The bells slowed and the congregation commenced singing, and she began to laugh out loud. Joseph, whose hands only moments before had flashed behind her back to pinch his brother, was confused and embarrassed at her laughter and pulled on her hand to make her stop, but she couldn't until the first verse was nearly over.

Chapter Forty-Six

When Hershey dropped me off at home after the revival that night--he had Wayne's truck--there was never any time when our faces were close together. Or really any moment at all when we were touching, after he let go of my hand at the top of the hill. He seemed tired, and so of course as I was lying in bed hours after he had gone I was disappointed. I turned to my pillow and placed my open lips against it, and fuzz got on my tongue.

The phone rang at seven o'clock the next morning.

"Hello," I breathed into the receiver, before I was awake enough to remember that no one I wanted to talk to would be calling at seven.

"Gabriel," Page answered, "are you sleeping?"

"Why aren't *you*?"

"My mama got me up, she wants me to clean all my daddy's stuff out of the hall closet. I ain't started yet. I was wondering if you wanted to come over and help me."

"No," I said. "God, Page, why do you always have to get me out of bed?"

"Sor-*reee*. I just thought you might be interested in knowing that I'm not after Hershey anymore. I mean, I just cain't have two guys at once, because I'm not that way, you know, and really, I mean, Sammy is being so sweet lately. So as for Hershey, you know, Rosemary can just have him if she wants him."

"What do you mean, Rosemary?"

"Well, I reckon she wants him anyway. I saw him sitting out with her last night at Sudsies."

"He was with me last night at the revival."

"No, I know, I mean after. It was late when Sammy took me home, because we stayed for the whole thing. When Sammy told me he wanted to stay for the whole thing, I was like, no way, because I want to go riding around, but he swore to me that Brother Jim was a good speaker like his aunt and uncle said, so I said okay, you know, okay, but anytime I want to I can get up and leave. And you have to come with me. And he said, okay, baby doll, okay, that's our thing, you know, *okay baby doll* he says to me all the time, and I usually say I ain't your baby doll." She laughed. "I mean, *you* know. God. Baby doll. Whatever. But he says he's kidding, but I don't know, you know, I mean, stuff he was saying was *getting* to me. And I . . . I mean . . . Sammy sat there and just put his head in his hands, and when Brother Jim asked for all those convicted of their sins to come to the front and let him pass his hand over them, well, Sammy gets up, you know, and starts going up there--I mean he doesn't even look at me, like he's having too big an experience or something, and I . . . well. . . ."

"You went up there with him."

"Well, everybody was just kind of sitting there looking like their dog had died, and the whole front half was crying and nodding their head, and God, Gabriel, right then I was just so

sorry that I'm such a bad person. I mean, Brother Jim told this story about this one girl who was going to be a nurse--"

"I don't want to hear it."

"I just felt bad all of a sudden and so I went with him up to the front. You just had to kneel there and wait a minute while Brother Jim run up and down the line with his hands stretched out."

"So you got saved."

"Well, Sammy says *he* got saved, he says he felt the anger of God coming over him but then after that, nothing but love. I sort of understand that, I mean, I felt bad, but then after I went up there I was kind of relieved."

"Well," I said. "So how does it feel to know you're for sure going to heaven?"

"Oh, well, I don't know if *that's* what that means, I mean, it was just like a clean slate or something, you know, like confession."

"Only easier, I guess, since you had to confess in front of about a million people."

"God, Gabriel. You're so mean. You probly could have stood to go up there yourself."

"I think I'm pretty much through talking to you this morning."

"No, I didn't mean to be mean, I was kidding, I gotta tell you one more thing. It was late, about midnight when I saw Hershey sitting up there with Rosemary. You know, that'd be cool

for you if him and Rosemary got together, since y'all are such good friends, like if he'd come up to see her and stuff in Knoxville. Not like if she was with Buddy, I mean, what a creep, you know."

After I hung up with Page I lay in bed unmoving with my hair wrapped in tangled coils around my head. I couldn't go back to sleep. My chest felt cold and tingly, like I'd just had a good scare. I finally got up and went downstairs to the kitchen, where Mama was already up and fixing herself some eggs.

"I heard the phone ring," she said. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah."

"Who was it?"

"Page."

"She woke you up."

"Sure."

My mama set her eggs on the back burner and cracked another egg into a bowl. She made me French toast in the skillet without even asking me, and got out powdered sugar from the cabinet to sprinkle across the top.

I couldn't eat it. I poured syrup all over it and cut it into a zillion pieces as Mama ate her cold eggs.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

I licked some syrup off the fork to cover up the cold sour feeling marching up my throat. "Do you know what color Rosemary's eyes are?"

"Rosemary's eyes?" My mama blinked. "I don't know--they're brown or something, aren't they? How come?"

I leaned forward a little into her face and opened my eyes wide. "What color are mine?"

"Blue," she said. "When's the last time you looked in a mirror?"

I kept blinking at her.

My mama's chewing got slower and she smiled faintly. "But I've always said your eyes are the deepest, clearest color I've ever seen, like the cornflower crayon in the Crayola box." She leaned in a little, so that our noses almost touched. "You can see all the little sections around the pupil clear as day, with little stripes of gray."

"Good," I said, and I looked back down at my plate.

"You're not going to eat that, are you?"

I sat out on the porch swing in my pajamas for the rest of the morning. Mama stayed inside, although I could see her looking out the window at me, until she finally came out and made me scoot over so she could sit down.

"You know," she said after a little while of silence, "we haven't even talked about you going off to school."

There was another immeasurable silence, and I replied, "No."

"I mean, at the least we've got some shopping to do. And since you got your scholarship, your daddy and I have the money set aside to get you whatever you want before you go. I thought

maybe a little microwave, or all new stuff for your bed, or both."

I tried so hard to think about neutral things, like the way the gray porch paint was peeling, but the tear came and rolled down my nose anyway. "I can't think about that right now, Mama, I can't."

Her arms came round me and she tried to pull me closer to her, but I felt upright and stiff as a tree. "Sweetie, I don't want you to go, either."

"I can't think about that."

The air around us was as hot and miserable as I could ever remember its being.

I stayed on the porch swing in my pajamas until noon, long after my mama had gone inside, which was where I was when I heard the pathetic putt of a Moped off beyond the trees. Hershey was coming down the driveway. I saw his bag slung over the back of the seat as he got closer, and even though he waved to me, I couldn't smile back. My lips felt dead.

When he got off the bike and kicked it onto its stand, he took a long look at me. "What are you doing in your nighties? It's noon."

"Making some decisions."

"Oh?"

"Sure."

"Anything important?"

"Maybe."

"Anything I should know about?"

"What do you care?" I picked a hair out of my mouth.

He dropped his bag heavily onto the porch floor. Some pencils spilled out from under the flap. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I widened my eyes, staring at the hair I had rescued and appreciating its red glint in the sun.

"Oh, great," he said. "I was hoping you would be in a really cooperative mood today."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I want to go back to the cemetery today. I want to do a sketch of you on your great-grandmother's grave."

"How gross."

"Come on, it's the best idea I've had all summer. I know just how I want you."

"And I'm supposed to just get up from where I've sat so gracefully making decisions all morning and go with you. Just because you putt down here on your pathetic bike and wave pencils at me."

"God, are you gripey today."

"I can't think of a good reason to go."

"Fine. I'll just do you from memory."

"Uggghhh." I popped up from the swing with great force. "Wait here and I'll go put my clothes on."

We rode to St. Mary's with me poised on the bar in front of him, squatting and wearing his helmet as he rode bareheaded. I made him take the back way through the fields because I certainly didn't want to be seen. His left arm went round my waist and so I helped steer with mine.

He parked the bike by the first row of graves, all modern and shiny. Emmitt Scheisel, an old man who lived two blocks from church, was mowing the grass off in the corner where they buried babies.

"There's somebody here," I said, taking the helmet off my head. "I don't know if I want to do this."

"He doesn't look like the kind to gossip," Hershey said.

"Depends on how you're going to pose me."

"Nude."

"I think even Emmitt might notice that."

"He'd love it."

"I'll have to pass."

"You know," Hershey said, pulling his pack onto his shoulder, "I was kidding, but I am supposed to turn in a nude as part of this portfolio."

"You can start eliminating that thought from your mind right now."

"I wouldn't ask you to do that."

"You would too, and I'm telling you right now to forget about it. Especially while we're standing on top of so many of my dead relations." We began walking toward the oldest part of the graveyard, where the chalky obelisks seemed to stick their tops all the way into the clouds. "Why don't you try just standing in front of a mirror?"

He laughed. "At Wayne's house? His kids have already been nosing around in my sketchpad."

"Which is full of me."

"Besides, my art advisor is female, and I wouldn't want to give her the wrong impression."

"Is she cute?"

"Not really. But she's married."

"Why is she not cute?"

"I don't know . . . she has really frizzy black hair, parted down the middle, and granny glasses with a chain. Why do you care?"

"I don't care."

"Would you like it if I listed her unattractive qualities, so you could write it down later?"

I folded my arms. We had almost reached my great-great-grandmother's grave. "I don't write just anything down in my book," I sniffed. "I'm not a pack rat."

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to insult you."

When we reached the grave marked "Helder" I sat down on the grassy earth, which showed no signs of ever having been dug into

at all, and Hershey fished around for the equipment he wanted. "I'm doing this in red pencil," he announced.

"Innovative," I nodded.

He smirked. "So when do I get to see your book?"

"I showed you my book."

"You showed me a list of foods from your mother's spice rack."

"Well, if you're expecting something much more profound than that, you're going to be disappointed."

He found his red pencil, and he peeled back some of its layers so that the red part showing looked like a long, ridged stick. "I was thinking more about that section called, 'Rosemary.'"

My stomach twinged. "Why would you want to see that?"

"Now that I know who the name belongs to I figure it's probably a lot more interesting."

I sighed. "If you must know, Rosemary and I have a long-standing croquet rivalry. If I didn't write down the win-loss tally God knows she'd make it up herself."

"Croquet."

"Sure."

"That was an awful lot of paper. You guys must play croquet all the time."

"Practically no grass will grow in her yard."

"Must piss her mother off."

"When she's sober."

Hershey sat on the ground and flipped over the top few sheets in his sketchbook. "So who's winning?"

"Undoubtedly, Rosemary. But I tell her I am. Why not? I keep the book."

"I have to tell you I suspected you used that thing to keep score." Hershey kept full eye contact with me as he peeled off more of the pencil.

I have to tell you my hair was not long enough to cover my eyes. It was back over my shoulders and was nowhere near my naked ashen face. I choked when no words but only air came up from below to escape through my mouth. The birds all around held their breaths.

"Am I right?" he persisted when I did not answer.

I had to speak immediately or I would be lost, but my voice wasn't ready. It wavered. "Well," I said slowly, clearing my throat, "there was that time when Ch--"

Hershey waited.

"When Chad, I mean, Chad O'Brien, when she gave me that letter to give to him. . . ." Appalled, I shut my mouth.

"A letter? What did it say?"

I picked at the grass around my feet. "It said, 'The next time you try to look up my dress, I'll fart on your face."

"Funny," Hershey said, sketching something on his paper, "Rosemary seems a little more genteel than that. Sounds like she was using you as a ghostwriter."

"Oh, you'd be shocked at her potty mouth," I said, but my face felt white as snow.

"Okay, let me fix you," Hershey muttered, looking at whatever it was he'd put on the paper. He crawled over to me on the grass and took my hand, which naturally was unnaturally cold for it to be so hot out (he raised his eyebrows at that but didn't say anything), and put it on the marble face of the gravestone.

"What I want you to do is, keep this hand right here, and scoot up here, come on, scoot up, so you're sitting by the base, and put your other arm around the back like you're hugging it. Then rest your cheek against the face, okay, just lay your head on it, and look up at your hand where I put it."

I did what he asked. "And what sentiment is this supposed to evoke?"

"If I told you, it would spoil the mystery of my art."

"If you told me, it might help me look a little less stupid."

He backed away from me and began whisking his pencil across the paper.

"No, really," I said.

"It won't take me long to get what I need. Then you can move, and be as obnoxious as you want."

"I can't emote properly if I don't know what I'm doing. Am I mourning? Am I worshiping?"

Hershey laughed. "Just shut up and let me draw."

"I feel like such a whore."

This time he threw his head back and laughed so loud I broke my pose to look at him.

"No, no, don't quit," he said. "Hang on just a few minutes while I get the outline done." He was drawing heavily, making something as black as he could make it. "Okay. I confess. It doesn't mean anything. I just thought it would look cool."

"Figures." My cheek was growing icy cold against the marble.

"I've never really met anybody like you my whole life, Gabriel."

"My neck hurts."

"I'm almost done."

When he was done, he didn't show it to me. I asked him to, but he wouldn't. He took me home on his moped and held me tightly with his arm, and I closed my eyes tenderly when the pain of squatting came to my knees. When I got off the bike and turned around, there was a second when our faces were close, and I made sure my mouth was the most prominent and easily reachable part of my face, but he did nothing except grin and rub my hair vigorously, saying, "Helmet head." He turned the moped around and I started up the porch steps as he putted away, my stomach racing. I only had twenty-six days left.

The nuns' car was in the driveway when I arrived to see Father Smiley that evening, the setting sun still bright. The nuns were holding on claws-and-teeth to the east end of the building, rarely emerging except to get groceries and for church in Middlefield. For some reason I felt uncomfortable about entering the house with them there, as if I were entering a battle zone where one side was hiding in the trenches.

Father met me in the kitchen, which still smelled like nuns to me. It smelled sweet and strange, like incense. Then it occurred to me that the nuns would still have to be using the kitchen as of course there was only one in the house. I wondered how they avoided taking meals with Father, and if they were civil to Elaine Brink, who had moved her housekeeperly duties into the convent as she was instructed. I wondered if one of the nuns had ever run into Father as she was getting a midnight snack from the fridge.

"Come in," Father said, placing a hand on my back as he led me into what was obviously going to be his study, across the hall from the kitchen. This used to be the nuns' front sitting room, where they received visitors. I peered down the hall, I couldn't help it; the house was divided in two by the chapel and I wanted to see a nun, to see the expression on Sister Bernard's face or to say hello to Sister Sheila. But the door to the east end of the chapel was shut, sealing off the other half of the house.

Father directed me to sit on the couch, which was piled up with computer cords and books on one end. He was wearing a golf

shirt, khaki shorts, and sandals, with a cardigan over the shirt because the house was over-air-conditioned. I wondered in whose territory the thermostat fell. The curly hair on Father's legs and arms stood up off goosebumps. I shivered.

The room was a pale green, with deep brown oak cornices at the windows where cheap lace curtains hung. There were faded squares on the walls where I remembered having seen portraits of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and of saints like Bernadette of Lourdes who had a special devotion to the Mother of God. *Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our light, our sweetness, and our hope, to thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. . . .* The pictures were gone. The only thing that hung in the room was a framed diploma from the University of Alabama awarding John Patrick Smiley his Bachelor of Business degree.

Father folded his arms, watching me watch the walls. He had taken a seat at his desk.

"So how's Sister Bernard?" I asked. "You see her much?"

Father's smile was brief and placid. "She and the other sisters are well. They're looking forward to being back in Nashville and seeing their old friends."

I blinked at him. "They're not budging, are they?"

Father's brows wrinkled together in the middle and he leaned forward on his elbows. "Gabriel, we're here to talk about you. I'm concerned for you."

I slowly tucked my legs under me on the couch. The couch was old and green with splitting cushions and so I figured my shoes wouldn't hurt it. "Well," I said, "I'm pretty cold."

"I apologize," Father replied, taking off his cardigan and handing it to me. "This building's temperature is kept far too low."

I took the sweater from him. It was soft and gray with a robe collar and wooden buttons and a tie belt. I put it on me gladly because I was freezing, but I noticed it smelled like a man and not like a priest, although I did not really have any idea of what a priest ought to smell like, as I did for nuns.

"Well, what do you think of the new hymnbooks?" he asked me, watching me settle into his sweater.

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

"None of the music I come to church for is in there."

He shut his eyes and smiled softly. "Change is good, Gabriel," he said mellifluously. "If you have to hear a certain hymn or relive a certain memory in order to be close to your God, then your relationship is with something else besides the living and true God of the Church."

"Oh. Whatever." I tied the belt of the sweater around my waist. "Lilah can't play that stuff. The congregation can't sing it. And frankly, some of the words are ridiculous."

"I want you to play the organ," he said earnestly.

"No." My teeth were chattering. "Lilah has nothing else to do."

"This has nothing to do with Lilah," Father said. "This has to do with renewing the parish."

I looked down at my lap. "No."

"Wasting a talent is an insult to God," he replied quickly.

"Faking a talent is an insult to God," I snapped.

He did not even pause. "I brought you here tonight to get to the root of this bitterness in you," he said. The word "bitterness" was all consonants. The room was darkening--Father hadn't turned on the lights because the sun had been bleeding through the blinds so brightly, but now it was fading--and his teeth flashed white in his tanned face.

I burrowed into the sweater, shrugging my shoulders so that the wide, flat collar enshrouded my ears. I missed the picture of Mary on the wall, which was odd since I'd only been in the nuns' sitting room a few times, in grade school. "I feel fine now," I said in a mouse's voice.

"I'm your confessor," he said. "You can tell me anything in perfect confidence." His eyes were searching for mine; I felt them on my face.

"I don't know," I murmured. "You would probably have to ask me a question or something."

He leaned back into his chair.

"Like, for example," I continued, "how is my grandmother, and I'd say, she's farther off the middle than ever, but eating properly and sleeping well."

"Gabriel," Father said clearly, "you don't take the state of your soul very seriously, do you?"

"The what?"

"In the sacred boundaries of the confessional, you admitted to me that you're thinking of taking your own life. I can't let that pass."

He would lead the way, in his green-and-white robes with the gold-threaded cross and loaves of bread, swinging the censer as my box came in behind him on the shoulders of the strongest men I knew. Who would those be? His voice would ring out and invite the children to sing.

"Well," I said, swallowing, "I don't know exactly what you're asking me."

"I'm asking you why you said to me, 'I'm planning to kill myself on the Fourth of July,'" Father nodded slightly, like a broadcast anchor.

"Oh, *that*." I waved my hand. "I was just in a bad mood."

He inhaled deeply through his nostrils. He leaned forward, and for a moment I was afraid he would take my hands. My knees were turning blue, they were so cold.

"You wouldn't have said anything to me if you didn't want me to help."

"Actually, I wouldn't have said anything if I'd thought you were listening."

For the first time ever, his eyes suggested that something might be passing through them. But whatever it was passed right on through and left his face clean. "There is nothing more important in the confessional," he said, "than listening to one of God's children asking for forgiveness."

"I was joking," I said weakly. "Aren't you going to ask me if I sleep too much?"

"The only important thing for me to ask you," he said, "is whether you've given your life to God."

My knees were blue. The hair follicles on my calves near my ankles were blue. I was shaking because I was so cold.

"Given it to Him?" I asked.

"Yes," he said urgently. "Have you handed all your worldly cares over to God?"

My worldly cares. The only cares I or anyone else had, and they were strung in a web that so many people held the loose ends of that I could not possibly give them up of my own accord.

"That's all it takes, Gabriel," Father said. "Give up whatever it is that holds you down. Despair is the only unforgivable sin."

Give up, was he saying? The glorious giving up, the handing over, the release. Sailing through the air in vivid color, giving up.

"I just want you to answer me," he said. "Have you given your life to God?"

I put my hand to my forehead, looking up incredulously at Father's bright eyes. "What do you mean, have I given it to Him? He *has* it already." I got up and moved for the door, trailing the limp sweater belt behind me, but Father Smiley was quick. He got between me and the door and put one hand against the side of my neck, a gesture I was unprepared for. I froze in mid-step and felt the smooth undersides of his fingers on my skin.

His face was very close to mine. I saw half-day-old stubble.

"Don't reject Him," he said. "You're in a state of mortal sin."

I stared. "How would you know that?"

His hand slid down my neck to my shoulder, and his other hand clapped down on my other shoulder. "Don't be lost," he said.

He pulled me to him, lowering his forehead to touch mine.

I jerked away, stumbling through the door into the kitchen. The screen door banged behind me as I left the house and ran for my car. I turned to look back at the convent only once, and Father Smiley had not followed me, but I saw a curtain pull back, just a tad. But this curtain was at the east end of the convent. The eyes I saw looking back at me were the calm, dry eyes of a nun.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The sweeping black wall of mystery, the shroud of holiness, the silent keeper of the sanctuary. Only a plain face peeped out from the top, and now and then a wisp of colorless hair. Knees did not show until much later.

Who knew what the nuns' habits contained? Shadowy figures glided along the sidewalk from the convent to the church in the gray morning mist before daily Mass, footless, hairless, and billowing. They lined up together in the pews like draped dolls, without the vaguest hint of hips or hair or willowy arms or feet. To the left of every assembled class they stood in photographs, the dark figures with the inscrutable faces, no holy seam touching the bare arms of any open-faced, gap-toothed child. Their fingernails were clipped, the whorls along the fingers dry and definite no matter how young or old.

In every season of every year these beings strode the sidewalks, and you in your bare skin could contemplate what mechanism propelled them forward. You strongly suspected these were not woven garments covering the ripply hips of middle-aged women; you strongly suspected no earthly decision kept human curves from pressing up against other flesh. No, these were not dried-up gardens, but Sent Beings, and when they swept past you in their cloistered scent and a bit of their cloaking grazed your skin, you knew you had to follow them into church and fall on your knees.

When the knees were allowed out of hiding and wrists and shoes showed, there was no more gliding or fluttering, you no longer wanted to sneak behind them in the mist and follow them to their holy beginnings, but the scent was still there. Their faces still told you that to brush up against them was to connect with your eternity.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Late in the evening when all were asleep, she lit a candle and brought her hand mirror into the kitchen. She sat at the table and wound a strand of ribbon into her hair, clasping it with a pin at the nape of her neck and letting the rest fall down her back. The ribbon curled around the pin and into her hair. She held up the mirror to see, but she couldn't really see it no matter how she turned her head.

Chapter Forty-Nine

It wasn't until I walked into my house that I realized I still had Father's sweater on.

Daddy was reading the Nashville daily paper in the living room when I came in, at the moment when I looked down at the sweater and remembered that it was there. Daddy glanced up at me and said, "What in the world are you wearing a sweater for? It's ninety degrees."

I didn't see Mama anywhere, so I ran up the stairs, shed the sweater like a snake's skin, and stuffed it under my bed. I heard Daddy call after me, "Hey, did you hear? The Jays got beat by the Twins tonight! Half the team has the flu!"

By the time the morning of my date with Booley rolled around I had descended into a more or less constant state of nausea. I wished Hershey would just show up for a little while so that I could listen to the sounds of his pencil on paper, but he didn't, and as the evening approached I was glad he hadn't. I wanted to keep him separate from the tingly sick feeling in my stomach.

I tried to stay as far away as I could from picking out something to wear. Mama brought a stack of clean laundry up the stairs and set it in my doorway, and so I brushed past it and took the first thing off the top. It was a bra, so I brushed back by and took the second thing, which was a school quiz bowl T-shirt from seventh grade that had about three threads left in it. I put that on and didn't wash my hair, and called myself ready.

At seven-fifteen I heard a vehicle come down the driveway, and my stomach mopped the floor before I realized the motor was entirely too quiet for it to be Booley's truck.

I looked out the living-room window and saw Granny getting out of her Falcon.

"No," I said to my mama, who was straightening up the furniture and wiping it down with a damp cloth. "She cannot be here."

"I told her she could come for supper."

Granny was already mumbling when Mama opened the front door to let her in. "I don't think Ellen likes to have me for supper anymore. She never lets me hold the baby."

"Margaret's fussy, Mama," my mother said, as if they had been in the middle of a conversation.

I eyed the driveway nervously as she came in, and actually tried to slip past her and out the door to wait on the porch, but Mama shook her head at me. I wondered where Michael was. "Hey, Granny," I said.

"It's hot out," she sighed. Her lips barely moved.

"I know."

A sound that began far-off and tiny, no bigger than the head of a pin, grew like a growl coming from some great animal about to roar. I felt saliva congeal in my throat.

"Mother of Jesus," Granny said, her eyes darting all around in their constant sea of tears. "What is that?"

Like a herald of the Apocalypse, a being that rose mightily off the wheels that bore it slowed into the turn of our driveway--I could see its winking eyes through the trees when it got close. Its insistent voice shook the trees as it bore down upon the house. Granny was paler than death.

"It's Booley's truck, Granny," I frowned impatiently, but I found that my own voice was shaking.

"The little Carson boy?" Granny's tiny voice trickled through smiling lips.

Mama scurried to the window and held back the curtain with a finger. "My word," she said, but I saw that there was color high in her cheeks. I stared at that, stunned.

"Your first date." Granny sidled up to me and began patting on the back of my hand with her fingers. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Clare?"

Mama turned from the window just as the roar in our driveway reached its peak. She blinked at me but it didn't hide the sparkle in her eyes. "The camera's in my bedroom," she said, her eyebrows raised, lips parted. The sound in the driveway stopped abruptly and a door slammed.

"*Mama*," I breathed. I shook Granny's probing fingers off my hand and stalked for the door just as I heard heavy boots hit the porch steps. "I'll be home early." I opened the door and nearly clobbered Booley in his pleasantly natural and ungelled hair, slamming the door behind me as I shoved past him and marched down the porch steps. He turned and followed me obediently.

"Hi, Gabriel," he said. I was already on the other side of the truck and I could smell him over there. It was a nice smell but I didn't want to be shut up in the cab with it.

My mama and Granny had moved to the front door, their faces framed pathetically in the window, looking bewildered, but they didn't open it.

"Do you need help getting in over there?" Booley called to me. I couldn't see him. "It's a big step."

"Nope." I reached up for the handle and yanked the big door open, and swung myself in. "Wow," I said when I landed on the seat, which was immaculately upholstered. "I can see the top of the garage." When I shut the door the cab dimmed because of the deep tint of the windows.

Booley climbed in and started the engine, which made my nose tickle, and he rolled down his window. "Will this bother you?" he asked as quietly as he could and still be heard over the motor. "I mean, with your hair."

"You can leave it down," I said, and he backed the truck around near the basketball goal. Just then, I heard a wild whoop and a laugh, and I saw Michael's head hanging out his bedroom window upstairs. "*Yeeeee*-hah!" he screamed. "Take her, she's all yours!"

The road to Alabama was long and quiet and the setting sun was in our eyes. The sound of the motor became background noise, amazingly enough, and the radio was off. Just before the state line I made Booley roll his window back up because my hair was

tying whopper knots around my ears, and that was the lone snippet of conversation that took place in the musky-smelling cab.

In the restaurant parking lot, I sat still when Booley shut off the motor because I knew he would be coming around to open my door for me. I spent the time waiting for him to round the back of the truck by trying to run my fingers through the knots in my hair. I pulled out a little red mat of hair in the process and could not bear to drop it in the floor of Booley's truck. I stuck it in my pocket.

I didn't know how to walk with Booley. I didn't want to walk beside him, and I couldn't walk behind him because he would wait for me to catch up. So I sort of walked around him, looking at everything but him until he got the door for me. He looked nice, in a bright blue button-down shirt that showed off his hay tan, and he smelled like a brand-new gleaming bottle of Aqua Velva, but my stomach was whipping around and flapping up against the other organs in my central cavity and so I didn't want to look at him.

I lagged behind him as we were led to our table by an indifferent gum-chewing girl whose ponytail was so tight it pulled at her eyes. I took the menu out of her hand a little before she was ready to give it to me and plunked into my chair, squashing my fists into my cheeks, elbows on the table, poring over the available entrees.

"Do you like this place?" Booley asked me. He did not open his menu, but ran his fingers over the cover.

"It seems nice," I muttered.

"What? Could you move your hands a little bit?"

I was afraid that if I removed my fists from my face my head would not want to stay on my neck. I looked around me; the walls were brick, and the lighting was very dim and glowed dully off giant brass planters scattered all over the room. "It seems nice," I repeated.

"The steaks here are really good," he said slowly, trying hard to make eye contact. "Order whatever you want, I'll pay for it."

"I know you'll pay for it."

"I mean, I know it's expensive, but I wanted you to have a good time."

"For crying out loud, Booley, I don't care what anything costs."

He opened his menu.

I ordered a salad and some chicken strips, and Booley had filet mignon, rare. Throughout the entire meal the only sound at our table was chewing and silverware clinking. Even in the dim light I could see, when I stole a look, that Booley was turning a bloody red under his tan. I looked mostly at our waitress as she glided unsmilingly from one table in her station to the next, imploring her with my eyes to return and offer to fill my water glass so that I could say "Thank you" and watch the new ice pour into the tumbler and knock the old ice to the bottom of the glass. But our waitress had not shown much interest in the level

of water in my glass ever since I had been so greedy with the menus.

When I was down to the last chicken strip, Booley ventured to speak. He had made short work of his filet and was trailing his homestyle fries through the leftover juice. "Are you still hungry?" he asked.

I shrugged, picking at crumbs of the breading on my plate. "Not really. It was kind of a lot of chicken." My eyes flickered up and met his, and I managed half a smile.

"It was six strips," he said.

"And a salad."

"You don't eat much."

I held out my bony hand in the air. "Where would I put it?"

"Would you share a dessert with me? They have real good chocolate mousse cake."

"You eat here a lot."

"Don't worry, I'll pay for it."

"Would you stop already?" I snapped. "I don't think I feel like any."

"Well, I do."

"So get some."

"Gabriel," he said in a low voice, and the whine in it made me a little sick, "I've been waiting for this a long time. Please don't be mean."

I looked at his hair, which waved softly across his forehead and looked almost sweet, and at his eyes, which were a very

pleasing deep blue; then I saw the baby curve of his cheeks and his lips like new cherries and shuddered. "It's not mean," I said, "not to eat dessert."

When the waitress came around Booley ordered a piece of chocolate mousse cake. "Extra big," he said very clearly, "and two forks."

"Cake comes in one size," the waitress said, turning up her nose as she left.

"No tip for her," Booley confided to me. "And it would have been big."

She brought the cake with two forks, as Booley had instructed, and he took one fork and cut off a bite and handed it to me, taking the other for himself.

"I said I didn't want any," I said, taking a bite anyway. It was good but I didn't want any more. As I set the fork back down on the plate Booley tried to clink his against it; it took a speedy deposit of his first bite of cake into his mouth to catch my fork while it was still in my hand.

"Eat some more," he said as I dropped the fork.

I shook my head. It seemed to take him a long time to chew up the rest of what was in his mouth. Then he ate the rest of the piece of cake by himself, bite after bite shoveled into his mouth and delivered into his throat with little chewing in between. He could have been eating gravel. His face was still the same bloody red, his eyes lucid and hard.

He did not ever ask me if I wanted to go to the movies. When we left the restaurant, he shut my door behind me after I climbed into his truck, and got in on his side and started the motor with one forceful twist of the key in the ignition. We drove all the way back to Tennessee without words. He rolled his window down and did not notice when my hair began whirling toward the ceiling of the cab.

Once we were inside the Hope Springs city limits, Booley sped up the truck.

"The limit's 45 here," I said loudly over the roar of wind into the cab.

The speedometer read 60, and Booley's accelerator foot hit the floor. He ignored me completely.

"Forty-five," I yelled. We were approaching the road to my house and he wasn't slowing down. "The turn, Booley!"

He sped past the turnoff and toward town without so much as blinking. "My mama wanted me to bring you over," he yelled back at me, his babyish lips angry and red. "So I'm bringing you over!"

"Slow down!" Town was approaching much too quickly. The lights of the Quik Mart shone in the purple sky. "You're going to get pulled over, you asshole!"

When we hit the center of the strip Booley was doing eighty-five. I covered my eyes, but not before I saw kids at the old gas pumps marvel at the noise his truck was making and watch it go by in a red blur.

"Wouldn't want anybody to have to see you in here," Booley hollered at me. We flew through Hope Springs's one traffic light, which was red.

My hair was actually stinging my face. "*Slow down*!" I screamed, chunks of hair pricking my tongue. "If you want to endanger your own life, that's fine, but mine is *mine*!"

The mighty roar of the engine eased a little. We passed the city park, the turn to St. Mary's, the funeral home, the body shop, and then we were at the turn to Booley's house. I knew where the Carsons lived, in a house by Third Creek that had been Booley's grandfather's and which his mama, Doris, had completely redone almost by herself. There was a wooden goose with a blue polka-dotted bow on its neck that said, "The Carsons," hanging by the front door.

When we reached his house Booley was driving at a normal speed. I could see as we sputtered into the driveway that both his parents were sitting on the porch in the swing, batting at mosquitoes and having a late-evening glass of tea.

I got out of the truck before Booley had a chance to say anything to me or to bother getting my door. My hair was wound all around my head like a spool of thread. My throat hurt from screaming at Booley. I saw Doris grin broadly as soon as my feet hit the gravel.

"Well, hey there, sweetheart," she called to me, and Booley's father, in his overalls and house slippers, rose off the swing to extend his hand to me.

"Hey there," I rasped, unthreading a hair from my eyelashes.

"Don't you look adorable tonight," Doris was saying, but before I could reach Mr. Carson to take his hand, Booley slammed his door and stomped around the front of the truck. He grabbed my hand and dragged me up the porch steps. I tripped on the top step and he took my other hand to right me and then let go of it again.

"Here she is, Mama," Booley said, his voice hard. He took his mother's hand and gave it to me.

I didn't know what to do. I dropped her hand and stared at the porch floor, all repainted a delicate blue.

Doris just sat there. The swing died to a complete stop and Mr. Carson said, "Son, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"And Daddy, here she is. She's here, on my porch," Booley growled, but he didn't let me shake his father's hand. He dragged me back off the porch. He let go of my hand and got back in his truck. I could have just stood there in his front yard--I didn't have to get back in the truck--but I turned and looked back at his parents, who were frozen and sick-looking, and I decided to get in the truck with Booley.

He started the motor as I shut my door. "I want you to take me home right now," I said. He started backing down the driveway, his parents staring after us like dead people. "Take me home right now."

He turned out of the driveway carefully as he normally would, so that gravel didn't spatter up onto his shiny wheel

covers, and when we were back on the road he drove at a reasonable speed. We pulled onto the highway, but then he slowed down at the entrance to the city park.

"Now what?" I snapped.

The last ballgame of the evening was over, and the cars and minivans of the remaining few parents were slipping quietly out onto the road, leaving the park dark behind them. Booley drove on into the park circle, where the streetlights shone, but the lights over the ballfield had been extinguished. He swung down around the tractor-pull pit, where the revival tents were abandoned and dark that evening, and he stopped the truck.

My heart was pumping blood with great vigor so that I could hear it in my ears.

"What are you doing?" I asked him. The quiet was weird after so much screaming. My hair felt like it was levitating. It felt like ugly dry straw.

Booley let go of the keys; they dangled from the ignition.

"What are we doing?" I asked again, in my raspy voice.

He sighed, and looked me in the eye for the first time since the chocolate mousse cake. "We're going parking," he said.

I breathed out. It was almost like a laugh, it was so quick. But my fingers were going cold. I concentrated on where my arm touched the door of the truck, trying to figure out just where the metal handle was.

"Don't laugh," he said through his baby lips. A little wet, they shone in the dark.

"We are not going parking," I said. "If you think that after tonight I am ever going to let you touch me, you are certifiably insane."

He was on me in an instant. He flew across the cab of the truck and pinned me to the window with his shoulder, his chest on mine. His face was in my face, his lips right next to mine, one of his hands clapped to my forehead and the other gripping my arm. Some of my hair was caught underneath me and his every breath pulled it painfully. He looked down at my lips, and closed his eyes, and moved closer.

It was quiet in the cab of the truck except for the thick sound and smell of breathing.

So I screamed.

"Get off me, you stupid *fuck*!" I hissed at him, shoving him off before his lips could touch me. The sound of my obscenity seemed to scare him. It scared me. Booley put his hands over his eyes and sat back on his leg, and when he did, I reached under me for the door handle and scrambled out of the truck.

"Hey! Gabriel!" he yelled, but I was already away from him before he could get a leg out of the truck.

I fled across the broad dirty pit and up the hill toward the baseball diamond, past the vacant misty-white tents in the dark. The hill was steep and I had to dig my hands in the clover to help myself up.

I didn't hear the sound of footsteps behind me. I heard a low moan getting softer and softer; Booley was not chasing me.

"No, don't leave," I heard him bay, like a puppy begging to be let back in the house late at night when he is afraid of the dark.

My mother stared at me when I walked through the door, dripping and frazzled with sweat, my hair like a storm cloud. She looked past me to the window for the sight or sound of Booley's truck, and when she saw nothing there, she asked me, "What on earth have you been doing?"

"Running," I said. I went upstairs to bed.

Chapter Fifty

If you could not arrange for your first date to occur in the spring--when the blossoms erupted and the world was alive again--then it was best to do it in the summertime. The smells of freshly mowed grass meant vegetables were somewhere waiting to be eaten, grown plump and ripe, and you were sure to love this first boy to come down your driveway. Days were long waiting for this first boy to come for you, and daylight savings time only made it worse.

And the cheering from the spectators! The hidden cameras and bizarre smiles! Oh, your mama would breathe like she had never breathed before, knowing she had produced something that could reproduce in kind. She looked like the weight of the world was gone from her; by all appearances she felt a sacred joy at this, your induction into womanhood, the place where your emotions are like flesh. You can almost hear them ripping off your body, because now, so many years later, you know to listen. Back then, climbing into his truck, you thought you had come into your own.

Chapter Fifty-One

The heavy evening air did not make her so cold as other heavy things. She should not have been where she was, and she knew it, but the Meisterands were out on their porch swing enjoying the air, and she had wanted Else's *pfefferneusse* recipe ever since Else had brought some over the day Karl was hurt, so she stopped by. Katie and her father drifted lazily back and forth in the dusk, and before Else went inside to write the recipe down she invited her to sit down in one of the rockers and stay a while. She did; she had known she would.

Hans Meisterand, a broad, big-handed, gentle man, inquired earnestly about Karl's leg and his crop, and she answered him with quiet words. Between each answer, she would glance at Katie, and gradually she assembled the whole picture in her head: eyes that took and kept what light was left in the day, straight nose, a thin upper lip and full lower lip that made an easy pout, milky cheeks, and long, slender limbs. Katie's feet dragged the ground as her father used his to propel the swing.

As she spoke to Hans about her husband, feeling the sun being gone, her words grew less firm, and by the time Else came back with the recipe her voice was trembling.

"Are you all right?" Hans asked.

She stood and nodded. "I . . . I should probably. . . ."

"Leaving already?" Else laid a kind hand on her back. "We haven't even got the chance to talk, *liebling*." Else leaned in

and peered into her eyes. "Oh, but you look delicate. Not well. You've been running too much after Karl, eh?"

She nodded weakly.

Else continued to look her dead on in the eyes until a light broke over her own. She opened her mouth wide, joyfully. "It's a baby, isn't it? You're going to have a child!" she whispered. Hans cleared his throat.

She blushed and laughed shortly, one hand over her heart.

"That is wonderful news," said Else, patting and rubbing her on the back. "Wonderful. You have such beautiful children, beautiful like you. One more in the world is a smile from God on all of us."

"Thank you, Else."

"But . . . you rode into town on the horse? You shouldn't be doing that, *liebchen*."

The crimson color had not left her cheeks and she looked at her shoes with an awkward smile. "I suppose it's not long before people will stare at me if I try to mount a horse in town." She laughed. "But Karl. . . . I don't have any choice."

"Of course." Else nodded in understanding. "But listen here. Katie adores to ride and she would be happy to bring you anything you need from here in town. Just tell us at Sunday Mass what you want." She handed her the recipe. "You take care of that tiny *liebchen*."

She placed a hand over her belly, and as she turned to leave, she glanced at Katie, just to see her face after all these

words about coming babies had been spoken. But Katie seemed not to have heard; she was gazing off into the yard. She was only a child, after all, sitting politely on the edge of an adult conversation and mooning at fireflies.

As she rode home and listened to her horse clopping in the mud, she took the picture of Katie she had drawn up and kept it at a pricking place close to her heart. She used it to bring her tears all the way home.

Chapter Fifty-Two

I couldn't sleep late Saturday morning, at twenty-four days, even though I tried. I lay still from 5:00 to 8:00 and refused to open my eyes, but my stomach was sending poison darts to my brain. I got up and went downstairs to the kitchen. Mama heard me from her room--she was a light sleeper--and she came in to make me pancakes. Or French toast, whatever I felt like, but I picked pancakes. She seemed afraid to ask me any questions, but she could barely take her eyes off me.

I was pouring the syrup over my pancakes when I heard the unmistakable roar of Booley's truck.

I capped the bottle and darted to the laundry room, passing Mama in the kitchen and telling her, "You tell him I'm at the store or something."

"It's 8:00 in the morning."

"Then I spent the night at Rosemary's."

"What is he doing here at 8:00 in the morning?"

I shut myself in the laundry room and shivered in the dark. I heard Mama go to the door, and I heard voices, and then Mama's footsteps came back through the kitchen toward me.

"Gabriel, honey, open the door."

"Make him go away."

"It's not Booley. It's his mother."

I pulled my robe tight and opened the door a crack. "His mother?"

Mama followed me out onto the porch into the early sunshine, already hot and moist as it fell on the sparkling grass. Doris Carson stood by the open door of Booley's truck. "Hi, Gabriel," she said, crushing the second syllable of my name between her lips.

I knotted the sash of my robe severely.

"I know it's early," Doris said, "but Booley told me you broke up with him last night, and I just cain't. . . ."

"Broke *up* with him?" I sputtered, and my mama put her hand on my shoulder.

"He's so *angry*, Gabriel." Tears rose in Doris's eyes and she put one hand to the bridge of her nose. "I cain't make him look me in the face. I know he's hurt, and I know you must of done what you done for a reason, but you got to come talk to him. His daddy come in to get him this morning to milk and he wouldn't go, he was hollering about being up all night and how he didn't ever want to touch a cow again. I swear, as ugly as he was, I thought he'd shoot his daddy."

I was struck dumb.

"He just loves you, Gabriel," she said. "Bless his heart. You got to talk to him."

I shook my head. "I don't know what Booley, told you, but--"

"He won't tell me nothing, that's the problem, except that it's over for you two. And Gabriel, I'm just begging you to reconsider."

"Doris," my mama said softly, drawing me backwards under her arm, "Booley and Gabriel were never dating. And last night she came home by herself. He didn't even bring her home."

Doris did not move the hand that was on her nose, but she sent a sharp, watery look like darts out from under it. It took her a second to find her words. "That's not true."

"It is true," I said. "You saw how he was at your house."

Doris cocked her head and a tear rolled down her face. Then she abruptly started climbing back into her son's truck, which was a struggle with her short legs. "He's a shy boy," she half-whispered angrily before she slammed the door. "I just thought you might take a second to think before you broke his heart." The truck roared down the driveway.

When we got back inside the door, Mama said, "What on earth happened last night?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling flushed and hot. I untied the knot in my sash and took off my robe. "I can't figure it out."

Then she grabbed my arm. "And what are these?"

Right above my elbow, where the skin was easily twisted, there was a faint green bruised ring around my arm.

"I. . . ." I squinted at the injury. "Hmmm." I remembered suddenly what Booley smelled like, and tears came to my eyes. "Mama, I never wanted to go."

Mama tipped my chin up and stared straight into my eyes so that I was scared to blink. "Did he hurt you?"

I sniffled. "Just my arm."

Her words were soft. "He didn't . . . ?"

"*No.*" I turned my head away. "Do I look like some kind of weakling?"

"Why," she demanded suddenly, "did you not tell that *bat* that she raised an asshole?"

My eyes widened so far they almost touched in the middle. "Where did you ever hear such a vile word?"

"Your father doesn't like me to use it," she shrugged. "You're not to speak to that Booley again."

"Oh, Mama, no," I said flatly. "You can't keep us apart. Don't try."

"I'm going to have your daddy fire him."

My eyes had not returned to their normal positions, which saved me having to widen them in fear. "You wouldn't tell Daddy what Booley did."

"How could I? You haven't told me what he did yet."

"There's nothing to tell. I think he's just been shy too long."

She sighed.

On the table, my pancakes lay sodden in the plate. I started to try to eat them again, but the fork was too heavy. Mama called up the stairs for Michael to come on and get up, that there were pancakes. I decided just to go back to bed for a while. I went upstairs to the bathroom for aspirins just as Mama was reminding Michael to take his antibiotic. He hollered back

down the stairs that he would, but when he came into the bathroom he popped open the bottle of pills, took one out, and flushed it down the toilet. I asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, and he said, "I took three already the other day. They hurt my throat going down." I was too tired to argue. I took my aspirins and crawled into bed. The first time I even opened my eyes, the sun had gone from my room; it was low on the other side of the house. My mama was standing in the doorway, her cheek against the jamb, and I couldn't tell how long she had been there.

"Please come down and eat supper," she said.

Father Smiley wasted no time at Mass the next morning. After he had finished reading the gospel, he strode down off the altar and into the aisle, clapping his hands together once, which made his vestments swirl. I thought of his forehead near mine, and I could barely stand to look at him. "I have good news," he said. "I've found a contractor willing to do the job of renovating our marvelous church for a fraction of the going rate. Look above you, look at the potential for a new beginning. What you see is a hundred-year-old vision of heaven and earth. Let's embrace together the possibility of a common contemporary vision." He went on with a list of the credentials of the contractor, who worked out of Montgomery and had once completely

rebuilt an Assembly of God sanctuary destroyed by fire, among other things. Then Father launched straight into praise of the faith of Nicodemus, the subject of the day's gospel. The air in the church was uncomfortable and it was clear that no one gave a rat's ass about Nicodemus at all right then; by the time we all shuffled out to join hands, I was surprised our hairs were not standing on end. I kept my toe on the rubber stopper of the kneeler, just in case.

Granny's was hopping after church. Agnes was peeling slices of sausage off the plastic casing and slinging them into the skillet so hard they changed shape, and Beth was sitting up on the kitchen counter, swinging her legs and hollering. "Hospital white! I think that would be perfect!"

"He hasn't said he was painting over anything yet," Mama said. She was cutting biscuits. My uncle Joe picked off the scraps of dough at the edges as she pressed on the cutter, and ate them. Two of his black-headed daughters were hanging on his legs.

Beth nodded very slowly and slit her eyes. "He'll paint it over."

All the energy and people in the kitchen was making Granny rattle like glass in a windowpane. I sat and watched her, apart from everyone at my seat at the table, but no one else was

noticing how she was standing at the water faucet and turning it on and off, on and off. She ran three fingers through the water each time and wiped them dry on the towel next to the sink.

When all the food was brought to the table and everyone began to eat, the conversation about Father Smiley paused only a moment to allow Beth to breathe the prayer; then everybody started back in again. Daddy's neck was the color of raspberries and he was ranting and raving about how somebody needed to get hold of the bishop in Nashville and get him to come down here and slap Father around a little bit. Mama looked appalled and told him to watch his mouth. Agnes was so irritated she could barely talk, and to prove it we all had misshapen brown hunks to pass for sausage patties on our plates. Terry was asleep in the recliner. Joe and Ellen's kids were fussy and so they were having trouble participating. Will said he didn't see how a priest who was there to serve the people could just get himself a bucket of paint and wipe out their historical landmark without even asking; June, who had been picking up some steam lately, said she thought it would be a good idea to paint over some of "that stuff." She put both elbows on the table as she spoke. "If you didn't have so much to look at you could keep your mind where it's supposed to be at." Beth sneered at her. Will's Adam's apple bobbed up and down about five times. "Where's Ernie?" he mumbled, and got up from the table.

Granny was eating nothing. The only thing she'd spooned on her plate was a pile of scrambled eggs which she was dividing

into infinitely small pieces with her fork. Her thin lips were screwed together, pulling the skin near her mouth into sharp wrinkles.

The voices around her were loud, but they hushed when she spoke.

"Do you suppose," she said, holding up a trembling fork, "that they'll paint over the angels?"

After a quiet second or two, Mama said, "Surely not. We won't let him paint over the angels."

Granny put down her fork. "I think we should say a rosary and ask Mary to come down and help her church."

June looked like she might be sick.

"After we eat, Mama," said my mother.

"Well, I just thought . . ." Granny whispered, her eyes glazing.

"After we eat," my mama repeated firmly.

So after the dishes were cleared, we all retired to the living room, where my uncle Terry was still sleeping and where all the kids but me and Michael had been eating. Agnes wrinkled up her nose at a mess of smeared egg bits in a corner of the couch. My mama saw it and went to get a paper towel. Joe's youngest three plus Ernie were all sleeping in Granny's bedroom, which always had the shades drawn and was cool; the rest were outside in the yard. Beth got us all rosaries from Granny's nightstand. When she handed two to Will, he lamely held one in June's direction, but she refused to touch it.

Granny asked my father to lead.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen."

Terry's mouth fell open and he let out a great snore.

Agnes flew up off the couch and hollered, "Oh, good God! Wake him up!" Terry's eyes fluttered when she yelled, but she was already upon him. She took both her hands and yanked at his shoulders, and then reached down and disengaged the footrest so that his whole body fell forward. His eyes were red when they opened.

"We're praying," Agnes snapped, and she went back and sat on the couch. Terry sat still and said nothing, his bleary eyes settling back to slits.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen," Daddy repeated, his eyes closed. He crossed himself with the plastic crucifix. "Mother Mary, we ask this afternoon that you protect the church dedicated in your name."

June sighed.

Chapter Fifty-Three

The Catholics did not worship Mary, but they kept hold of her by her beaded apron strings, begging for her ear. Even the Methodists, who spouted the same creed on Sunday and played basketball with them in the fall, would not only not participate in such a cult, but would not speak of it at all. The Baptists had no problem speaking of it, mostly to ask pointed questions: How can you elevate the mother of Jesus to the level of God? And the Catholics replied, they weren't; they delineated carefully the difference between honor and adoration but it made their brows sweat. It didn't matter. The words didn't matter. They knew the line to the heart of the Mother of God was open--they had seen the answers come back.

The feel of the beads was the return to peace. Especially before summer storms, when the breasted clouds hung into the trees and the air was hot and still, the sky yellow. If one were impatient, the Angelus could be said three times, quick and dirty, as the family huddled in the basement and listened for the civil defense sirens to go off; better to sit and be calm and pray the long way. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.* Ten times five. Better to sit with the beads growing clammy under nervous fingers and wait for the legendary sound of a train hitting the side of the house. Mary's gentle outstretched hands would come to you and unwrench your stomach, smooth your brow. The tornado would skip the house or never brew

at all, and the distinction between honor and adoration would be a silly bunch of words, little rocks under human feet.

Chapter Fifty-Four

On Sunday nights, after the sun had poured into the east windows and roused the family for church, stalled over the roof's peak at midday, and drained out of the west windows by nine o'clock, they would have the rosary in the living room. For her and for Karl the praying and the weight of beads between their fingers were the anchors that kept the ensuing week within their grasp; for the children the rosary was the sacred rope with which they were permitted--no, encouraged--to choke off a day dying of holy sluggishness, and therefore on Sunday evenings they scrambled into the living room when the last light faded from the west windows, with a fervor not mistaken for piety by their mother.

Karl would lead, always in German.

"*Im namen des Vaters und des Sohnes und des Heiligen Geistes, Amen.*"

She listened for the responses of the children, toning down her own voice so that she could appreciate the sound of their chorus; it was with a pang of sadness that she sensed the edge of the Saarland dulled in the hard consonants of their words, still perfectly German but pronounced from their mouths and not their chests or stomachs. She knew that when they came running in from the fields they called to each other in English. They spoke with a heaviness that was German but with long, sunny vowels that seemed to derive from the sheer expansiveness of their new foothold in Tennessee. Their voices were not like Karl's, thick

and curling with German color and apt to substitute his native grammar for the English that skipped his mind; or like hers, fluent with a British English learned in school. She herself would not give up her *nein* or her *ja* when speaking to her children, and she lapsed hungrily into the tongue of her childhood when she was alone with Karl--that was more and more a rarity as time went on, and she was inclined to believe it was the language, not Karl, that made her heart ache with missing.

"*Gegrusset seist du, Maria, voll der Gnade; der Herr ist mit dir. . . .*"

She spoke to God's Mother now simply by sitting still and feeling as if her heart would break. She had once believed Mary spoke German, but she had grown helpless as her own children, the flesh of her flesh, spoke to her not only in German but in Latin and in that broad, slow English whose consonants waited so patiently for the vowels to be finished. But she saw to it that once a week they would sit and speak to God's Mother in the fashion that she remembered. For her it was not so much a prayer as a feeling that there was earth beneath her feet.

Chapter Fifty-Five

When they met the next Monday, the Pirates stood 3-2, and the Jays 4-2. Daddy and Wayne had the team convene in the 96-degree heat before Tee-Ball even started, to impress upon them the importance of taking this crucial victory at the halfway point in the season. Also, Jerry Dog had had the flu, along with half his team since they spent so much time together, so if there was ever a time to make it be there, it was now.

Hershey had come early as well and was helping the Tee-Ball kids stand straight and keep their eyes on the ball. The umpire let him mold each one into place before he batted. Most fathers had not begun their journey south from Futures yet and were not there to mutter encouragement, but the mothers sparkled as the hands of a baseball star touched their babies, and the sisters watched, fascinated.

Luther Cordell's daddy was there, however, and as Hershey squared the shoulders of his delicate son, he offered a great belch.

Luther stayed squared up where Hershey put him, and on the first swing of his spindly arms he nudged the ball down the third base line.

"Run! Run!" the bleachers screamed, and he did (after carefully placing the bat on the ground), pumping his misguided arms with as little efficiency as possible. The third baseman waited with stony patience for it to arrive at his feet despite

the apoplectic fit his coach was having, and Luther made it to first base before the ball even touched the kid's glove.

Hershey let out a big whoop. "Whoo-oo, Luther!"

Luther stopped square in the middle of the bag and grinned with all the teeth he had, breathing huge gulps of air in and out so that his belly contracted and expanded. I could see the blue of his eyes from the bleachers. His father belched again.

Mama and Beth and Agnes and I were drinking Cokes and watching sweat pop up on each other's foreheads. Agnes's came the fastest because she was pissed off at her husband for forgetting that today was her birthday.

"He hasn't come home yet," Beth pointed out.

"He didn't say a word to me this morning. Believe me, he ain't planning any surprises."

The irrepressible Cody's pregnant mama was sprawled out near the bottom of the bleachers. She was not hollering, even though Cody's at-bat--which needed no help from Hershey--pushed Luther to third base. She seemed stunned by the immensity of her stomach, which poked up like a beach ball and nearly pushed her breasts apart. Still, her sweat was dewy and light.

The next batter got a tip from Hershey about planting his feet properly, and promptly struck out. But the next one, who received the same advice, licked the ball into left field. Luther came scampering home, Cody nearly overtaking him, and he stomped his cleats heartily on the plate, turning round and round. We all hollered. Even Cody's mama found her hands on

either side of her stomach and brought them together, smiling serenely.

Luther's coach waited while Luther pirouetted around home plate, and then when he didn't quit, he went over there and led him back to the dugout with one hand on his shoulder. "Good man, good hit," the coach allowed, and he spat before and behind himself.

Luther's daddy yelled from the pit of his belly, "I'd get you a burger but for it'd swell your head up!"

As the game neared its end, Little League began collecting at the sides of the fence. I saw Jerry Dog huddled up with his troops, looking withered and pasty. The Tee-Ballers had barely finished shaking hands--Luther's team didn't win, but he was smiling breathlessly anyway when he bounded out of the dugout--when Jerry Dog hustled his boys out onto the grass and got them started throwing.

Michael wasn't pitching, Mama forbade it, but Jerry Dog's son Abram was. He was half-green. We could see the circles under his eyes when he stood on the mound. Jerry Dog had no bubblegum in his jaws; he folded his arms and stared at Abram's warmup while periodically dredging up the phlegm in his throat and spitting it with great force into the dirt.

Rosemary arrived as the game got under way. She sat behind me, said hello to my family, pulled a pick from her purse, and started running it through my hair. "I feel like doing your hair," she said.

"Okay."

"Tell me if I pull too hard. Guess what I did today, roommate?"

"Mmm."

"I bought you the comforter that matches mine."

Mama said, "Well, Rosemary, you didn't have to do that. How much was it? I'll write you a check."

"Oh, no, no," Rosemary said. Some hairs behind my left ear were being stretched too tight. "I just accidentally found it and it was the last one they had at this place, on clearance. It's just like mine. It's Gabriel's birthday present from me."

"My birthday was in February."

"I didn't get you anything."

"You got me a sweater."

"Oh, look," Rosemary said. "There's a sticky-up place here I'll have to redo."

"She's doing one of those reverse French braids," said Beth. I felt her reach out and stroke the beginnings of it.

"How can you do that and not drop it?" Agnes asked.

Beth ran her finger all the way down the back of my head. "It's those long fingers."

"I just learned to sometime," Rosemary shrugged.

I wriggled but she held my head tight by the hair. "If it's messed up you better fix it," I said. "I'm the one who has to wear it."

"I *am* fixing it."

She undid the braid and started again. When she was finished, she tied it off with a ponytail holder from her pocket.

"That's perfect," Beth said. "I've never seen a braid so perfect."

"Her hair is so easy to do," Rosemary replied, patting my head. "I'd love to have her hair."

Even though Michael's first at-bat was a strikeout--he was swinging for the fence--the Pirates put two quick runs on the board in the top of the first. Abram looked like death, and he snorted and sniffed helplessly between his pitches.

"He looks bad out of the eyes," Mama said.

Beth clucked her tongue. "He looks like death."

The potbellied man in the aquamarine lawn chair on the Jays' side, who apparently was the father of their first-string reliever, stood up and started hollering at Jerry Dog. "Take your boy out!" he yelled, pulling his Joe Camel T-shirt over his belly to meet his shorts. "He's sick as a dog!"

Beth clapped her hands together tightly. "Ooooh!" she whispered.

Jerry Dog didn't move except to fling a wad of snot from his throat with his tongue. Although he wasn't chewing gum the muscles of his face were working like crazy. Abram's eyes never wavered from the mitt of his catcher. Jerry Dog's assistants, in their taut blue T-shirts, hadn't caught much fire although they didn't seem sick; the game felt like a stick dragging through mud.

The man returned to his lawn chair, red-faced and full-veined, and after the crowd was satisfied that Jerry Dog wasn't going to fight back, everyone started talking again.

Jerry Dog did not remove Abram from the game. Mrs. Jerry Dog was not there. Abram remained on the mound, sagging and coughing, as the Pirates went round and round their rotation and hammered his pitches away. My brother and his crusty arm produced three hits, although they weren't strong ones, and while the Jays made good for three runs themselves, it wasn't enough. We took the game 9-3. Abram sat lamely in the dirt when it was over, and Jerry Dog stomped off into the dugout without shaking my father's or Wayne's hand.

"Just as well," my daddy said later. "Didn't want to catch anything."

Rosemary and I went to get more Cokes before the teams had a chance to make it to the concessions stand. On the way I nearly stepped on the baby in rubber pants, whose head was coated in mud. Its mother was working the concessions stand, along with Lo-rene, who was very excited to see me.

"Girl," she said, holding her fingers up, "have you *ever* had your nails done up at the RainForest by the Subway in Middlefield? My cuticles are like a baby's butt." Her nails were so long they were beginning to curl under, so I knew they were real. They were blood red.

"Nope," I said. "Two Cokes."

Lo-rene pointed a curly blade at Rosemary. "*You. You* should get those hands to the RainForest as fast as is humanly possible." She twisted the cap of a full Coke bottle gingerly to protect her nails, taking turns nudging it along with each hand.

"Would you like me to help you with that?" I asked.

"Lord, could you?" She stuck the neck of the two-liter through the hole in the screen and I wrestled off the cap.

Lo-rene poured the Cokes and handed them to us, and then suddenly the victorious Pirates were upon us, demanding their free loot. Rosemary and I eased our way out of the crowd and stood by the screen door at the side of the building; we sipped the foam off the tops of the cups. The mudbaby's mother came out to smoke a cigarette before she helped clean up for the night.

I didn't realize I was hearing a conversation from inside the screen door until I heard Lo-rene whine, "But *baby*." Then there was a low voice, and she whined again, "But he won't be home for *hours*, I swear to God."

I blinked at Rosemary. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

I put a finger to my lips, but there was nothing else to hear.

Wayne Barfield, smoking a log of ashes that was no longer a cigarette, came storming out the door and let it bang behind him.

"Oh, God." I jabbed Rosemary with my elbow. "I think Lo-rene just propositioned Wayne."

Rosemary's mouth dropped open against her cup. "Uh-uh."

"Uh-huh. I just heard it with these very two ears."

Her mouth acquired a bend in the upper lip. "What a slut!" she whispered.

"Don't say that. You don't know that."

"Well, sure I do--I mean, she asked Hershey to mow her yard and stay for drinks. . . ." Rosemary stopped, pressing her cup hard against her mouth.

"How do you know that?"

"Uh, you told me."

"I didn't tell you that. I didn't know that."

"Oh, I guess he told me. You know, you were sitting there, weren't you, when he told us that?" Rosemary's voice got squeakier as she went along. "The other day?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lo-rene came charging out of the concessions building, her huge chest bouncing ahead of her, her face red. The screen door slammed behind her. "Jared!" she yelled. "Jared! Where are you? *Get* your Coke and come on!"

A voice came from within the pack of boys. "Wait a minute, Mamaw! I ain't got a hamburger yet."

Lo-rene muttered something under her breath and strode off toward the parking lot, squeezing her buttocks tightly with each step. Her slingbacks tossed rocks and cracked against her heels like whips.

Rosemary watched her leave with her doe eyes. Then she asked, "Does your brother play tomorrow?"

"I think so," I said, "but I'm not coming."

That night when we got home the phone rang. It was Elaine Brink, the church secretary, who was calling to tell my mama and daddy that there was scaffolding up in the church, all covering up the altar, and a couple of men taking pictures inside, and did they need to call an emergency Parish Council meeting without Father? Daddy said hell, yes, and he hung up the phone and started calling the Ehemanns, the Meisterands, the Beckmans, the O'Connors. Somewhere in between calls, the phone rang, and my daddy answered brusquely, "Hello?"

He was silent a moment, listening, and he said, "Son, you don't need to call here anymore," and hung up. I knew the caller was Booley, and blood spread over my face. Daddy looked like he wanted to ask me something but thought better of it and started making phone calls again.

The next day, Michael couldn't feel his pinky finger.

Chapter Fifty-Six

There were many reasons why a little boy was often not playing up to his potential on the field, as mothers on the bleachers would be glad to tell you through moist pink lips. They often spoke of it as they poked brilliant nails into the shells of their hair.

"Well, Ryan's the baby of the Little League--his birthday's in October, right before the cutoff. He's got a year before he'll be as big as the other boys."

"I swear, Slade hadn't picked up a bat all summer. Usually, you know, he likes to hit with his daddy, but this year he's been at the pool ever damn day. I think there's some little *girl* or something."

"Joshua has had The. Most. Persistent cough I've ever seen, and here in the middle of the summer. I can't figure it out, but you can tell by the way he runs that he don't feel good."

"I just wish my husband didn't work thirds. Blake has such a good, you know, build, kinda, and a lot of natural ability, but nobody to work with him, you know? Coach Littrell from the high school was watching him the other day and said, Peggy, he's got a lot of *inborn* talent, of course it's all in the raw, but with some work you could have you an athlete on your hands. I said, *I* know it."

"Channing thinks he's too cute. I told him he better quit smirking around on the bases and making them goofy faces or one

of these days he's going to get thown out. Even if he *is* fast as a whip."

The mamas would chuckle, a high sound from the backs of their throats, and shake their heads. They ran their tongues over their teeth and smiled carefully to keep their lips moist and pink.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

He was a long time about asking her to come and share more of herself with him, so eventually she took matters into her own hands. Late one night under the candlelight she took her pen and wrote down what happened on the night that her first girl, Greta, was born. She wrote about how she had been here without Sophie, without her mother, with only Karl for comfort. Karl, who was barely able to look at her swelling stomach without blushing with a sort of embarrassed pride at what he had wrought upon her. *I asked the doctor many times,* she wrote, *what I should be expecting, how I should know when my time was come, and he said only, You will know. He would not say how or why or when, but only that I would know.* She hadn't known; no one had told her that her water would break first, and when it did, she feared that something was wrong, that she was losing her child. After that agony of fear, none of the rest of the pain hurt her; she lay pushing with anger and embarrassment against the doctor's hands with Karl out in the field trying to break a horse.

That was the first time, she wrote, *that I thought of leaving him. I packed my bags the next night and thought of different ways I might get passage to Nashville, where I could stay until Sophie could come down to live with me. I had been trying to write stories and I had some idea that I could sell them to a newspaper. But in the end, I realized I would have to steal my husband's horse to go, and I couldn't do it yet. I had*

to think some more. I am still thinking. She was fairly certain he could not use this in any book he was writing.

She did not mark the envelope that she addressed to him; instead, the next time she was in town, she left it on Mrs. Brecht's grain scale when the old woman wasn't looking. She saw her pick it up out of the corner of her eye.

She did not hear from him. The next occasion she had to see him was at church the following Sunday, and they never made eye contact. He had mounted his horse before she even got outside after Mass. A week later, she made an effort to separate herself from her parade of children and catch his eye as they were leaving church. He saw her this time, and lowered his gaze to the hem of the skirt of Katie Meisterand, who was gliding out just ahead of him.

But she got into his path. She would not let him leave so easily. She was coming from the side aisle, and he from the center, and she left her children behind to beat him to the vestibule. She cut in between him and wide-eyed Katie and said sharply, "Oh, good Sunday to you, Dr. Blair. I haven't seen you in too long a time."

He looked all around him, at the eyes of all the Massgoers converging on them at the exit, to maintain a casualness and friendliness that would mask what he was saying to her. He smiled at Mrs. Brecht on the side aisle, in her Sunday feathered cap, and then leaned down and whispered into the waiting ear: "You should never have sent me that."

She slipped out from between the doctor and the child, breathed in deeply, and smiled hello to Lise Ehemann and her daughters.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

I stayed home when my brother's team played the Angels. Mama still wouldn't let Michael pitch, and she made another doctor's appointment for him.

I stayed home and played the piano. I sat alone in the house and tried a Chopin practice piece. I knew I couldn't possibly hit all the runs because I hadn't been playing at all lately, but when I started missing notes, I slammed my fingers with the keyboard cover anyway, for every wrong sound struck. When they finally started bleeding, I quit. The phone rang several times but I was afraid to answer.

The Pirates won their game, but only barely. Mama said that Tyler Barfield knocked the winning run in after the Pirates came into the sixth down by one. Daddy was steaming; Michael carried his wounded arm in his other hand, pressing the scabs and frowning. Mama said that Rosemary had come and was looking for me.

"She knew I wasn't coming. I told her," I said.

First United Methodist Church filled quickly Wednesday night with Catholics hiding from their priest. I decided to go for a while, just to listen, before I went to help Hershey with the Tee-Ball camp. I had called Rosemary to tell her we would be meeting in her church.

"I know, I heard," she said. "Reverend Holley gave the president of your parish group thingie the keys yesterday. Some of our elders are kind of pissed off because they're afraid of getting in the middle of somebody else's fight."

First United Methodist was a big, plain church with golden oak pews. Nothing hung on the walls except a huge red nylon banner with a gold cross on it, behind the altar. The families that knew about the meeting--Daddy had called only those who were active in parish affairs--did not fit easily into the space; some people had to sit in the floor.

Percy Davis was uncomfortable at having to convene the meeting without Father present, and he said so. "I think Father Smiley is a reasonable man. If we got a problem with the way he's approached the business of renovating the church--which I think most of us agree is long overdue--then I think we ought to bring him in here and say so."

My daddy stood up. I suspected he would remain standing for the rest of the evening. "He already knows some of us are strongly opposed. And he went ahead and got the damn scaffolding put up without asking anybody." Daddy's ears were red.

Lilah Murphy raised her crinkled hand and spoke softly. "And he got rid of the old hymnbooks. He didn't just box 'em up. He burned 'em."

"How do you know that, Lilah?" Percy asked, the church having fallen silent. His wife, Wyvonne, turned around in her

front pew seat, blinking back through heavy-laden lashes to see the old organist.

"Because I saw him do it," came Lilah's voice softly. "I came to the church building to practice and he was out in the bushes behind the playground." She cleared her throat. "My eyes ain't so good anymore but I could see the old books plain as day where he dropped them in the fire."

Words did not echo in this plain, carpeted church. Lilah's voice died when her mouth shut. In the silence that followed, the back door opened forcefully and Elaine Brink hustled inside, looking sweaty and urgent, her smile lines unsmiling. Behind her, as she held the door open, came Sister Cecilia, former principal of St. Mary's.

Elaine took the floor immediately without bothering to ask permission. "I'm late because I had to sign for a truckful of beige paint," she said flatly. "It's piled up now on the carport at the old rectory. And Sister Cecilia has something she wants to tell you."

Sister Cecilia stepped into the middle of the aisle. Her face was plain and unremarkable, her eyes dull, her hair invisible, but she stood erect and with authority. "As my sisters and I see it, and with God's help, the conflict in the convent has been resolved," she said quietly, looking at no one. "Father Smiley's things are waiting for him on the lawn, and the locks have all been changed."

Several people laughed out loud, including Beth, who was sitting between me and Mama. A murmur rose from the assembly.

"We won't leave the building again until we know that Father is leaving this parish," Sister Cecilia continued. There was no mirth in her face. "Sister Sheila and Sister Bernard have committed themselves in God's grace to a prayerful fast." Her voice wavered. "As for myself, I'm going to Nashville to plead our case to Bishop Zelniecz. I'm here to ask some of you to join me."

The words disappeared into the carpet. After a second passed, Elaine said, "I'm going."

My daddy nodded. "Clare and I will go."

Hands went up. Louis Hollander volunteered, as well as Lilah, Bob Finneran, and Clarence Meisterand. Then Percy Davis said, "As the president of Parish Council, I feel like I oughta be there."

"That's probably enough people," said Elaine. "If we take too many Mass will be empty this weekend."

"This weekend?" Sister Cecilia asked faintly. "I thought we could go tonight."

Elaine opened her mouth but nothing came out, and she looked to Daddy for help.

"Most of the people here can't take off work on this short a notice, Sister," Daddy said gently. "I know I can't."

"Me neither," said Clarence.

Percy Davis scratched his head. "If you really feel like it's an emergency--and I still think we should talk to Father first--we should probably head out Saturday morning."

Sister Cecilia blinked her eyes, said a quiet thank-you, and slipped back out the door.

I leaned over and whispered to Beth. "Where will Father stay if he's locked out of the convent?"

"Don't know, but I can't think of a better person to carry off a hunger strike than Sister Bernard. It'll be weeks before she feels it."

Mama looked worried. She raised her hand timidly and said, "Percy, those nuns are old women. They can't fast for long."

"I know it, but we can't get there any sooner than Saturday."

"I'll check in on them," said Elaine. "They gave me a key."

"The next question is," said my daddy, his hands on his hips making muscled wings of his arms, "where the hell is Father going to sleep?"

No one knew.

By the time I got to the ballfield Hershey had already been at it with the Tee-Ballers for an hour; the kids were divided up into four drill teams. There were a lot more kids than there had

been the week before. I came to the fence behind home plate and stuck my fingers through, watching.

Hershey was batting from the tee at home plate. He had five players spread between first and third, inside the dirt. "Now if the ball comes to you, I don't want you to catch it. Don't open your glove, okay? I just want you to *touch* the ball with your glove. Just reach out and swipe it." When he squared up to bat he saw me and grinned. "Hey, Gabriel. Come over on this side of the fence." He swung slowly. "Lucas, this one's for you."

I came through the dugout gate on the first-base side and joined Hershey at the plate.

"I can use you," he said.

"Is that so?"

"See out in left field?" He put another ball on the tee and swung at it. "I've got another tee out there with that little group of kids. Will you go and bat for them? Just let them go after the ball awhile. Hey, Barrett! That was great, but I don't wanna see the inside of that glove!"

"What about right field?"

"They're playing Simon Says. They've already batted."

"Center?"

"Red Rover."

The group in left field were rolling baseballs at each other like bowling balls. Luther Cordell was among them. He wasn't rolling balls; he was being rolled *at*, and he danced around the

balls, laughing with his teeth missing and letting his wispy arms flag about.

When I picked up a bat out of the dirt and walked out there to them, they eyed me with distrust. "Who are you?" one feisty boy with shaggy hair and a loud voice asked me.

Luther stopped dancing for a moment. His eyes were big and full of light. He came over to me timidly and said almost in a whisper, "Whose mama are you?"

I had to touch him. I couldn't help it. I ran my hand across his tender buzzed scalp and said, "I'm nobody's mama."

He laughed, a sound like a sharp gasp. "You look like a mama."

So we began to practice. I took the ball and bat and tee myself and the boys spread out in a semicircle.

"Who are you gonna hit it to?" the feisty boy asked. "You gotta call who you're gonna hit it to."

I placed the ball on the tee and lifted the bat to my shoulder, tensing my shoulders and arms hard enough, probably too hard, to keep the bat from wobbling. I had never tried to bat from a tee before. "No," I said, "it has to be a surprise."

"Why?"

"Because I said."

I lined the bat up with the ball and squared my shoulders, which my own daddy had taught me long ago, and I reached back and swung lightly for fear of cracking a little kid in the mouth. It was pretty easy to make contact with the ball, but I also nipped

the rubber shaft of the tee, which made a broad, squishy noise as it took the impact.

The kids laughed. Luther spread his gappy grin wide and slapped his knees. The ball rolled slowly to the feisty boy, who scooped it up and said, "Now what?"

I blushed a little crimson. "Well--roll it to me. I don't have a glove."

"Is this all we're going to do?"

I frowned. I pounded the end of the bat into the grass. "Well, you're going about this all wrong. I don't want you to catch the ball. Just reach down and swipe it. I don't want to see the inside of your glove."

Luther wrinkled up his nose and let his jaw hang open. "You mean don't catch it?" he squeaked.

"That's right. Pretend like you're playing tag."

"They're playing Simon Says over there," one boy informed me, pointing.

"Exactly."

I started hitting balls a little harder and catching less of the tee. When I realized I couldn't hit in a particular direction, I kept shuffling the boys around so they'd all get a turn swiping at the ball. The feisty boy said, "We wouldn't have to move around if you would hit the ball different places." I said, "I *have* hit the ball different places. Have you been paying attention?" "You never hit the ball over *there*." "I did so." "Did not." "Did so."

We played this game until the boys' faces grew long, at about which time Hershey drew all the little groups back to the diamond to give them some base-running lessons. "No sliding today," he called out, and I took my bat and ball and tee and sat in front of the away dugout, watching a closed loop of boys go round and round the circuit, leading off, stealing second, rounding for home, over and over. Their parents began to arrive and cluster at the fence, several with their teenage daughters who eyed me thoroughly. Mamas and daddies were ready to take their boys home and find out just what Hershey had done to them, and so Hershey gathered the small sweaty boys to him in a tight huddle they were all eager to crowd into. He spoke parting words to them that I couldn't hear.

As the little boys came off the field, four or five parents converged on Hershey to inquire about the efforts put forth by their children that evening and get a feel for his assessment of their talents. I noticed that Luther was standing at home plate, hands clasped behind his back, straining his neck to see up over the hill into the parking lot. I used the tee to pull myself to my feet.

Luther jumped a little when I came toward him. "Is your daddy here?" I asked him.

"No," he said softly, and I saw that his eyes were brimming with tears. The delicate skin around them had gone purple, and his lower lip trembled.

"Oh--" I reached out to take his hand, to tell him that Hershey and I would wait until his daddy came, but before I could, he had wrapped his arms around my leg, burying his face in my T-shirt. My heart tingled and I stooped over to put my arm around him. I looked up, and there was Hershey, with us at home plate. He mouthed, "What's wrong?"

I shook my head and bent farther over Luther. His narrow, shaking shoulders felt jerry-built, like he was somebody's last-minute decision. I crouched over the white child clinging to me at home plate, and Hershey stood over us both, his hand on my back.

Another child's mother took Luther home. Hershey offered to take me home, but I had my daddy's car, and so he just smiled amiably and said, "Okay, see you then," without looking at me as he left.

I slept through most of Thursday. When I woke up, it was Friday and there were 18 days left until the Fourth of July. Mama sat at the foot of my bed and patted my leg while the sun came up that morning. When I opened my eyes, she told me that Page had been calling for me--not Rosemary, because I asked--and was wanting me to help her clean out her mama's utility closet. Then Mama said to me, "I think we need to have you see a doctor."

The day smelled like mustard greens; Mama was canning them as fast as her hands would move. Daddy and Michael spent a careful day on the weights in the garage since the Pirates had the night off. Mama was mad about it, and she sent me out there with a glass of ice water for them, less to relieve them than to have me spy on them. Daddy didn't seem to me to be pushing Michael too hard, but I saw Michael shaking out his hand a couple of times, frowning at his ring and pinky fingers.

When I went back inside the house, Mama was hanging up the phone. "There's somebody in Middlefield that Elaine knows that I think you should talk to," she said to me. "Not a doctor, but someone with their master's, and I made you an appointment."

"You told Elaine?"

"She would never tell."

"When is it?"

"July 5. Do you have anything planned?"

My bones creaked as I exhaled. "No, nothing at all."

At about 7:30 that night, as the sun got low in the sky and I was thinking about going on to bed, even though Mama was just starting supper, Hershey rang the doorbell. Mama let him in and came to get me in my room.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner," he was saying when I came down the stairs.

"Not at all," Mama said. "I'm going to insist you stay and eat."

"Thanks," Hershey said, and to me as Mama hustled back to the kitchen, "I was thinking we could go for a walk."

"It's hot out."

He rolled his eyes. "The sun's going down."

"Oh."

He came closer to me and spoke in a low voice. "Bring your book of lists."

I wrinkled up my nose. "Don't want to."

"Please? This is the last time I'll ask."

I couldn't take the chance that he wasn't kidding.

We walked along the creekbank on our farm, him just ahead of me, me clutching my fraying book and watching for snakes in the grass. He had asked me if I wanted to go to my little circle of rocks in the pines at St. Mary's. I hadn't even thought of that place since the night I graduated, not once. And no, I didn't want to go there, either, maybe not ever.

Hershey wanted to sit on the tree where he had hung me for his drawing, the one that stretched over the water. "I like this tree. It's bizarre," he said, and so we clambered up one behind the other and sat together, a knot in the bark separating us.

"Look at the waterskates," he said, pointing down, dangling his legs back and forth. "They're so thin, but they make ripples that go all the way to the bank."

Were we going to talk about bugs? I was running out of days, for God's sake.

"Is it Rosemary you want to read about?" I asked.

His eyes gave no indication that he understood what I was talking about.

"In your book?"

"No, in the Bible. Of course in my book."

He sighed. "I just want you to share something with me. That's all. I want you to show me a page that means something to you."

"I'd almost rather you just opened to some page, and then I could tell you you couldn't look at it."

Before I could think about it, he snatched the book away from me.

"Hey," I said. "If you drop that in the water. . . ."

"If I drop it in the water what?"

"I don't care. Go ahead and drop it."

He shut his eyes and stuck a finger in the middle of the book. Without opening his eyes, he opened the book and held it up to me for inspection. My heart pushed at my chest, wanting out. But I looked at the page he'd picked and said, "Okay. You can read it."

"Ah-ha!" he cried, bouncing up and down a little so that the tree groaned. "He picks a winner!" He read aloud. "April 24, 1980. The lady with big elbows. The red books. My lemonade. Four balloons, not five."

My skin prickled as he read. I had never heard the words aloud before. "That was from a street fair when I was seven."

"This is nice printing for a seven-year-old."

"No, I rewrote it in this book when I was fifteen. I lost the book I had when I was seven."

"You remembered everything in the book?"

"Most everything."

"What does this stuff mean? Not to question your poetic instinct or anything."

"It's not poetry."

"Who was the lady with big . . . elbows?" He snickered.

"My parents took me to a street fair in Nashville once and I didn't want to go. I didn't like so many people in one place. So I didn't talk to anybody--I just memorized everything I saw and wrote it down later. The lady with big elbows was a fat lady who sold balloons. Daddy promised me five balloons but only bought me four."

"Big elbows."

"She did have monstrous elbows."

"The preacher's dog. Old cigarettes. You could spell 'cigarettes' when you were seven?"

"Yes."

"Flower pom-poms."

"I made that up. They were bouquets being sold a table but they were round like cheerleaders' pom-poms."

"So I can't count on your complete honesty here."

"I'm not so attached to the book that I wouldn't consider pushing you off this tree."

He shut the book. "I was kidding. Pick me another page."

"Haven't you seen enough?"

"Come on." He stuck his finger in close to the back, and I swallowed. He held up the book so that he couldn't see the page. "How about this one?"

The writing was in Eraser-Mate pen and was smeared with water.

"How about it?" he said.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not? Let me see just one word."

"Try again."

"Just the first thing on the list." He brought the book down to his lap and started reading as I grabbed at him. He fended me off with one hand and said, his voice wrenched with the effort of keeping me at bay, "January 3, 1991. That's this year."

"Stop it. Give it back."

"'Rosemary came over at three in the morning bleeding from her lip.'" Hershey stopped reading immediately and I stopped fighting him with my fingernails dug into his forearm. There for a second, we were just breathing. Then he read some more. "'February 3, 1991. Happy Birthday, Me. My parents are with Rosemary in the emergency room.'" His eyes were resting upon me, I was sure of it, but I had shut my eyes because I couldn't stand the sound of the words. "Most of these are just dates, with no

words." He flipped through several pages with his thumb. "November 11, 1990. Mrs. Winchell in homeroom told Rosemary she had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen." He shut the book.

"I don't believe you," I said. My stomach hurt terribly. "I don't believe you just did that."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have." He dropped the book into his lap.

I took it away from him. I poked into the pages so hard that I cut my thumb on the paper. "Here," I said, opening to a page barely worn at the edges and shoving the book back into Hershey's lap. "Here's a list."

He didn't seem to want to touch it, but he read aloud: "November. Golden fields. Frost on the horses. One burning yellow tree left."

"There's you a list," I said with no voice.

Hershey ate supper with us because my mama had asked him to. I didn't speak except to ask him to pass the salad over, but no one noticed because Daddy was talking to him about the Pirates finishing up the season neck-and-neck with the Jays, and how many practices should they have the week before the championship game? I felt tears in my throat, in my ears, between my eyes, but none showed up on my face.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The women were responsible for making the popcorn and naming the children. They kept their noses out of the rule books and their asses out of the score box seats on the balcony above the concessions stand. They squeezed pitchers of lemonade and salted the burgers on the grill and moved the chocolate bars out of the sun every thirty minutes and rolled quarters for the night deposit bag.

And they named the children. They named them completely irresponsibly. They turned out passels of Justins and Codys and Tylers and Jareds and Channings. They watched prime-time soap operas with wide wet eyes and two-scoop hot fudge sundaes and then they would go to bed and conceive Blakes and Dakotas and Colbys, and sometimes on the tails of the beast of Sunday's guilt would come the Joshuas and Abrams and Isaacs. There were not quite so many of these. One can only assume it was the fault of the women.

The men would have told them it should be different. The men would have told them about the assembly lines and convenience stores and garages. They would have told them that respectable Southern men were named Ewell and Otis, or even Willie and John and Charlie. But Jared's Bait and Tackle? Dakota's Garage? Ain't no Cody ever run no one-stop deli and package.

But the women weren't paying any attention to the men anyway. They were watching soap operas. They were staring into mirrors and studying the thin blue skin behind their knees and

around their ankles. They were crying into two-scoop hot fudge sundaes, buying bright pink crop-tops and short-shorts and little bright white canvas shoes. They were taking their towels and bikinis to the backyard and broiling themselves to a rich golden butter-brown, or plunking down twenty-five dollars a month for a tanning bed membership at the video store. They were huffing and puffing and clutching pink barbells in their fists as they power-walked the park road, stretching their bubbly skin tight over the tops of their thighs. They were putting crinkle perms in their hair. They were buying blue mascara and pink lipstick and hiking up their shorts over their bubbly thighs. They were crying into two-scoop hot fudge sundaes.

And the men were very busy filling in the playbooks with the rosters for Monday night.

Chapter Sixty

"I need one that bones well," she said, pausing over the two knives, which were only slightly different. One had a tip that was more curved than the other.

"*That* one," said Mrs. Brecht, running her finger carefully over the tip, "is just like the fishermen use in Alaska, where they have fish as long as your arm."

"Oh. I don't often cook fish as long as my arm."

Mrs. Brecht said, "It's just as precise on chickens."

She smiled. "Well, in that case."

"I'm surprised, being on a farm, that Karl has not bought you a good sturdy set of knives." Mrs. Brecht began to wrap the knife in tissue paper and fumbled around under the counter for a box.

"Oh, I have some good knives, but they've been run over the stone so many times that they are not well-shaped anymore. I want this one just for boning."

Mrs. Brecht nodded. "Replacing them one at a time, eh? Sensible." She paused. "Karl brought you, didn't he? You didn't ride here alone? You're nearly due!"

"Yes, he's outside."

She thanked Mrs. Brecht and walked out into the sun with her package, and then around back of the store, where she had tied the horse. Nobody was around, so she swung her massive body up onto his back and spread her skirt all around her, a clumsy and

difficult task that she was proud to have done once she snapped the reins.

Katie Meisterand was sent out to her farm by her mother with homemade bread the next day. She looked fresh and giggly, and confided in a whisper as she handed over the bread, "I was glad to bring you this because I could ride by the mill and see Mr. O'Malley's son sweeping the porch." No sooner were the girlish words out of her lips than she was back on the horse, waving goodbye, and trotting toward town the way she had come.

Chapter Sixty-One

"If you don't want to stay here in the house all by yourself, then go over to Granny's, okay, hon?" Mama told me. It was early on Saturday morning and she and Daddy were getting ready to go to Nashville to ask the bishop to do something about Father Smiley. Michael had spent the night with Tyler Barfield and was going to again that night; Mama had suggested that I go to Rosemary's but I didn't want to. She didn't much like the thought of my being in the house all alone, but she seemed pretty well convinced that I would decide to go somewhere else once it got dark.

After they left, I spent most of the day at the piano, grinding out runs until my fingers started to freeze up and the sun was touching the tops of the trees in the southwest corner of the sky beyond the house. Page called once to ask if I wanted to go riding around. I didn't. Rosemary called twice to see if I would go to the movies with her. I wouldn't. I was in the house alone and only I could hear the mistakes I was making. When light started to seep out of the kitchen and living room and shadows grew in the corners, I felt a little nervous and went around to lock all the doors.

I was in the middle of a Mozart sonata that made my knuckles hurt when I heard a sharp tap on the glass of the window behind me. I grabbed the piano bench on both sides and turned around to see what was there. I saw nothing. My palms went cold. I turned back to the keys but was unable to go on playing.

The rapping came again. This time when I turned around, a face was pressed against the glass in a gruesome display of flattened flesh. My heart rocketed up into my throat.

It was Hershey.

I groaned. I turned back to the piano and started playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" with one finger on my right hand.

I heard his muffled voice through the glass. "Come on! Let me in."

I got up and went to the door. "Are you going to clean your foggy lips off the window?" I said to him as I opened it. "God, I can't believe you did that. There's bug crap on the window."

"I scared you good." Hershey pushed me with his hip as he came in. "I've been out there on the porch twenty minutes, listening to you play."

I grunted. "I haven't been practicing that piece much. I know I haven't seen it at least since May."

"Shut up," he said. "I didn't hear you miss any notes. What have you fixed me for dinner?"

I hadn't eaten all day. I'd forgotten to.

"Michael's been over at Wayne's since yesterday, so I knew your folks would be gone," he said. "I thought we could make some dinner. Or, uh, have you had breakfast yet?"

I still had on a nightgown. And no bra, I remembered as my arms crossed over my chest.

"Are you still mad at me about the other day?" he asked. He twisted his fingers in his belt loops.

"I don't know."

"Don't be. Let me cook you some dinner."

"If you want."

"Do you guys have any candles? Let's light candles everywhere and turn out the lights. It'll be dark before long."

"I'm pretty sure my mother left me specific instructions not to burn down the house."

"I'll be careful."

There were some candles out already in the living room, but we had to go digging into the Christmas candles from the back of the pantry to have enough to satisfy Hershey's idea of what the house ought to look like. After a little while, standing on a kitchen stool to get the ones off the highest shelf, I stopped crossing my arms over my chest, mostly because I had to if I didn't want to pick up the candles with my teeth, but it felt okay. Hershey was standing below me so I could hand the stuff to him, and once I thought I saw him looking at the way my gown fell over me. I wasn't sure. It was a white cotton gown my aunt Beth had got me for Christmas and it was monstrously too big; I was always stepping on it.

Hershey had one of Wayne's cigarette lighters in his pocket.

"For a nonsmoker," I said, "you seem to always have a lighter handy."

He lit some squatty tea votives and lined them up on the fireplace mantel. They were evergreen Christmas candles and pretty soon the room started smelling like a pine tree.

"Mmm," he said. "Makes me hungry for a turkey."

"Uh, we have ham lunch slices."

"And macaroni and cheese?"

"No doubt."

"I'd love to make you some macaroni and cheese."

"Be my guest."

"You keep lighting candles," he said, "and I'll make macaroni and cheese. And ham sandwiches. And don't come in to help me because I'm doing this for you."

I tried to keep from smiling, and when I couldn't, I let my hair fall in my face.

I lit little black-and-orange witches, glittered angels, snowmen, pink bunnies, slender red tapers, and Michael's First Communion candle, all with Wayne's lighter. Only the fierce rim of the sun was left outside against the grass; the sky was deep purple. I lined up four angels along the piano lid. Their heads afire, they cast a deep dusk on Mary's face and flickered against my sheet music, where the black soup of notes grew darker in the shadows.

I heard Hershey opening cabinet doors and shutting them again. "Hey!" he hollered. "Where's the macaroni and cheese?"

"It's on the top shelf in the pantry, on the left."

I heard the door squeak open. "Wait--this is just macaroni."

"Well, there's cheese in the refrigerator."

"No, I mean *macaroni and cheese*, like, that comes together."

I lit a little Christmas mouse with holly on its tail and set it on the television. "Hershey, my mother does not make macaroni and cheese from a box."

"Well, I do."

"I can show you how to make it with real cheese."

"No, because then you'll be making dinner instead of me." The door swung back into place. "Besides, I don't want to learn how to make it with real cheese. I like the powder stuff."

I put candles along the floor in front of the fireplace, on the dining-room table, on the sill of the big front window. The light in the sky was gone. The breeze from the air-conditioning vents made the tiny single flames jump around.

After a few minutes, Hershey called, "Well, I've made the sandwiches, but I guess you'll have to come in here and show me how to do the macaroni. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

I laid the lighter on the dining-room table. "Put a pot of water on to boil."

"I did that."

I showed him where the cheese was and had him chop it into small blocks, got out the salt and the pepper, and retrieved the box of macaroni from the pantry shelf.

"Now," he said, "stop helping me."

I sat on a stool by the kitchen counter and watched him make the stuff as I was directing. We didn't talk, really, while he was doing it; he was watching the boiling pot intently and I was telling him what to do. The sandwiches he'd made were sitting on

plates on the counter, crookedly stacked, with little globs of mustard poking out. I didn't like mustard particularly, and he hadn't asked, but I figured I'd eat it anyway.

When the cheese was in the covered pot, melting, and we were waiting wordlessly for it to be finished, he pointed to the picture window in the living room. "One of your candles went out."

I'd put more candles there than anywhere else, five right together in a tight little bundle of flames, but one of them had been snuffed by the air conditioner. I took Wayne's lighter over to the window and leaned over the candle, holding back my hair with one hand. After I relit the candle, I waited for its tiny ball of light to lick up into a point, and I stood, smelling the sulfur smoke.

Hershey was standing in the kitchen doorway, holding the two ham sandwiches in his hands, looking at me.

The walls bounced in the tall, rapidly changing shadows, and I realized that the candles behind me in the window were shining through my gown. My shape was as clear as if the morning sun were shining in.

"Do you . . . want . . . ?" Hershey cleared his throat, raising a ham sandwich in the air.

"What's all this for?" I said, looking down at my gown. "Are you going to draw me or something?"

"The candles, you mean?" Hershey cleared his throat again. "I just . . . I just thought it would be nice, to eat, you know, with the candles."

"Oh."

"Besides, I'm done with the sketches. I mean, for my class. Well, except for. . . ."

I looked at him, hard.

"Except for, you know." He nodded, waving the sandwiches around in the air like a crazy man. "You know, the nu--the nude."

The room did not look real. The walls were tall and short, short and tall, approaching and receding, in the shaking light of the candles. So when I put down the lighter and reached for the buttons of my nightgown, it seemed more or less a dream, and I wasn't afraid.

The sandwiches were hanging limply in Hershey's hands. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, so he shut it, but then he opened it to try again. "You're gonna . . . ?"

The buttons were tiny, but the buttonholes were so tall that they slid apart easily, except for a few that got caught in the threads. I patiently untangled them and moved on to the next ones. The last buttons were just above my knee. When I had them undone, the gown hung on me like a robe, just barely split down the middle. My underwear was old, I saw. The elastic at the legs showed through where the cloth had frayed, and a couple of

short strings hung down. My blood was shooting through my veins and tingling in my fingers and toes.

Hershey had set the sandwiches down on the dining-room table and was searching the room, suddenly business-like, for a prop. "That chair over there in the corner would be great," he said quietly, his eyes never falling within three feet of me, "if we could move it there into the window with you, for you to, uh, sit, or something--sit on."

I could feel every place the cloth of my gown touched me. "Okay."

The chair was an old wooden one with elegant armrests and a cracked seat that had belonged to my great-grandmother. Hershey picked it up and moved it to where I was standing, never looking me in the eye. He set it down and picked it back up four times without changing its position.

"Do you need paper?" I asked him.

"That would be great."

"Upstairs, in Michael's room. . . ."

"With the bird?"

"Yeah, in his desk there's some notebook paper and pencils. I'm don't think we have any art paper or anything."

He flew upstairs, and I heard Evangeline squawk when he opened the door and rustled through Michael's desk. He was back downstairs almost before the wind created by his rushing upstairs was gone. He had a few sheets of loose-leaf paper and a Husky pencil.

"You could have got a regular pencil. I know there are some up there."

"That's okay--these you can shade with a little better anyway."

"Do you need a magazine or something to draw against?"

"That would be great."

"Over in the basket by Daddy's armchair."

Hershey seemed to wince at the word "Daddy," but he got a *Newsweek* and came back. Then he stood there.

I stood there.

He said, "Could you . . . sit on the arm of the chair?"

"I don't know--it might break."

"Let's see--I'll help you."

I stepped up into the chair and my gown split wide, but Hershey had his eyes on the floor. I sat down slowly on the arm, holding onto the ornate knobs of the chairposts for balance, my gown under me.

"Is that okay?" Hershey asked me, looking at the ceiling.

"Yeah, but you're eventually going to have to look, you know."

His eyes shot defiantly back to my face, and he moved his hands to pull my gown away, but they were too quick and clumsy; his thumbs jabbed my collarbone on both sides and they were ice cold. But the gown fell away from my shoulders. It just fell off, not in graceful folds but pretty much straight down to where it was pinned between my butt and the chair.

Hershey's eyes were agonized. "Lift up a little bit and I'll get the rest of that for you."

I did. The gown was in the floor. It was only me and my ragged underwear, and the shifting room was cold.

"Oh," I said, looking down at my underwear. I had grabbed hold of the knobs again, keeping my chest contained and partially hidden. "I guess I'll have to take these off."

"You don't have to take them off," he said quickly.

"You'll have to cheat if I don't."

"Cheating's not the word *I* would use."

I got up off the chair and, before I could think too hard about it, I pulled my panties down and stepped out of them. I felt a breeze from the vent and a wave of goosebumps rolled down me from my head to my feet. My arms were down, my hair back behind my shoulders.

"Uh," Hershey said. His ears seemed to be red, but in the strange light it was hard to tell. "Just sit in the chair. Not on the arm, just sit in the chair."

I sat.

"Cross your legs and just drape your arms on the armrests."

"Aren't I supposed to be standing or holding my arms over my head, or something?"

"*No*, no. No, just sit."

"Can you see what you're doing?"

"I can see fine." Hershey picked up the pencil and paper and sat on the couch, about six feet from me. He was swallowing what must have been copious amounts of spit.

"I'm freezing," I whispered.

For the first time, I watched him take all of me in, up and down. He tapped the chubby second-grade eraser against the paper and sighed.

As he started to draw, his shoulders dropped from where they had frozen close to his neck and his eyelids started to open and shut more naturally. He would look back and forth, from me to the paper, and eventually his eyes seemed to be seeing lines and shapes instead of me. The candles began to drip.

As we wore on towards an hour, they were changing shape altogether, and I was getting sleepy. I also felt the finish of the chair sticking to me.

"My mama's candles," I said, yawning. "She'll kill me if wax gets on the furniture."

"I'm almost done," he said quietly, the pencil continuing to flick across the paper. He smiled faintly. "It's . . . almost. . . ."

I noticed that the Christmas mouse's ear was melting away. Five minutes went by, and the liquid slowly built up to a head and then rolled down the edge.

Hershey sighed and held the paper out in front of him.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"So you're done?"

"I'll have to put it on sketch paper later, but--"

"Can I see it?"

"No."

"It's my body."

He didn't say anything. The quick professional appraisal in his eyes was gone and he put the pencil down, folding the paper and putting it into his pocket. He was across the six feet between us before I could blink my eyes, picking up my wadded gown off the floor and holding it up so I could stick my arms through. I did, and he let go, and I buttoned myself back down to my knees. Hershey stood behind me, pulling my hair back with his hands, and I waited to feel a little of his breath against the back of my neck, but I didn't.

I looked around the room. "Let's blow these out."

Many of the candles--my mama's Christmas candles--had burned halfway down already. We usually only lit them for a little while on Christmas Eve, to save them, and I had let them burn half away. Hershey and I went around and blew each one out, leaving the smells of bayberry and pine in the air, as well as pools of wax on the furniture. When I blew out the Christmas mouse, Hershey and I were on opposite sides of the room and it was completely dark.

"Hey," he said.

"What?"

"I bet the cheese is melted into the macaroni by now."

I reached for the nearest light switch.

The macaroni and cheese was cold as ice; Hershey had to reheat it. It was when he had set the plates back on the table and I was taking a bite of macaroni in my nightgown that the walls of the room became finite to me again. My face went a burning scarlet and tears rose in my eyes.

Hershey saw. "What's the matter?"

"Hah," I said, letting my mouth hang open and spitting the macaroni back out. "The macaroni is hot."

We finished our dinners and cleared the plates talking about the Pirates' winning season and whether or not Michael would win MVP. Hershey said that he didn't see any way that Jerry Dog's son could even come close to Michael in the voting, unless he pitched the game of his life in the championship match, which would all but certainly be between the Pirates and the Jays on the Fourth of July.

"Seventeen days away," I said.

"Huh?"

He also said that he'd been up north to Columbia to check out a couple of their games, and that with Michael and Abram on the same team the Hope Springs All-Stars could probably put up a good fight with the Maury County team. Then he said, "Are you staying here alone tonight?"

"I guess."

"Will you be okay?"

"I guess."

"Do you want me to stay here on the couch?"

I looked him in the eyes and picked at one of the buttons on my gown. "My mama and daddy would absolutely kill me."

"They're in Nashville. And I'm sure they'd want you to feel safe."

"Sure, at my granny's house."

"Well, I was just asking."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Wouldn't Wayne wonder where you're at?"

"There's no way he'd know. I'll call him and tell him I'm going to Florence to see somebody I know from school--I'll pull my bike around back just in case."

My parents called shortly after that to say that the meeting with the bishop had not gone well. He had been angry that a delegation of parishioners had come to him without the knowledge of their priest, and was sending them home with orders to work out the problem themselves. He had refused to intervene. My mama sounded awfully tired. "He barely let Percy finish a sentence," she sighed. "Your daddy is boiling." She said that they would be home the next day, although she wasn't sure what time, and asked, "Why have you not gone over to Granny's?" I shushed Hershey with a finger and said, "I like being by myself for a change."

The rest of the night Hershey and I watched a documentary about the sinking of the *Titanic* on TV, at his suggestion. He pushed me down on the couch and fuzzed up my hair, and then he set up the cushions so that one was between us as I leaned against him. We were not touching except for his hand on my arm, for hours and hours, as the model ship got lower and lower in the sea. When I could keep my eyes open no longer, he turned off the TV and said, "Do you have any blankets?"

I got him the pillows off Michael's bed and some sheets from the linen closet and set him up a bed on the couch.

"Thanks for staying," I said.

"No problem."

When I was in my own bed and had turned out the light, I couldn't even shut my eyes. I knew that Hershey was lying directly below me, about to go to sleep. I held my breath, listening for the noises he would make, and I heard the squeak of the coils in the couch, and I imagined my naked body perched on a my great-grandmother's ridiculous chair in a room lit with Christmas candles. I was as awake as I could possibly be. My breath came more regularly than the clock beside my bed ticked.

Then, after a half hour of listening to the couch's coils squeak, the noise ceased--and there were footsteps on the stairs.

He was coming up.

I heard him pause by the door to my room.

Then, before my eyes could focus on his dark shape coming toward me, he was over the foot of my bed and between my sheets, wriggling up next to me without completely touching me.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Something wrong with the couch?"

"No."

"Then what?" I could smell his breath and a little of his sweat.

When he spoke I could feel it on my face, because his mouth was so close to me. "I thought maybe I could sleep better in here."

I rolled over a little onto my side, to face him.

"And," he said, "I just wanted to say thanks for the drawing."

He was wearing his shorts, but no shirt. I measured in warmth how far his face was from mine. My lips seemed to be sticking out inches off my face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I moved my leg against his. I couldn't tell my breath from his anymore. "Maybe years from now," I whispered, "we'll both be laughing at some drawing hanging on our wall."

He laughed shortly, without mirth.

Then he whispered, "Goodnight," turned his head from me, grabbed a pillow in his arms, and curled into a fetal position on the other side of the bed.

I let my face get cold before I moved. We were not touching at all, and I rolled over stiffly on my back, staring up at the ceiling. I lay there like a log for several minutes, hearing that his breathing was not coming quite evenly yet, and I wasn't sure how long I had. I yawned and sighed, and flung my arm wide until my hand touched his back. He didn't stir or say a word. *My arm was out there, touching him, and I dared not move it, and so I lay with my arm going to sleep but not the rest of me for minutes and minutes that trailed off into more minutes. My hand was dead and I could not sleep, and it was as if he were lying in another country unreachable by phone or post, and I could not feel him because my hand was dead. I lay there and lay there and knew I was not sleeping until he woke me when my clock said three a.m., with a gentle touch on my forehead above my dead open eyes and said he could not sleep, and he was going home. Goodnight.*

Wayne dropped Michael off at church the next morning and Beth and Agnes brought me. It was unusual for Agnes to go to ten o'clock Mass, and her eyes looked puffy, as if she'd slept late. I myself had not been able to get up until 9:30. Michael wrinkled up his nose when he saw me and said, "Did you lose your hairbrush or something?"

When we stepped inside the building, Agnes muttered, "Good Lord."

The scaffolding Father had had put up covered the entire front of the church. The angels' faces were crisscrossed with the ugly rusted bars. On the altar itself there was only room for the lectern, the priest's chair (there were two today, and I wondered why), the altar table, and a narrow pathway to the sacristy on either side. All the heads in church were pointed up, staring.

When the bells had rung and the opening hymn began, I thought I heard extra feet in the processional march. Behind the two altar boys and the lector came Father Smiley, singing forcefully, and behind him slowly strode another priest, white-haired and bespectacled but with a golden tan not unlike Father Smiley's. He did not sing. He moved down the aisle at his own leisure, looking all of us up and down very carefully, and therefore arrived at the altar a full ten seconds after Father Smiley, who waited patiently and with loud song. The two of them genuflected broadly together and threaded through the scaffolding to the side altar, where a second throne-like chair had been placed beside Father Smiley's.

Lilah brought the last verse to a close, and the second priest stood unsmiling, turning his chest alternately to each side of the church with the scientific, distracted air of one taking a head count, while Father Smiley brought his green-sleeved arms grandly together for the opening Sign of the Cross.

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," he intoned. "Amen. The peace of the Lord be with you."

"And also with you," we responded.

"I'd like to welcome you to Mass this morning," he said, his arms still aloft and dripping ceremonious green vestment, "and to introduce you to a good friend of mine, Father Sebastian Colney, who would like to deliver the homily this Sunday."

Father Sebastian nodded, his lips still unsmiling but stretched into a mild upturn of acknowledgment.

All through the opening prayers and into the Sunday readings, he kept the sour look on his face and burned his eyes into the top of each curious head. After Father Smiley read the gospel, Father Sebastian turned ever so slowly toward the podium where he was to preach his sermon, and the two men crossed paths as Father Smiley returned to the priest's chair. Father Sebastian was moving much more deliberately.

When he reached the lectern, he gripped it and pursed his lips together. We could hear his breathing in the microphone but there was no other sound in church. Father Smiley kept his perpetually pleasant expression aimed at the floor.

Father Sebastian Colney did not tell us who he was. He did not say what parish he had come from, he did not tell us any witty anecdote about how he and Father Smiley had met during Bingo at the cathedral school or at a concelebratory Mass where each thought the other was supposed to deliver the homily. He didn't chuckle.

And when he spoke, his voice was like an anvil hitting the floor.

"A PRIEST," he said mightily, "IN A TENT."

His words were so purposefully enunciated that it was impossible to misunderstand them, but we all sat as understanding as barnyard animals in our places, lips parted dumbly.

"A PRIEST IN A TENT," he repeated. "THE ARBITRATOR BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR GOD, IN A TENT."

I could tell Beth was popping to whisper something in my ear, but as close as we were to the front, she was afraid to move.

Father Sebastian's frosty white hair, so still above his thundering mouth, produced an eerie effect. "SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI," he bellowed, gesturing toward the stained-glass depiction on the east wall of the saint crouched among rabbits and deer, "ONCE SAID THAT IF HE MET A PRIEST AND AN ANGEL WALKING ALONG THE ROAD TOGETHER, HE WOULD SOONER GREET THE PRIEST, BECAUSE THE PRIEST BRINGS HIM JESUS EVERY DAY IN THE EUCHARIST."

He stopped to let us savor those words as they resonated off the walls and ceiling. Father Smiley continued to smile vaguely at the floor.

Father Sebastian sucked in his cheeks. "I ONCE KNEW OF A PARISH," he said, "WHOSE MEMBERS DID NOT LOVE THEIR PRIEST THE WAY THEY OUGHT TO. TO BE RID OF HIM, THEY MADE UP A RUMOR THAT HE WAS HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A YOUNG GIRL IN THE PARISH, AND HE WAS ORDERED OUT BY HIS BISHOP. BUT AS HE LEFT, HE STOOD UPON THE STEPS OF THE CHURCH AND CURSED THE PARISH. AND MARK IT, THEY

WERE NEVER ABLE TO KEEP A PRIEST AGAIN. THEIR RANKS DIMINISHED AND THEIR CHURCH CRUMBLED TO THE GROUND."

Father Sebastian seemed to search each face for its reaction; the faces I could see all looked the same--blank. He left the podium and returned to his place beside Father Smiley.

Beth found her tongue. "That's *it*?" she whispered in my ear. She was the only person who had moved. "*That's* the sermon?"

Apparently it was. Father Smiley began the creed; he was a few lines into it before the congregation recovered enough to join in, but when we did, we spoke strongly and loudly, which seemed to speak not of conviction but of our desire to return to reality from wherever it was we had been for the past minute and a half.

By the time we said the Lord's Prayer before communion under the stern gaze of Father Sebastian, we were acting as if nothing had happened, forming our weird little chain across the church and barely looking at each other.

But once church was done and Lilah killed the last verse with a stomp of her foot on the volume pedal, and Father Smiley and Father Sebastian followed the altar boys out of the church, voices burst out of their closed boxes and flew at each other. "*What* was that?" Beth demanded of Agnes, who hollered back, "You've been here as long as I have!"

Margaret Brink, Elaine's sister-in-law, who'd been sitting behind us, leaned over and grabbed me and Beth by our arms.

"I'll tell you what that was. Father Smiley's been camping out in a tent in the pines behind the school, don't know where he got the tent. The nuns haven't come out of the convent. The bishop is mad as hell--Elaine called last night and said it didn't go too good with them in Nashville."

"Charlie and Clare didn't think so either," Agnes said. She was craning her neck at the vast network of bars over her head.

"The pines behind the school," I repeated.

"Well, who in God's name was that man?" Beth asked. "I never heard of him before."

Margaret shrugged. "That I don't know."

Agnes had firm fists on her hips. "I want to know what that garbage was about cursing the parish--what the hell."

Margaret looked uncomfortable, but didn't respond.

The loud roar of voices in the church softened when someone noticed that Father Smiley and Father Sebastian had propped open the church doors and were standing on the steps, waiting to shake hands with the parishioners.

"Ugh," Beth said. "Let's go out the side door."

We did. In the parking lot, as we all got in the car, Beth looked toward the pine trees behind school. "Can you see the tent? I can't."

"You wouldn't be able to see it from here," I said, sighing. "It's too far in."

When Mama and Daddy got home that afternoon, looking tired, they came straight to Granny's, where discussion had been raging

at the table for hours. Beth and Agnes, in agitated tandem, told them about the strange visitor we'd had at Mass. Mama and Daddy both looked like they couldn't even manage expressions of surprise. "I have a bad feeling," was all that Mama would say.

Later that evening, when I was starting to feel sleepy and was contemplating turning in, Mama said to me, "You know, Gabriel, your college orientation is this coming weekend." Before I could respond, she said, "You have to go. I insist that you go."

I twirled a strand of hair around my finger and stared at the floor.

"Your daddy and I have already discussed it," she said. "He doesn't think he can manage another weekend away from coaching, so you and I will drive over there together."

"You don't know your way around Knoxville."

"I know."

We never did, in all the years to follow, even though several people looked into the matter earnestly, find out who Father Sebastian Colney was. No parish we contacted had ever heard of him.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Little girls that played the piano could go far. The two teachers in town had a few angry little boys who came in on Wednesday afternoons and pounded out what they hadn't practiced, but the rest of the week was filled with little girls who were going far. The little girls with skinny fingers were usually going the farthest. Chubby fingers could play "Born Free" from the Big Notes book, but skinny fingers could dabble in the works of real composers and learn to toss out arpeggios like they were shaking off water.

Skinny fingers were usually last at the recitals, given in the civic center with orange plastic chairs set up in rows for the parents to sit in. Chubby fingers kept warm naturally and only had to play Big Notes; skinny fingers, not having the advantage of extra natural padding besides anticipating having to knock out a Mozart sonata with no mistakes, tended to shake harder. A month of sleepless nights filled with disjointed half-dreams of plastic orange chairs could render skinny fingers nearly unusable in the appointed hour.

But it was good training. The little girls who yearly braved the civic center recitals would go on to play for weddings, receptions (often in the civic center, which was nicely familiar), graduation ceremonies, and even church services. The two teachers in town would recommend them to friends not only in their town, but all over the county. By the time they reached high school, everybody would want them in their lace-trimmed

dresses, backs straight, plunking out a mostly true rendition of the theme from "Ice Castles" as the bridesmaids started down the aisle.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Milky-white Katie rode in on a Thursday with kerosene for the lamps. It was not vital that they have it, but Else was so insistent that Katie be of use to her that she had to think of something they needed.

Katie was petulant on this Thursday, pouting her lips without thinking about it much and not offering any confidences when she handed over the metal jug as if it were made of lead.

She took it from Katie with the most tolerant of smiles, and let her go without asking her any questions or staring at the soft color in her cheeks that sprang there without being pinched. She watched Katie go, she watched Katie mount the horse, and she watched Katie speed for the hilltop; it was there that the horse--could this nervous feeling she was having be not only greenness, but genuine intuition?--reared up and threw its rider back, suddenly and terribly folded neatly at the center. Katie fell the ten feet doubled over like the halves of a book and landed on the curve of her back, rolling up towards her neck and over until she lay sprawled on her stomach, unmoving.

Ach! She groaned, she cursed, she banged her head upon the doorpost, but she didn't go outside. She called for Joseph after a few moments, and told him to get a horse, and hurry; Karl limped out of the bedroom with his walking stick and asked what was wrong. She shook her head, and he opened the front door, and said quietly, "*Ach, mein Gott.*" Then he shouted for Joseph, and so, knowing things would be taken care of, she slipped into the

bedroom and made herself small in a corner, rocking and banging her head quietly against the wall. She didn't want to go outside and help. She didn't want to see any of the faces that would appear or the expressions they would hold.

Chapter Sixty-Four

I did not hear from Hershey in three days. Rosemary called a lot, mostly to get approval for things she'd purchased for our dorm room. She asked me to please come with her shopping, but I didn't want to. Page called me to say they'd heard from her daddy! he'd left a message on the machine saying he was in Ocala, Florida, and just thought he'd call to talk to his little girl. I asked if he'd left a number, and she said no.

I knew Hershey would be having Tee-Ball clinic that night and I waited for him to call and ask me to help, but he didn't, so finally I dialed Wayne's number and asked for him. Tyler put him on the phone.

"I was just wondering what time I was supposed to be there," I said.

"Ohhh. . . ." He sighed. "I don't really need any help tonight. I'm gonna let them scrimmage."

"Who'll call the bases?"

"I will."

"Oh. Okay."

The next night the Pirates whipped the Astros handily. It was the game that cinched their berth in the Fourth of July championship game. I was a little breathless on the drive over to the park, thinking I would have to wonder when Hershey saw me, is he seeing me with these cutoff shorts on, or is he thinking about me in the candlelit living room? But as it turned out, he

never once looked over at me. I could barely see his eyes under his baseball cap.

Michael's arm seemed to feel a little better, although he was not jumping up and down after the game with the rest of his teammates who were celebrating their winning season, along with my daddy, who clapped his big mitts together and drew as many boys as he could grab at once--which was several--into a tight squeeze. They lolled their tongues out and laughed like they were being tickled.

Hershey gave every boy a high five, calling each by name as he did. Then he hopped on his moped and was gone.

I woke up sometime Friday afternoon and realized that I'd been sleeping all day, and that Mama had been in and out several times trying to shake me awake, which I had a dim recollection of. I sat and tried to make myself more awake, and the thought that crossed my mind first was that I had eleven days left. So I went back to sleep. *In my dreams I shook the dust off the girl in the car and sent her back over the bridge again. Again and again, just to hear the noise--Ka-runch, Thud, Boom! Again to see the town pour over the hillside--how I had missed them, how I had forgotten their loving and horrified looks! I hung my bleeding head out the window and sighed a sigh of relief.*

"Please, please, wake up and call Rosemary," my mama was saying as she shook my shoulders. "She's called three times--please get up now."

I sat up and my head hurt so bad I thought I'd die.

"Your granny's here," Mama said. "She wanted to come over and say good luck with your orientation."

"I don't have any orientation," I said. "I don't know where my feet are."

Downstairs, Granny was pacing back and forth in front of the picture window. She wiped at her watery eyes and watched me come down the stairs, and then said, "Goodness, have you never got out of your pajamas today?"

"No."

Mama went to the kitchen to fix me something to eat, and I started to follow her, but Granny reached out with her birdlike arm to grasp my wrist. "Stay here with me a second," she said. "Unless you're real hungry. If you're hungry, go ahead with your mama."

I shrugged. "It's okay. What do you want?"

"Are you sure? Now, I don't want you not to eat because the Lord knows you're way too skinny."

"I'll eat when she's done making it."

Granny let go of my wrist and clasped her hands to her chest; her right thumb kept glancing rapidly off her left, and she nodded her head while she gazed out the window. "I just

wanted to tell you how proud"--here she paused and looked me almost in the eye--"your granny is of you going off to school."

I pulled the collar of my robe up tight. "Thanks."

"But," she said, softly and with an upturn at the end, "but, but, there's lots of smart folks out there, and mean as snakes, and just watch yourself and pray your rosary that the Blessed Mother will watch over you."

I swallowed. I wondered if Mama could hear this from the kitchen. "I will."

"I want you to know," Granny said, her lip trembling and going blue, "I want you to know, that once I was. . . ."

I waited until she bit her lip, and I said, "Was what?"

She moved her tongue around over her teeth and seemed to be arranging things inside her mouth. "Here is something for you," she said, and in her sweet Southern accent and warbly soprano, she began to sing:

Fa una canzone
Senza note nere
Fa una canzone
Senza note nere
Se mai bramasti
La mia grazia vere
Falla d'un tuo
No ch'in vi tal dormire
Dolcemente, dolcemente, facendola finire.

Her eyes while she sang swam in their watery pools and looked in the direction of the ceiling. Granny's last notes were not a fraction off the key she'd started in. On the last words, two tears rolled down her face, and her tremolo grew a little wider.

I stood dumbstruck. I had never heard my granny sing before, except in church. "That was beautiful," I said. "Where did you learn that?"

She put her shoulders back a little. "I had a teacher."

Mama had wandered into the kitchen doorway during the last line of the song, whisking eggs. "Mama?" she said softly, but it was not a question.

"What do the words mean? Is it Italian?" I asked Granny.

She smiled, and her parchment cheek creased into a million folds. "I have no idea."

I agreed to meet Rosemary in town at ten-thirty. But instead of driving straight to Sudsies, I went to the city park, where the lights at the ballfield had just been turned out, leaving only the streetlamps on along the park road.

I sat on the bleachers in the balmy dark and smelled the leftovers of baseball. Gray popcorn lay crushed in the gravel dust. I wasn't uneasy until I saw the Casey Black Memorial Scoreboard and remembered that the little boy was dead. Long

dead, he would have been older than me. That gave me shivers, but I didn't leave because there was nowhere else I'd feel comfortable either. My head was filled with the high, thin sound of my grandmother's voice and the sibilant *s*'s of her song. *Senza note nere.*

It had always seemed to me that the wood of the bleachers was so old that it gave to the shape of your rear end. New paint could not cover up the generous sway of the slats. But I sat on it now and it was painfully hard and unforgiving of any shape, crooked because it meant to be, and pocked with crushed soda cans. It was as ugly as anything I had ever seen.

I heard cars roll along the park road behind me. Some made soft sounds; others thumped by with the bass on their stereos cranked. Some stopped and turned their lights off and slipped down into the parking lot by the carousels, which, I could tell by its dense tree cover and lack of a streetlamp, was logistically a prime place to go parking.

A heavy, hot trickle of a wind touched my face, and I realized it was getting late. I climbed down the bleachers and went to my car--but as I was gripping the door handle, I caught a glimpse of a truck nestled down in the leafy valley between the ballpark and the city swimming pool. It was a red truck. My first thought was that it was Booley, and my heart hammered at me, but then I looked closer and saw silver stripes on the side. It was Sammy Wellman's truck, and it was starting to rock back and forth.

I couldn't get in the car, even though I felt tiny intermittent raindrops specking my arms. I was watching the cab of the truck. Sammy's windows weren't tinted yet; he was saving up for it, Page had told me. I could see Sammy in the driver's seat, and several hands, and then he disappeared.

Then, sure as I was standing there, a naked butt made its appearance in the window.

At first I blushed, thinking they had seen me and I was being mooned, but then there was more movement and I realized the butt was not being aimed at me. Hands came around the butt from behind, and I stared. *Suddenly I smelled Booley on me, the scent of him wrapped around my neck and pulling hard, and I ran to get her out of there, down into the vines behind the swimming pool. I would pull her myself back up the hill even if he should chase us. I would drag her to the circle in the woods and pour water over her until she breathed again.*

I flew toward the truck without thinking of what I would do when I got there. Three feet from the driver's door I tripped on some kudzu, put out my arms, and thudded into the side of the truck.

There was a scream.

I yanked open the door.

In the driver's seat, her head snapped around to look at me, sat Page on her naked haunches, her arms flapping up quickly to cover breasts I had never seen before. Her clothes were in the floor of the cab but for her panties, which were still around one

ankle. Sammy was spread out across the seat, lying down, with his jeans unzipped and his eyebrows pointed in shock.

"Ohhhhhhh! *God!*" I screamed, and Page winced, paler by the second and rushing to cover everything that showed.

"What the holy hell," muttered Sammy. After a second of shock he fumbled for his zipper.

"You *pervert!*" I screamed at him. "Get away from her!" I grabbed Page's elbow and tried to pull, but she resisted.

"Gabriel," she breathed raggedly, "Gabriel, oh, Lord."

"Pull your pants up," I said, "and come with me." I covered my eyes.

"Mind your own business," Sammy said, his voice deflated. I heard Page grabbing for her clothes.

"Page, honey, tell her," he said, "and leave your clothes where they are!"

In a flash Page had a T-shirt on and her panties back in place. "You can look, Gabriel," she said. "Oh, God, oh, God."

"Get out of the truck," I barked. "Don't let him do this to you."

Sammy snorted. Page spread her discarded jean cutoffs over her bare lap and put a pained hand to her forehead. "Gabriel, he--do you really want me to come with you? Oh, God."

Sammy started to crawl back over Page before I could answer. "I'll take her home," he growled.

I looked to her for an answer.

"Oh, let him," Page breathed, squeezing the shorts to her as hard as she could. "It's okay, I promise."

Sammy fished keys out of his pocket with thick fingers as he righted himself in the driver's seat. "I'll drive real careful, I promise," he said, rolling his eyes. "Just go away."

"You don't have to take this from him, Page," I said, but my voice was quiet now. I couldn't explain it. "You can just come with me and forget it."

Page was like a pile of cement. She neither moved nor, it appeared, breathed, but merely clutched the shorts to her purposefully as Sammy turned the key in the ignition. I watched her stare back at me, white as a sheet, as he shut the door on me.

Before his headlights came on, I turned and ran for my car.

When I turned into the Sudsies parking lot, where Rosemary stood waiting, my tires squealed.

"My God," Rosemary said when I opened the door. "You redneck."

I got out and looked to see if there were skidmarks. "I didn't mean to," I said. "I really didn't mean to."

"Are you mad? Why were you driving so fast?"

I shut the car door. "I don't know."

She nodded a little. She had her hair down over her shoulders, and the heat of it was making her sweat beautifully across her upper lip. "Why don't we go riding around? Let's go up to Middlefield and see who's at the Krystal's."

"Okay," I said. "I just saw Page, though, and I think maybe Sammy was raping her."

I could see inches of white in Rosemary's eyes. "What makes you think that?" she asked. "Where did you see her?"

"They were in the park behind the swimming pool," I said. "I ran down there, and he had all her clothes off."

Rosemary waited.

"And," I said, confused at her silence, "he was. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Lying down in the seat," I said, picturing Page and Sammy in my mind, "and she looked scared."

"Was she screaming?"

"Don't you think we should go back and check on her?"

"Was she yelling?"

"She yelled when I banged on the door."

Rosemary's beautiful eyes blinked so slowly that I saw the lashes clearly as they met gracefully and parted again. "Let's get in my car and go to Krystal's, okay? We can talk about school--I'm trying to decide, do you think we should rush a sorority, or not? I mean, it's not like we really have to decide until we get there, but it would be fun to talk about it."

I smeared my hands across my cheeks. "I don't know if Page got home okay. I don't know why I didn't drag her out of the truck. We can't leave until I know she's okay."

"She's fine, I guarantee you."

"You don't know that. You didn't see what I saw."

"I don't have to see what you saw," Rosemary said.

"I need to get to a phone."

"You *need* to come with me to Krystal's."

"What is the matter with you?"

"Gabriel, get in the car."

The lights of the Quik-Mart blinked above us, twinkling only dimly in the asphalt at our feet.

"I mean it," Rosemary said.

I stuck my own keys in my pocket and walked over the passenger side of her car. "I'm calling her when we get to Middlefield."

We got in the car and shut the doors, and Rosemary turned off her radio. "I want you to guess," she said, "who might have picked up Page to go riding around three weeks ago, only to be nice to you, because she's your friend. And who, after he drove about a mile down the road, felt a hand where it shouldn't be and turned around to see a naked girl in his passenger seat."

I waited until she had turned the car around and pulled back onto the highway, and I turned the radio back on and up until I could feel the speakers vibrating my seat. "Hurry up and go

wherever it is you want to go, because I have to get up early and go to Knoxville tomorrow."

"Be sure," Rosemary said, turning the radio back down, "to get some brochures about sororities."

Chapter Sixty-Five

Gentle rain, come and wash the leaves clean; turn them shiny, turn them over and back again, tap them softly until they drip. The whole world wants clean, to stand under the mist with outstretched arms and toes rooted into the mud to purge the heat and tar of the summertime.

Tamp the gravel back into its place. Make a soft mud. Wash the white cloud of dust from the air, make the diamond damp and rich and red. That way, when they lime it for the evening's game, the powder will be a brilliant white and the boys will see clearly the way to go. The bleachers will be damp and cool, and we'll bring quilts to sit on, blue and pink and orange, star and double wedding-ring. We'll breathe the clean air, and it will be as if we're breathing the wet green of the leaves.

The leaves are still clean and whole, not yet bug-bitten, so come quickly. Come before the first child wipes his brow. We'll watch for you to break the air into pieces of light, we'll sit on the bleachers and point to the sky when the arc shimmers down from the sun to the trees. We don't mind the mist; we'll bring umbrellas but we won't put them up.

But be gone when the batter is ready, don't cling between his fingers. Let him breathe dryness and warmth, let him wipe his fingers on his pants leg and be done with it. He'll sprint for first with his cleats gripping the damp ground, along the plain white line, and he'll be thankful that you came.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Katie lay with skin the color of ash but luminous as the silver curve of the moon, lips whose berry color hinted at the life left in her that would waken in time; her bed could only have been positioned by angels, otherwise the sunbeams falling on the white coverlet would not look so much like the mighty beams that spray from a clouded sunset and remind us of God.

She let her eyes fall upon Katie for only a second; she left a lettered prayer card on the bedside table and went home. She was so full of this baby now that she looked half-dead, plump at the eyes and wrists, red-eyed and gray-faced.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

My mama cried off and on in the driving rain the whole way over to Knoxville, which worried me because she wasn't paying a lot of attention to the road. It was over an hour out of August County before you got to any interstate, so we practically never drove on one, and here was my mama merging and weaving with tears streaming down her face. I asked her why she was crying, and she said, "Because I don't want you to grow up and move away."

After that, the trip was long, a three-hour sore place in my throat. We listened to the radio and flipped through the stations until we heard a weather report. There were tornado watches out through all the counties we would be traveling in, starting with Davidson and stretching west. Mama said, "Let's say a rosary together, how about?" Her voice was barely intelligible above the slap of rain against the car. So we prayed together, our voices a mumble, and that got us all the way to somewhere between Mount Juliet and Cookeville.

My mama had been keeping all the mail UT had been sending me--I hadn't even seen any of it. She'd packed all my clothes for me. She had the orientation agenda, the maps, the parking passes, and the registration instructions, but when the interstate widened to three lanes as we were coming into Knoxville and the rain kept beating down on the windshield, she looked more nervous than I'd ever seen her. "I don't know where I'm going," she said. "I don't know why I didn't make your daddy come with me."

My chest was starting to feel cold and tingly. "The letter says take the 17th Street exit. Number 387."

We had already passed some huge mall and some office buildings, but we couldn't see downtown yet; there were too many trees. Mama got in the far right lane and tucked herself behind a tractor trailer that was hugging the white line and moving at a geriatric pace.

"We could go faster," I said.

"I don't want to miss the exit."

An approaching sign read, "Exit 386--University of Tennessee."

"That's not what the letter said," Mama said, squeezing the steering wheel. "It said take 387."

"Yeah."

"Well--" Mama grunted and was checking all her mirrors.

"Take the one it said to take. It gives directions."

"You think so?"

"Well, I guess, Mama. I don't live here."

We rounded a curve of the interstate and skipped the University of Tennessee exit, and suddenly the heart of the city was visible from the road: the Sunsphere from the World's Fair, which was shorter than I had imagined it, two tall mirror-faced bank buildings, and a host of brick high- and low-rises left over from more prosperous times. The dull orange dormitories of the university stood ugly and naked on the highest point of the horizon, and the sharply hilly land in between the campus and the

city was thickly covered in sagging, beaten houses. The gray rain hid the mountains and made such a thick mist that the only spot of color on the landscape was the round, gold-paneled head of the Sunsphere. My stomach felt full of acid.

We took the next exit, the one specified in the letter. "It says, get over in the right lane as soon as possible," I instructed, and Mama nearly put her neck out checking for cars as she crossed over. "Take a right," I told her, and she said, "Thank God."

We took 17th Street according to the map and finally found the right dormitory, Clement Hall, and got ourselves situated in a parking garage, but not before we we entered through the exit, met an angry car with a loud horn in working order, and had to back all the way out and start over. Mama looked blue as Granny when she put the car in park, and she breathed out tremulously, and that was when my lower lip began to tremble and would not stop.

It trembled as I stood in line to check into the dormitory; it trembled as I was told that my roommate's name was Laura and that she was another honors scholar, like me. As Mama and I took my bags upstairs to my room, a group of laughing girls with nametags spilled out the elevator and past me. "Good *God*, Michelle," one of them said, pushing another's shoulder.

There was no one in the hallway on the third floor when we got off the elevator, and my throat ached so hard that my eyes watered, and I hoped that my roommate would not be there yet.

Mama's eyes filled and silently, under her arm, she held the books she had brought me to read if I got bored.

The carpet was gray with burgundy flecks, like a hotel, and all the doors set in the cement walls were brown but had construction-paper favors with our names on them. Mine was a pink balloon that read, "Gabrielle." I set my bag down and put my key in the lock.

The heavy door swung open wide with a desolate echo. There was no one in the room.

The tile floor was gray, the walls were white, the iron beds were gray, the sheets were white. "It looks like an asylum," I said.

"Yes, but the rooms don't look like this when you have all your things moved in and you decorate," Mama offered.

I set my two bags on the floor and wiped at my eyes. One bed had a large duffel bag and an overnight case sitting on top of the sheets, and a dress was hanging from a bar in the open closet on that side of the room. "Laura whoever must already be here," Mama said. I sat down on the other bed, the one away from the window. The window looked out on the parking garage, but there were some trees in between.

Mama sat with me and took all the orientation materials out of her purse. She drew a folded sheet of paper from an envelope. "This is your agenda for tonight and tomorrow," she said. "We go home Monday morning." She handed it to me.

Welcome buffet at 7:00. Alumni speaker, University Center Auditorium, 9:00. Welcome dance, Clement Courtyard, 10:00-12:00. Breakfast, 8:00-9:30. Meeting with University Honors Staff, Melrose Hall, 10:00. Lunch with fellow scholars, 12:00. Tour of Hodges Library, 1:30. I quit reading, except that I noticed there was a sorority interest meeting on Sunday night. The only event Mama was supposed to attend with me, she explained, was dinner on Sunday in the Morrill Hall cafeteria. Tours were given of university facilities to keep parents who had traveled with their children occupied.

"Your buffet dinner is in an hour," she said. "I could go on to my motel and let you change."

I didn't want her to leave me there. "Okay," I said.

"I'll call you at 11:00 to make sure everything's all right." She leaned over me to the phone on the nightstand to check the number. "You'll be fine." She squeezed my hands.

"Okay." My entire face was trembling.

She left quickly, leaving a kiss in my hair.

I unpacked the dress I had brought from my garment bag; it was almost completely creased from the collar to the hem. I stuck my head into the bathroom--it joined the two halves of the dormitory suite, and I wasn't sure if anyone else was in there--and turned on the shower as hot as it would go, and I hung the dress from the curtain rod.

I had nothing to do but wait on the wrinkles to fall out of the dress, so I sat on the bed and stared at my roommate's

things. My throat was on fire. I sat and stared at her things and then I hugged my knees to my chest, and then I rocked back and forth a little. My mouth was more ready to cry than any other part of me. It jerked and bent and shook, and finally I just laid my head against my knees and sobbed.

In about fifteen minutes I got up to check the dress, which now looked like it had been sat on only two hours instead of ten, and about that time the outside door opened. A short girl with wide hips and hair the color of honey stuck her head in, saw me, and said, "Gabriel?"

I thought I could smell her hair from where I was, and it shone like hair in a shampoo commercial. I wished that she could not see my face, but it was too late. I laughed apologetically. "Are you Laura?"

She came in and shut the door, offering her hand. She had broad, pretty hands, and skin like brown cream. "Uh-huh. It's nice to meet you." Her brown eyes searched my face. "Oh, my gosh, what's the matter? Have you been crying?"

I felt like reaching a hand up to grab my jaw and make it stop moving. I couldn't control it. "I just broke up with my boyfriend," I said, tears spilling onto my cheeks.

"Oh, you poor thing." She led me by the hand to the bed. "I know you don't know me, but if you want to talk about it, I would love to listen."

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I'd rather not think about it."

"Oh, I completely understand," she said. Her teeth were perfectly straight. "You know," she whispered confidentially even though no one else was in the room, "I just had to break up with the guy I was seeing because I'm going away to school and all. I mean, he's nice, but I wasn't all that attached. How long had you been dating, if you don't mind my asking?"

I blew hair off my forehead with my lower lip. "Oh, three years, almost."

Her eyes shut briefly, taking in the information. "I am so sorry. So this was someone you really loved."

I nodded, and the tears retreated slightly from my eyes.

"Well, I'm not going to leave you alone a minute," she said. "Some of my friends are here from my hometown and we're all going to the dinner together--would you like to go with us? No, I'm not even asking you, I'm telling you. You're going with us."

"Thanks," I said.

"Is anyone here from where you're from?"

"No."

"Oh, too bad. Have you met anyone else from our program yet?"

"No."

"Well, my goodness." She smelled very sweet. "You are just all alone here. You're not going to leave my side, okay?"

"Okay."

"What are you going to major in, Gabriel? I'm going to be in biology--the honors office has my curriculum all picked out for this year, which I personally find scary." She laughed.

"I'm going to be an engineer."

"Oh, you must be a math brain. Civil, industrial, what kind of engineer?"

"Uh . . . civil?"

"Mmm. Has the honors office helped you pick out a schedule yet?"

"No."

"Oh, you poor *thing*." She clucked her tongue. "They've really left you in a complete lurch, huh? We'll go over there and get you fixed up at Melrose--I've been here all day, learning my way around, and I've got Melrose memorized. Because we'll be there a lot, you know?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Oh, and you will *forget* this boy. I'm from Clarksville, by the way. Know where that is?"

"Um, up above Nashville a little?"

"Yes! Have you been there?"

"No."

"Well, anyway, not that that has anything to do with this, but there's this guy in our program a year ahead of us that was hanging out in the honors lounge when I was getting my schedule fixed, and I swear, he was beautiful, and he came up to talk to me and I told him to come to the dance tonight." She sighed.

"Wow. And I'm sure he's not the only wow here, if you know what I mean. It's a big school. God, is that steam coming from somewhere?"

"Oh," I said, leaping up. "My dress--it was all wrinkled."

"Oh, sure, I see," she said. "You know, I brought a travel iron. Give me that dress and let me have at it."

We met her friends from Clarksville in the lobby a few minutes before the buffet was to begin, and my tears had dried. There were boys and there were girls, although later I couldn't remember how many there had been of each. When Laura saw that the caterers had finished setting up the banquet tables and were waiting for people to get in line, she grabbed me and another girl and dashed for the plates. "Somebody has to be first," she said. "Funny how you think you have to let somebody else start the line."

We got our food and picked out a table; of eight chairs there, I was the only occupant not from Clarksville. Laura sat beside me and made sure our eyes met at intervals, although she and the other six people there gossiped about a girl they knew from home who had given a boy a blow job at a party in front of all the guests. They also talked about how their city pool had gone completely downhill since the management changed. "Poor thing," Laura said to me at one point, "I know you don't know who on earth we're talking about," but I assured her that it was all right.

Just before the dining services employees came round with the dessert carts, Laura elbowed me. "Look," she whispered, and nodded her head toward a boy coming through the lobby doors. "That's him. The guy I told you about." The boy saw her almost immediately; we were sitting close to the front of the room. He came up to the table and Laura began visibly sparkling.

"Hi," he said to her.

"Hi, Matt," she replied. She said, "This is Gabriel, another honors scholar," and then proceeded to introduce him all around the table. He said hello to everyone and then asked Laura, "So y'all will all be at the dance later?"

"Uh-huh," she said, and he left with a little wave, off to get himself some barbecue.

We all walked over the University Center together to hear a UT alumnus tell us about his wonderful four years here--Laura already knew how to get there, so we didn't have to ask anyone for directions. Once we had gone a couple of blocks, I forgot completely which way we had come from and was as good as lost.

My eyelids had begun to swell a bit, and so when the auditorium lights were dimmed for the speaker's slide show and we had all settled into our seats, it was all I could do to keep from going to sleep. So I didn't. I woke when Laura poked me, giggling. "I know you probably needed a nap," she said, "but the speech is over. Let's go dance."

When we got back to Clement Hall, there were white Christmas lights lit in all the bushes along the courtyard, and in the

trees over my head. The sky was drowsy, black, and hot, the stars faded, and Laura was looking around eagerly for signs of Matt while holding gently to my arm. "It's beautiful out here, Gabriel," she said. "The trees are so old--I like to think I'm coming to a school where there's some history. Gosh--how long do you think it'll be before Matt gets here?"

She searched the growing crowd of heads, and saw someone she thought might be him coming down Cumberland Avenue from the bright venues of the university's strip. "Wanna go with me to see if that's him?" she asked me, and I shook my head.

"I'll be here when you get back," I said.

She squeezed my hand and was off for the footbridge.

I squirmed through the orientation crowd back toward the lobby, back toward Clement Hall where my room was and where I had last seen my mother.

When I reached the third floor hall, it was the first quiet, dark, and empty place I'd been to all night, and I fumbled in my pocket for my room key. It turned with reluctance in the lock.

The light from the hall swept into my empty room only so far as the arc of the door permitted; I slammed it behind me to shut out the gleam, and as I locked it I heard the metal echo all the way down the hall. My heart seized the bones of my chest and began to rattle the cage. I kicked off my dress shoes and tried to cross the room to my bed, where the new sheets lay crisply folded on the navy-striped mattress cover, but I couldn't get there. I sank to my knees in the middle of the cold tile floor

where the moon shone like a beam of ice into the center of the room, and I put my cheek to the tile and let the cold come up into me, crawl over me like a vine that grows quickly and covers you before you ever realize it was planted. I spread out onto my stomach, where the cold spread through my shirt and inched into the bones of my shoulders and hips, and then settled into the rest of me. A treescape whose edges were unfamiliar to me jutted into the sky framed by the bare window, foreign points indicating the bright moon and pale stars, foreign shadows coloring this floor that was not mine and falling over my face. Laughter and music floated up to me from the courtyard, through the slightly open window.

All my life was a game dressed in twigs and leaves, my feet even as they ran coming down to the ground again and needing soil, touching lightly upon the vines that vomited over the grass and reached up to my ankles for a new foothold. All my life was the shape of a shadow of the morning in my bedroom, a familiar constellation of the winking shadows of leaves moving in the early breeze--but here the shadows railed at me, colored different shapes on the floor and wall, gathering round with leafy fingers to menace me in the dark.

I looked at Laura's bed and saw only the edges of her neatly folded blanket peeping over the mattress. The buckles of her suitcase shone atop her bed.

Was I to bleed into this new shape who was already out the door, gone, her trail sparkling behind her? For the shape I knew

was not here; the edges of me were bleeding away with nowhere to go, each tear falling from my face carrying something away that would not return. I bled into the floor, I bled away, with no dark boundary to catch me and teach me how to be.

Tears were forming a hot pool on the cold tile underneath my cheek. Sobs came from under my ribs, so hard they made me gag, and I dug my fingernails into my face, but I couldn't feel it.

And where was Mother Mary, God above, who never taught me to be, only to hold my hands out and hope to suffer? Where was anything at all to sink my fingers into? How was I to drag myself back up? Only what was me was no longer discrete here, falling apart in the black, foreign shadows while love raged all around me outside my door, love pulsed and kissed and whispered behind my back, letting me look upon it and then running away. Love shook its sweet fist at me from two hundred forty-six miles away, blind to words and justice, shining through one tender frame and sucking everyone in on threads of honey and light.

I tried to get up, I tried to crawl to the bed. I put hands that I couldn't feel under me and lifted my body away from the cold tile sticking to my skin. I dragged my weight over and pulled myself up by the mattress. The ugly sounds of my sobbing and gagging echoed loudly all through the metal room and down the hall, tearing through the dead quiet in the building, and no one heard me because they were all out in the courtyard laughing.

I would drive to the bridge under the gaze of the moon and fly over the rails like an acrobat, landing in the living mass of

vines with a rush of fire and a burst of shredded glass, blood coming in waves and flowing to the water before the vines begin to suck it up and crawl over the burning metal to me. The moon would throw its cold light over my pale face, thrust through the window like a picture in a frame with my hair flowing all around, the sounds of combustion calling to the sirens, the sirens waking and calling to the people, the people dumbly wiping mustard from their mouths and fleeing the gravel, shock passing through their hearts all at once and pain filling their eyes under the cold, cold moon. The people would come to the bridge and flood through the vines to get to me, my eyes shut and the life flowing from me down to the water in a steady stream, the drink for thirsty vines. And he would be at the head of the storm of people, letting go of a hand and never looking back, seeing my dead face and rushing faster to get to me, wishing, wishing, wishing.

I crawled up into the bed and I knew right then that all I wanted was to die.

As she stood at the sink, Laura's hair shone under the warm beams of early sun, hair tousled from her pillow but still able to catch sun and throw it over to me where I lay still under my one blanket. She was brushing her teeth in short, quick shifts, turning the faucets gently on and off so that I would not wake. Consciousness was slowly peeling my swollen eyelids apart through

a crust of stale tears and nighttime sand. I rolled over onto my side.

"I'm sorry," she whispered through a foam of toothpaste, watching me through the mirror, and she spit into the sink. "Did I wake you up?"

I shook my head, and put my pillow over my eyes.

"Breakfast is in forty minutes, at the student center," she said. "I wasn't sure if I should get you up or not."

"It doesn't matter." My voice was crusty and remote.

Laura sat down on the end of my bed. "Are you okay, Gabriel? You look like you had a rough night." She patted my ankle through the blanket. "And I couldn't find you at the dance. Was I supposed to come back for you? I thought. . . ."

"No, I just didn't want to go."

"Okay. . . ." She got up and went back to the sink, and I heard the plastic bristles of her brush crackle through her hair. "I'm really sorry if you thought I was leaving you out."

"I'm going home now," I said.

"Now? Why? We're meeting with the chancellor at noon, we've got tours today. . . ." She looked into the mirror at me, and her brush stopped moving. "What happened to your face?"

"I have no idea what happened to my face," I said. I got up out of the bed, still dressed in my clothes from the night before, and dragged my suitcase out from under the bed.

"Gabriel. . . ." Laura set her brush down. "You can't go home. You haven't met any of the other scholars yet. You haven't made out your schedule."

"The chancellor won't miss me," I said. I took off my dress and pantyhose and put on my shorts. I stepped into one tennis shoe, but in my haste to get it on I kept stepping on the heel. "Damn it."

"No, I mean, don't leave upset," she said, her eyebrows wrinkled together in concern. "You can't drive for hours like that."

"Mama drove me." I felt warm prickles flood across the tender backs of my eyes. I took my toothbrush and toothpaste from behind the sink and stuffed them into my bag. "Mama'll come to get me."

Chapter Sixty-Eight

When the summer days were longest, the shade of the oak was more welcome than God's salvation. To sneak out and find a cool spot of grass beneath it while your mama and daddy were hoeing or filling plastic buckets with beans was a clean, fragrant wickedness that made you giggle insanely. You grew to know how its branches looked from below, where you lay your head against the biggest root and looked up into the impossibly thick green at the bugholes in the leaves. It was already so big--your grandaddy planted it for your mama back when she was crawling and stuffing rocks into her mouth, and the wind would not budge it.

While your limbs were smooth and thin and your chest only a promise, you could climb it if you wanted; when you got a little older, you stood in front of it in your chiffon monstrosity and let your mama take a million pictures of you and that boy you only half liked. Years and years from now, when that same boy begs your forgiveness with his arms around you and you stare numbly out the window past the heavy lines in his neck, you better thank your lucky stars that the tree will be in the same place. Nothing else will. You will be lost and afraid and you better grab on to something with strong roots.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

The pains came in the way that she had expected they would, as she was putting flour into biscuit dough. It was late in the afternoon, and the other children were mostly in the house, so she ground her knees together and lost the blood in her face to keep from showing them what was happening. She finished what she was doing and then dusted the flour from her hands. This was her sixth child, and it would come quickly, so she had little time.

In the bedroom, where Karl lay sleeping as he often did before and after dinner, she walked with silent steps to her bureau and took out the sheaf of papers she'd worn crinkly with worrying. She tucked them along with a dark glass bottle into her coat, which she wrapped tightly around her.

She did not wake her husband. She did not call the doctor. She told Joseph that she was going to walk to the Ehemanns' for more flour. He said, "Mama, I'll go for you." She was touched, and tears sprang up, but she said, "No, I feel like a walk. I'll be back in just a few minutes."

By the time she'd got to the Ehemanns' barn--she sneaked in the south door, away from the house, and climbed three steps into the half-story loft--the pains were just minutes apart. She took the coat off and unfastened the tight buttons of her blouse at her wrists; the bottle fell out, and the concealed papers spilled down over her. The one that by chance ended up on top made her smile at the sight of her handwriting; she'd liked that page.

But she didn't want to read any more of it. She spread the papers out on the hay and sat on top of them.

She wanted to scream when the pangs started in earnest, but she saw heads near the feed shed at the north end and was afraid of being found. She drank large gulps from the bottle and cried in gasps that dried her throat. She was afraid to pull back her skirt and confront the space between her legs, but she felt him coming and she was here in the barn, on the loft. She reached down between pains, removed her pantalets, and folded her skirt back. The papers underneath her poked her skin, and she was crying like a little toddler, opening her mouth wide and heaving. When she could stop and drink, she drank. She found a little stiff piece of straw with a pointed end and jabbed it into her hands until she bled, cursing upon the tiny head that was inching so slowly into a world where the sun had gone down. It was getting dark in the barn, and the horses were unfamiliar. She heard them snorting restlessly.

Slowly, slowly, as the bottle dribbled onto her chin and blood stained the paper beneath her, the smooth head emerged. She knew how to push, and she did. She stood, she rolled over to either side, she threw herself back down, and she started calling out a name, caring less and less about who heard. The head pushed all the way through, glistening urgently and waiting to be ushered out, and as the shoulders shoved into place she took her skirt and ripped it all the way from the hem to the waistband. The shoulders came through slowly but without her screaming.

Then, one more push, and she was done.

She reached down and took the wet little body into her hands, turning it over and rubbing its back, and it opened its mouth and cried out to her. She set it down on the paper and lay back, but as it cried again, she took it into her arms and wiped it off with her coat. "Oh," she told it gently, "oh." The baby was a boy, but she had known that all along.

She had no strength, but she knew she was going to have to walk home. She lay with the baby against her chest and stroked it quietly, looking down with tender drunken feeling in her eyes and guiding it to suckle. Then she realized that she had nothing to cut the cord with.

She lay in her own blood, tied to her baby, for what seemed like hours but was only minutes as her womb continued to spit forth inconsequentially, disgusted with herself for having brought nothing to cut herself away, and the next time she saw the light of a lantern come near the feed shed, she cried out for help.

It was Lise's young son Gib, who stuck his head half-frightened into the dark of the barn, his light swinging ahead of him. She was at the opposite end, nearly covered in blackness, and it took him a few minutes to find the glint of her eye.

"Who's there?" he called in a small voice.

"Gib," she answered calmly, "Gib, it's all right. Please go and get your mama for me."

He started to come to her with the light, but she called out quickly, "No, don't come closer, *liebling*--just go get your mother."

She heard the soft thump of the dirt under his feet as the light disappeared, and in moments there were more spots of light jarring the dark--Lise and her husband, Adolph, whose lanterns came in haste. Lise was first, squinting fearfully to try to see what was there beyond the horses.

"Lise," she called in German, pulling her coat over herself and the baby, "Lise, it's me--please tell Adolph to wait outside."

Adolph heard and remained by the barn door, his large woolly brows knotted together, and Lise caught sight of the two eyes in the hayloft and crept toward them across the dirt, lantern in hand.

When Lise was close enough to see, she cried, "Mother in Heaven, *Mein Gott*, what has happened?"

"I need you to help me, Lise."

"*Ach!* I'll ask Adolph to go for Doctor Blair."

"No!" she whispered urgently, for her son was sleeping. "Just help me clean up."

She walked home clean in borrowed clothes, leaving Lise to burn the bloody hay and papers in an agony of guilt and

confusion. She carried the little bundle in her arms and watched its dark eyes mirror the starlight as it stared calmly up at her, yawning in the tiny way that turns a mother's heart.

Chapter Seventy

I had so few days remaining, and they all spun like pinwheels. They spun into each other and lurched forward into the week, gone before they started, and I wondered if I was already dead. I drove to Middlefield on Monday to arrange to rent a car on the Fourth of July. I was, in the tiredest way possible, proud I had thought of it. I had to look in the yellow pages to figure out where to go, because it didn't occur to me that the rental place would be next to the bus station. When I figured that out, I was so embarrassed at not having thought of it that I turned red, although there was no one else with me in the kitchen.

The man at the Huey Sanderson Rental Agency, which was just a stack of cement blocks leaned against the diner by the bus station, was probably Huey Sanderson himself. I saw no other employees. The place was dingy and so was he, and he looked like he'd just got up. His bald head clung to the last of his hairs.

"I just want to reserve a car," I told him.

"For what day?"

"The Fourth of July."

"That far ahead?" he drawled. "You don't need to reserve nothing here that far ahead."

"Please."

He squinted. "Just for the day?"

I nodded.

"You ain't getting married, are you? I don't rent these cars out to people getting married because shoe polish and whatnot don't come off."

"I'm not getting married."

"It don't come off, I'm telling you." His breath smelled strongly of coffee.

"Look." I held out my bony left hand to him. "There's no ring." I stared at my fingers.

"Good enough, I reckon."

I folded my arms uncomfortably, sticking my left hand well into my armpit. "What kind of car can I have?"

"Well," he said, bringing out a ledger from behind the counter, "do you like blue or green?"

I ended up with a blue 1984 Buick Skylark. He wanted to take me out back and show it to me, but I didn't want to see it. I walked back out to my mother's car with my eyes firmly planted on its headlights, averted from the rest of the lot.

The days were long, the days were fast, the days were upside down. I slept, and my mama's face loomed large over me, the eyebrows nearly knit together, asking me to please, please get up, or just turning the covers down under my chin to hold me in place.

Granny seemed to be there almost every time I would wake up and come downstairs. Mama was canning cabbage that week and Granny was helping, pacing the kitchen with her bird legs and rubbing at the thin blue skin on her face. She seemed incapable

of speech, not at all like the Granny who had sung to me only days ago, or the one who would ask me about my fellers. She was just a wind-up toy agitating between the sink and the stove.

Mary held out her hands to me and said, Think, think about what you are doing. I said, Look at you, you have holes in your hands. And when I think about what I'm doing, I feel the only pleasant shivers I'll ever have in my life.

Agnes and Beth and Ellen were in and out a lot, too, staring at my ratty hair and sleepy eyes when I would wander into the kitchen for a glass of milk, except for Agnes, who was looking even puffier than she had at church on Sunday and who barely noticed I was there. My mama looked so sad and heavy, as if she were carrying something she could not ask anyone to help her with, that it was hard to look at her. Eventually, in my hazy treks from the bed to the refrigerator and back again, I gleaned enough pieces of conversation to deduce that Agnes had found out Terry was sleeping with a nineteen-year-old new hiree at Futures. That made me so tired, I stopped walking and hunkered down in front of the television with an afghan and turned on the Weather Channel. It was easy, bland information that never stopped marching across the map. I tried not to look up when Beth came and sat down next to me, but she got so close to me that I couldn't help it.

"Are you sick?" she asked me. "Do you have a fever or something?"

"Maybe a fever."

"Your mama is worried. She said she didn't know whether to tell your daddy about you sleeping so much, or not."

"Sucks about Uncle Terry, huh?"

Beth made kind of a growl in her throat. "Agnes hasn't eaten in four days--she's just *sick.* The girls are sleeping at my house. The thing is, I probably knew about it for a while, but I didn't know if I should say anything. Because I saw them--Good God, I can't believe I saw them--at the Hasti-Mart in Middlefield a few months ago, getting cigarettes when I was getting gas, and I couldn't tell if she'd come with him in his truck, but I could tell how they were looking."

"God," I said.

"And her *name,*" Beth said, "is Mistie."

"God."

"Mistie with an 'ie,' which I know because she's one of the girls I work with's little sister."

I shook my head.

Beth sighed. "God, I was hoping somebody around here would be in a good mood today, and I was counting on it being you."

"Sorry."

"No, I mean, I have some news to tell, and I sure don't want to tell it in the kitchen. It's like a funeral in there."

"Well, you can tell me. I'm not dead yet."

Beth laughed without a trace of sarcasm, and I saw how sparkly her eyes were, two shiny berries dropped in a bowl of

cream. I knew what she was going to say. "I'm seeing somebody," she whispered.

I raised my eyebrows. "Like who?"

"Not anybody you know." She laughed again. "He's the new junior English teacher at Middlefield, or will be in the fall."

"How did you meet a guy like that?"

"What do you mean, how did I meet a guy like that? I hang out in all the respectable places."

"Did he come in to buy furniture?"

"Yeah."

"Where's he from?"

"Murfreesboro."

"What's his name?"

Beth smiled, full of pleasure at bearing this most important bit of information. "Mark." She pursed her lips together and relished the consonant. "Mmmmmark." The friction from her lips stirred up color in her cheeks.

"Mmmmmark, huh?"

"I want you to meet him."

"Wow," I said, truly impressed. "This one must be good."

"Oh, he is," she whispered. "Three dates, and I'm *bowled.* Lord, Gabriel, I'm just positively bowled."

I felt, somewhere in my Weather Channel insides, a spark of excitement for her. "One to ten."

"Forget one to ten," she said. "I would pick him cherries and make him a pie."

"Oh, you would not."

She sat back and pondered a moment. "Mm, you're right. Probably not." She stared at the wall, and so I did, too, trying to see the face she saw there. "But I might."

The vegetables were coming in. Daddy was putting his cap on every day after work and taking his buckets to the garden, hollering for Michael to come help. Colanders on the kitchen counter filled with every kind of green thing, each still dusted with garden dirt and tiny curled-up dead leaves, and their smells lingered in the kitchen despite the open windows. The jars stood clean in the dark of the pantry, waiting.

Thursday, with only five days left, I spent the whole day at the piano ironing out a perfect chromatic run, and Mama started to snap and wash green beans. *Up and down, up and down, make those bony fingers run.* She came out of the kitchen after the first couple of hours and said, "Could you play a *song* or something?" Her eyes were set in deep purple circles. So I got out all my piano books from inside the bench and went through them one by one, song by song. It took me until dinner, by which time Granny had come and gone and the entire main floor of the house smelled like cabbage and green beans. I took my place at the dinner table for the first time in days, and Daddy said, "Well, I guess she's got her nap out," and passed me the mashed potatoes. He was smiling, and he hadn't asked me to set the table or put ice in the glasses. Michael was complaining that his head hurt and he was cold, and he looked pale.

Friday my mama asked me if I'd like to go pick out some new clothes for the Fourth of July, to wear to the carnival. I didn't want to go, and the beginnings of a sparkle in her eye went flat.

But it got me to thinking that I probably should be picking out something to wear on the Fourth of July. I pulled out every hanger in my closet and found nothing I thought was appropriate, stopping at the robin's egg-blue cloud of organza that Mama had worn for Agnes's wedding. I touched it and thought of holding it up to my shoulders. *But I couldn't look strange, I must be conventionally beautiful spilling from the window, inspiring no snickers from the sea of rescuers.* I settled on an old red T-shirt from a trip to the National Zoo and cutoffs. I rolled them up and stuck them just inside the closet door, and was putting a pair of white socks on top when I heard the screaming.

Chapter Seventy-One

When the priest passes the Baptist minister in the grocery store there are polite smiles. The priest is at a disadvantage because of his Roman collar; he is instantly recognizable to anyone, but he has to know which minister goes with which church by heart because they blend in with everybody else.

What they are thinking when they pass each other is the count they took during their sermons of how many of the other's churchgoers were in *his* church this past Sunday. Brother Billy Creek of the Holy Faith Baptist Church on Tisdale Road, for example, has a Catholic--or a former Catholic, it is possible but not certain to assume--leading one of his Sunday School classes before service. The priest knows this, but he also knows that this is because the girl's boyfriend's parents are heavily embroiled in Holy Faith, but that when she finds out he's been sneaking off from the Quik Mart with his old girlfriend on the Saturday nights she babysits for the Willises, she'll break up with him and be right back in confession. She was always a good religion student in elementary school, one of the crowners in May Procession when she was in the eighth grade, and she won't be able to just turn it off like there's a switch. So when the priest and Brother Billy meet in town, Brother Billy still has the upper hand, the fuller chest, but Father is not too concerned just yet.

Or perhaps they're not thinking this at all. Perhaps each thinks of the other as he passes with his paper sack of diet Coke

and mayonnaise and frozen pizza, *There goes a good man of God.*

Chapter Seventy-Two

When she cleared the hill and was making her way between the barn and the house, carrying her baby, little Anja was standing in the lit doorway. She cried fearfully at the dim sight of her mother and ran inside.

She stumbled on a tuft of grass; it was too dark to see where to put her feet. What she could see was Karl, stomping around roughly with his cane as the girls hurried to put some dinner on the table; *they haven't eaten yet*, she thought, *what can I make for them?*

She walked through the open door and stood fast with the bundle in her arms.

"Mama?" cried Greta. Anja was cowering under the table.

Karl's face was white. His tongue was caught and so he banged his cane helplessly against the floor several times.

"Whose is the baby?" Joseph murmured.

"Ours," she replied.

Karl rapped at the floor and table with his cane until it knocked the voice back into him. "Joseph," he said hoarsely, "go to town and get the doctor."

"No," she said. "I am fine."

"Joseph, go."

"Don't you," she said calmly. She wanted this baby to hear only soothing sounds. "There's no need."

Karl batted at the air with his cane, and Joseph ran outside for a horse.

Chapter Seventy-Three

My little brother screamed like a girl, but I supposed that all little boys scream like girls if they are in enough pain. So when I heard him shrieking outside my bedroom window, I knew that something was terribly wrong.

I dashed onto my bed and drew the curtains back where I had kept them pulled shut for days to keep the light out. Through the window I saw my father crouched over my brother in the grass where he lay holding his arm and writhing around. Their gloves and ball were discarded by the basketball goal. I heard the door to the porch slam, and in seconds Mama was pushing Daddy off Michael and probing his arm with her fingers.

By the time I got downstairs and out the door, Michael had quit screaming but his face was covered with dirty tears and he was grunting. Mama was holding his head tightly to her body. Michael clenched his injured arm so tightly with his other hand that his fingers were turning white. Daddy had gone back into the house.

"What happened?"

"They were pitching," Mama said. "Michael says he can't move his arm, it hurts so bad. We're going to the emergency room."

Daddy stuck his head out the door. "Hey--I'm going to call Joe and Will, and they'll tell the girls--let's get him up there right fast, before he can't feel it at all. As long as it hurts, he's okay."

"Do you want to go?" Mama asked me.

Michael was whimpering softly, indifferent to me.

"No, I'll stay here."

"That's probably better," Daddy said. "If anyone needs to find us there'll be someone here to get the phone."

The closest hospital was in Middlefield, twenty minutes from home. I waited alone in the house for their call after they left, curled up in my bed.

Three hours later, the phone rang. It was Mama, sounding all fired up. "Well, we *finally* got to see a doctor," she said. "There were *three* people in the waiting room and it still took us this long to get in."

"Well, what's wrong with him?"

"He's in a room," Mama sighed. "They're keeping him overnight. We're in here with him right now. The emergency-room doctor thinks the infection from his cut spread to the main nerve in his arm."

"What are they going to do?"

"It just so happens that they have a neurologist coming down from Vanderbilt tonight to assist in a surgery, so they're going to have him take a look at it. I told that doctor, though, that he's been taking antibiotics for weeks now, and I don't see how he could be getting worse."

"Oh." I swallowed.

"He can't feel his ring or pinky fingers," Mama said. "The doctor said he didn't think that was a good sign."

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know," she said softly. "He could lose the use of part of his hand, I think."

I pinched the end of my nose in the curls of the phone cord. "Mama, there's something I ought to tell you."

"What?"

"Michael's been flushing his antibiotic down the toilet."

A very heavy, controlled breath made static in the phone connection. "What?"

"He's been flushing--"

"I *heard* you," she said, and she was teetering on the edge of shouting. "How long has this been going on?"

"Uh. . . ." I shut my eyes. "Our septic tank has a much greater chance than he does of avoiding infection."

"*Why didn't you tell me?*" She was shouting now, and I heard my daddy in the background asking what was going on. "Gabriel, why didn't you tell me?"

I started to say that I didn't know, I didn't remember, but I could tell that the phone was switching hands. I prepared to hear my father's big voice reaching out through the phone line to shake me, but after a few seconds and a lot of muffled talking, it was Mama who got back on the phone.

"Your brother wants to talk to you," she said quietly. "Here he is."

"Hello?" Michael's voice was sleepy.

"Hi there."

"Why didn't you come up to the hospital with us?"

"I don't know, I thought I should stay here."

"I need you to feed Evangeline."

"Okay."

"Hey--will you take her out and play with her?"

"She doesn't want out."

"I know. Put her cage in my closet."

"Michael, she doesn't like that."

"Please?"

I groaned. "Whatever."

"You told Mama about me flushing my medicine." He was whispering.

"I had to. She has to know what to tell the doctor."

He sighed. "I'll be in trouble."

"Maybe. Probably not, if you get better."

"Mama and Daddy are outside the door," he said. "That's why I can talk to you."

"Does your arm hurt?"

"No, not if I don't move it." He coughed. "But I can't feel my little finger. I couldn't hold the baseball."

"Here, why don't we hang up and I'll go take care of the bird, and call you back."

"Okay."

"What's the room number?"

"I don't know."

"Nevermind--just tell Mama to call me."

"Okay, bye."

I hung up the phone, disengaged myself from the cord, and swung my feet off my bed and into my houseshoes which were lined up on the floor. I decided that no matter how dirty Evangeline's cage was, I was not under any circumstances going to change the gravel paper. To let her know I was coming so she wouldn't be startled, I began to whistle.

There was no reply from my brother's room.

I whistled again, and nothing.

For some reason, I felt like running. I bolted from my room into Michael's, calling, "Evangeline, baby, sweet, sweet baby." I shut the door behind me so I could play with her, but when I looked at her perch, there was nothing there. My first thought was that she was somewhere in the room, having escaped somehow, and my instinct was to duck my head, but the cage door was closed.

I came closer, and I saw, down in the bottom of the cage, her peachy feathers fallen into piles of her own crap, was Evangeline's stiff little body.

"No," I whispered, sticking my finger through the bars to touch her soft wings. "What on earth have you done to yourself?"

She didn't answer.

On the phone, I told Michael, "I have news."

"Huh?"

"Evangeline croaked."

"She what?"

"I found her in the bottom of the cage."

He paused. "Are you sure she's dead?"

"You could pick a lock with her."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then, "I just held her on my finger this morning."

"I know."

"Well," he said faintly, "she was three. The pet store guy told me sometimes parakeets don't last long."

"I guess not."

"Were her eyes shut?"

His voice was so little and sad. I didn't know what to say. "I didn't think to look." I thought a moment. "I'll put her in a shoebox and you can bury her when you come home."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Wrap her up in Kleenex. Don't let her just slide around in the box."

"I wouldn't."

Daddy came home late that night, but Mama decided to stay with Michael in the hospital. Daddy said that the neurologist wanted to do some exploratory surgery on Michael's arm on Monday, but that he had to stay in the hospital until then and be given strong antibiotics. Daddy didn't say anything to me about Michael's flushing his medicine. I asked him when they had scheduled surgery.

"The Fourth of July."

"No."

"Yep. He won't be pitching for the championship this time."

"No, I mean, can't they schedule it for some other time?"

Daddy had settled into his recliner and was rubbing his eyes. "Why don't you call the neurologist and ask him. Be my guest."

My heart went flat as a pancake.

Beth took me up to see Michael myself the next day, because Mama said he was asking for me, and she seemed to have dropped the subject of the pills in the toilet altogether. Michael looked fine, although his arm had pus coming from it.

"I'm bored," he said. "Why didn't you come up here yesterday?"

"I told you," I said. "I don't remember what I told you, but I remember that I told you."

"You were probably sleeping."

There was a knock on the door, and Mama stuck her head in. She and Beth had gone to get themselves some coffee. "You have somebody here to see you, Michael."

The door opened wider, and there stood Hershey and Wayne.

"I gotta go," I told Michael.

"No, don't," he said. "Did you put Evangeline in a box?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I found one the same color as she is. Was." Hershey and Wayne were hanging back by the door to let us finish our conversation. "You can come in," I told them, picking at Michael's sheets. "I'm leaving."

"Hey, champ," Hershey said to Michael. "Let's see that arm."

"I can't move it," Michael replied. "You'll have to come look."

"Damn," Wayne said, peering at the scabs. I could smell smoke the second he came in the door. "Son, all I can say is that the pitching will be just as good next year."

"If my fingers work," Michael said simply.

Mama and Daddy both stayed the night that night and went to Mass in Middlefield on Sunday morning. Home alone, I got up early and walked to Mass at St. Mary's, two days before the Fourth of July. *How clear the morning sky was, reachable and true, but colorless. There were no piano tunes in my fingers.* I got there just five minutes before the bells were supposed to start ringing, but the church was half empty. The heavy scaffolding, which remained standing across the front of church, made the building seem dark. I saw Elaine Brink sitting on the left side of church and knelt in the pew behind her.

I tapped her on the shoulder. "Where is everybody?" I whispered.

She shook her head. "Elsewhere, I reckon. I heard ten people if I've heard one say they'd get their churching at home if they had to put up with stuff like we heard last week."

Father Smiley blazed in for the first hymn as full of song as ever, and the echoes of his voice were even more pronounced than usual, as there were only half the bodies to soak up the

sound. When he reached the altar and stood, hands outstretched, for the opening prayer, he looked out over us as calmly as if we were a full flock. He did not mention the sermon of the previous week, nor the fasting nuns, nor the absence of half the parish, even when he got to his sermon. It was pleasant and based on the Sunday's Gospel, the story of the hemorrhaging woman who believed in Jesus and reached out to touch his cloak to be healed. Father took the pulpit to remind us that if we were in need, all we had to do was ask Jesus for his loving aid, and believe that he would help us.

When it was time for the Lord's Prayer, we all had to stretch and grab to get hold of each other's hands, there were so few of us. Most of us had to move out of our places.

After Mass was over and I meandered out of my pew, I saw Page in the back of church, looking hopefully at me. My eyes burned, and I looked away from her. She stood a while back there before she finally left.

Father took his usual place in the confessional. I noticed that no penitents knelt in the back pews for an examination of conscience; the green light stayed on as the last of the Massgoers left the church. I was the only one left, and I hurried to the confessional.

I shut the door behind me and glanced at the screen where I usually knelt, but I chose the chair in front of Father instead, so he could see me. He looked surprised as I came around the little half-wall and took my seat.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen," he prompted me when I paused, but I shook my head. "I don't want to confess," I said.

He looked at me with the full force of his eyes. "Penance is a sacrament, Gabriel. If that's not what you're here for, then you ought to leave the confessional."

"I think that what you're doing to the nuns is crappy," I said. "I think that last week's sermon was crappy. Who was that crazy man you brought in, anyway?"

"We shouldn't talk about this in here," he said, rising from his chair. "And you've got an anger inside you that you would do well to examine outside, kneeling before God."

"I know where you're staying at night," I said. "So, did you borrow a tent from old John Whittington? Or was it Percy?"

"Gabriel," he said slowly, taking me firmly by the arms, "this is not the place."

"There *is* no place," I said. "Our foreheads have touched."

He let go of me. I saw him swallow. "Jesus loves you. I can't tell you anything more than that." He sat down in his chair. "I refuse to take responsibility for your immortal soul if you won't even meet me halfway."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever." I ignored the feeling in the pit of my stomach. "I'll see you around."

Before I left the church, I took a long look at the angels singing over the high altar, and I felt the age of the building

like I never had before. I looked again and again, until I wasn't seeing anything at all, and then I left.

Once I was outside, I went straight for the pine trees behind the school building. I pushed the heavy, sticky limbs out of my face and crouched as I moved forward into the grove toward the center. When I got several yards in, I could see Father's little one-man tent, pitched in the center of my circle of stones.

I felt like kicking it. When I reached the tent I peered inside to see what a priest might take with him to sleep in the woods, but all I saw was a blanket. I decided against kicking it. Instead I moved all around the circle and dislodged every stone from its place. They came up unwillingly, gripping the ground and the moss with all they had, but eventually I had them all pulled like potatoes from a garden. Deep, raw pits remained after I tossed all the rocks into the woods, except for the beautiful piece of iron ore that Page and I had always been so proud of. I wrenched it from its place, held it in the air, and dropped it square on the top of Father Smiley's tent.

I took my mother's car to Granny's for breakfast. Agnes was not there so no one made biscuits, Joe's baby Margaret was teething, and little Ernie surprised everyone at the dinner table, not least of all his prunish mother, by asking Beth to "please pass the shit."

Two days, two tiny snips of time cut from the cloth of the universe, one to hold in each hand. I was afraid. The trees around me joined branches to hold me in, to lock down the skyline and give it a finite shape where none had been before. I had not counted on being afraid.. Mama and Daddy came home for a little while Sunday afternoon, to spend some time with me, but later I only remembered the sound of the car pulling in and then keys in the door. I was asleep on the couch for hours and only saw their faces dimly over me, which appeared and reappeared in the fantastic dreams I was having. I dreamed of heat and mutated shapes, and woke up with a fever. Mama sat by me with a wet washcloth and some soup, and all I could do when she spoke to me was stare at each shape on the familiar walls with apprehension. *Sconce, yearbook photo, grapevine wreath.*

"Charlie," she said when she thought I was out of earshot, "one of us has to stay here with her."

In the end, it was Mama who stayed. I finally sweated off the fever and asked her for some French toast, even though it was 7:00 at night. She started cracking an egg without even asking me why. When she finished cooking it and stuck her fingers into the powdered sugar to sprinkle over the toast, I watched her every movement. *Index finger up, take a pinch, snap it between your fingers.* The sugar fell like fairy dust through the air, and when I tried to eat the toast, it caught in my throat and would not go down. It hurt to swallow.

Around 7:30, when I was cutting the remnants of my toast into dust, Mama decided we should play Boggle. "We haven't in a long time," she said, "and it will keep my mind off Michael's fingers."

She got it down off a closet shelf and we sat at the kitchen table, me wrapped in an afghan she'd crocheted years ago. When she poured the letter dice into the container and started shaking it up, the sound was deafening to me. I winced every time she did it. Also, Michael had broken the hourglass timer years before when he stomped on it to make me mad, and so Mama had to keep getting up to set the microwave's timer for each round. She beat a path from the table to the microwave, back and forth, back and forth, until to me there was just one shape of my mother stretched from one point to the other. *Chair, microwave, chair.* This shape, too, was deafening.

"You're squinting," she said to me after eight rounds. "What's wrong?"

I relaxed my brow. "I don't know, the shaking is loud."

"Gabriel," Mama said clearly, her eyes swimming fiercely through the tears building up, "you are going to have to tell me what's wrong."

"Just shake it under the table or something, and I'll hold my ears."

"I don't care about the stupid game." Her voice was rising. "I want you to stop sleeping and tell me where you are these days."

I pulled the afghan up to cover as much of my face as possible, and she flew across the table to me, yanking the blanket down and grabbing my face in her hands. "I want to know where my little girl is!"

Knots came up in my throat. I shrugged her hands off me. "Can I take the car for a little while?"

"Ohhhh!" she screamed, throwing her hands up in the air. "Fine! Take the car!" Her purse was hanging on her chair, and she reached in and fished out the keys. "Here!" She threw them into my lap and stormed off to her room.

My legs felt like lead, but I got up anyway.

I drove past all the places I wanted to see again, as the tip of the sun was burning against the tree line and the rest of the sky was turning dark. I drove the dirt road past our house out to all the old farms; I drove around the city park and sat on the baseball bleachers for a while; I drove the blocks around St. Mary's where the first Germans who moved to town built their houses and where the trees had tremendous girth. *The pins should have stopped pricking, I'd cut the nerves long ago.*

The last place I drove was out to the bridge. I parked the car and got out, hearing the water pound the rocks below, and I stood at the edge of the shallow rails *and waited for all the pictures to draw themselves against the darkening scene. Nothing*

came easily; I could see me flying out into the air, aiming for the leafy fingers of the trees that leaned over the bank, but it took several tries. It was a Buick Skylark. It was blue. It had never quite been blue before. And, Hail, holy Queen, no one would be watching but you and me. I couldn't quite see everything so clearly, so I shut my eyes. *Over, over, fly over, sound the sirens!* Nothing came at the right pace, and I left the bridge and drove back to town with my heart knocking.

When I passed the laundromat and the Quik Mart, I saw several people standing around their cars, hands in their pockets. One was Rosemary, who saw my car and started waving and jumping up and down to get me to stop.

"Hey!" she said when I pulled over and rolled down my window. "Just so you know, Booley's been out here looking for you."

"Great. I was just going home anyway."

"Oh, stay for a minute. I know,"--she smiled and reached into the cab to play with my hair--"let's pick out a sorority to rush in the fall."

"Right now?"

"I've barely gotten to talk to you this week. I don't even know which sororities you liked at orientation. Did some of them look a lot better than others?"

"I guess."

"Or do you think maybe we should wait a year?"

"That might be good."

"I'll do whatever you want to do. Which did you like?"

"I just don't. . . ." I rubbed my eyes. "I don't remember which of them was which. All those Greek letters."

"Don't look now," Rosemary said, "but here comes Booley's truck."

The red beast growled into the parking lot, its mighty wheels rolling to a halt. I started my engine again.

"Don't leave," Rosemary pleaded. "He'll go away eventually."

The roaring motor of the truck died, and Booley stepped out of the cab. He looked at me with abashed eyes and hesitated as if waiting on my permission to come near.

"Hi, Booley," Rosemary said.

"Gabriel, can I talk to you a little while alone?"

"I don't think so."

"Gabriel's mama is waiting on her at home," Rosemary offered.

"Just for a minute. It's real important." His voice was quiet and completely lacked assertion, and he tried a smile.

"No."

"Please?"

The soft word curdled my stomach. "Absolutely not."

I heard him sigh shortly in protest but I stared at the pavement.

Rosemary clapped her hands together. "Tell you what, Booley, why don't you and I go riding around for a minute? I want to talk to you."

"Huh?"

I looked up at her. "What?"

She smiled at me reassuringly, from her dimples to the corners of her sparkling eyes. "You stay here. I'll be right back."

Booley stared at Rosemary strangely. "You want to ride around?"

"I think we should talk," she said. "You can bring me right back when we're done."

He shrugged, and looked back at me. "Is that okay with you?"

I waved my hand.

Rosemary climbed into the cab; when both doors closed I could not see either of them through the tinted windows. Booley chugged into reverse and then pulled out onto the highway, headed south. I turned off my motor.

I sat back in the seat of the car and threw my hair over the headrest so it wouldn't stick to my neck. I stared straight ahead at the hot-pink cement blocks and wondered only briefly what Rosemary was up to; long ideas that took turns were too much for me, *my stomach was pricking.* People walked by and thumped the hood of my car, grinning and waving, and I laid a faint smile out on my face that I would not have to renew each time; I could

just leave it where it was and let each person think I'd put it there for him. Jamie Pinedweller walked by once, but he looked embarrassed to see me.

The day was gone but the air would not let go of the heat. The night lights, the streetlamps and signs, lit up the gray asphalt and showed up the dozens of ragged edges where cement had been poured over cement that had been poured over cement, and gasoline stains were everywhere. I sat and smelled it all, listening to yelling and laughter all around me, and I waited for Rosemary and Booley to come back. I waited for thirty minutes. I shifted in my seat and drew my knees up under my chin, putting my feet on my mother's seat, and waited another thirty minutes. It was eleven o'clock, and there was no sign of them.

At eleven-thirty an ambulance came screaming by, and I sighed. A couple of cars pulled out to go follow it, and I wondered if I should go by Rosemary's house to see if they'd been by, but I couldn't imagine that they had, and I didn't want to see her mother's sour little face in the doorway or give her reason to worry. I turned the key in the ignition.

Wayne Barfield's house was an old, straight frame house behind the telephone company that needed painting pretty badly. Wayne's ex-wife had painted the whole thing herself fifteen years ago, in a china blue that was a lot for an old frame house to bear, and the shutters were what I was sure had been supposed to be mauve but was just plain pink. It was peeling off like old

dried skin. Wayne's ex-wife, Tyler's mother, was gone with the wind, and I guess had taken her paint cans with her.

I pulled into the driveway and turned off my lights after I saw that Hershey's moped was parked in the little open shed in the backyard. All the lights were off in the house. I got out of the car, shut the door, and went up the flagstone walk to the porch, not sure whether I would be able to make myself knock. The porch boards creaked when I stepped on them. When I leaned in closer to one of the windows by the front door, I saw the pulsating light from a television, and the shadow of Tyler's cowlicked head in front of it. I put my knuckles to the door and rapped.

Tyler finally pulled himself away from the screen and came to the door, half-asleep. He opened the door without even looking out to see who it might be. "Hi, Gabriel." He yawned.

"Could you get Hershey out of bed for me?"

"He's not in bed," Tyler said. "He's on the couch watching TV with me--Hershey, comé here."

Tyler was gone, and then in the crack of the door Hershey's face appeared. "Gabriel?" He opened the door wider, although he just had on a T-shirt and boxer shorts. "Do you want to come in?"

"No," I said. "But I need you to put some pants on and help me."

"What's up? Is something wrong?"

"Booley Carson rode off with Rosemary in his truck hours ago and he didn't bring her back."

Hershey just stood and looked at me. "Rosemary?"

"She wanted to talk to him for a minute."

"What about?"

I drew the toe of my shoe across a badly painted board. "I don't know, she didn't say."

"How long have they been gone?"

"A couple of hours, and they were supposed to come right back."

"Hang on, let me find my pants."

We drove back into town not speaking until I asked him, "Have you finished any of the drawings?"

He sighed and rubbed his eyes forcefully with the backs of his hands. "Oh, I don't know, they're partway finished."

"Oh," I said. My fists clenched on the steering wheel.

We turned at the post office and came south on the highway, toward the Quik Mart and the laundromat, toward the lazy crowd.

"What the hell?" muttered Hershey, straightening up in his seat.

There must have been three hundred kids out on the asphalt, running around excitedly from venue to venue, some hopping in their cars and roaring south. I pulled my car in and turned off the motor, and Hershey jumped out of the car. Many female eyes, awash in some sort of attractive terror, turned to him dramatically.

"What's going on?" he yelled.

One brave little sophomore girl flitted up the hill to us, giving me a quick disinterested glance, and breathlessly told Hershey, "There's been some kind of accident, I don't know." She was half smiling.

I grunted, got out of the car, and slammed the door. "Is Page around here anywhere?"

"Page Stubbs?" the girl asked innocently. "I haven't seen her."

I saw Jamie Pinedweller hurriedly tossing keys to a junior football player by the ice machine in front of the Quik Mart. I hadn't been glad to see him in a while, but I marched down there and grabbed him by the arm before he could get away. "Jamie, what's going on?"

"Down on the old highway," he said, pale-faced, dispensing with his worn-out hostilities as he continued toward his vehicle. "Booley Carson's truck is wrapped around a telephone pole."

Crouching to the pavement, I watched a fleet of cars gun it for Pickensville.

Chapter Seventy-Four

It was important when it was your turn not to look at nose hairs. They would wiggle when he spoke the words, "Body of Christ," and you were to ignore that and also the string hanging off his chasuble, and the sound of an early-morning bass-thumping boom car rolling past the doors of church. It would only momentarily surpass the drone of the organ, so you were to tuck it in a part of your mind a respectable distance from the senses. Stare instead, you would tell yourself, at the crisp Body of the Lord, the light poking through it unevenly as he held it aloft before placing it in your hand, a chip out of it where it must have bumped other Pieces of the Body in the chalice.

Chapter Seventy-Five

She was looking for the pools of light in her baby's eyes, alone at the kitchen table because her husband and children hung back, when Joseph came through the door with the doctor.

"There's no need," she said firmly.

"We need a private place where I can examine her," the doctor said to Karl.

"Speak to *me*," she said, not taking her eyes off the baby. But she got up and went into the bedroom anyway, with the doctor and Karl at her heels.

"Karl, stay in the kitchen," she said quietly. She wanted to keep the rhythm of her heart pure and soft for the baby.

She heard him whisper something to the doctor, but she didn't turn around, and then there was only one set of footsteps behind her.

She sat down on the bed, and the doctor shut the door behind them. He stood over there by the door, coming no closer.

"What have you done?" he asked.

She held the baby tightly. "I've had a son," she said. "What did you think?"

"I would have come." He gripped his bag, squeezing the handles tight. "There was time. I'm sure there was."

"I went for a walk," she said evenly, reserving her gaze only for her child, "and I was too far gone to make it back home."

"Meaning you walked miles. Miles in the freezing cold, when you only had days left."

"Na, na," she cooed at the baby.

He threw his bag to the floor; things clinked in it and the baby blinked his tiny eyes, screwing up his face. The doctor got down on his knees in front of her and said, "You could have killed your baby. You could have killed yourself."

The child began to cry, and she forcefully unfastened her blouse and drew a breast out with a firm hand.

"I need to see the baby."

"He needs to eat."

He paused. "Is that liquor that I smell?"

"No, it is *not*."

He reached up and pulled the baby from her, leaving her breast hanging exposed and cold, and she didn't fight. "For the baby's sake, let me look at him," he said.

He laid the child on the bed, placing his hands all over him, silently examining the rudely cut cord that curled up on the baby's stomach. The baby began to cry again.

When he was done, the doctor said, "There's blood on your skirt."

Startled, she looked down and spread the pleats of fabric wide with her fingers. "Lise's skirt," she breathed. She saw the spot of blood where the skirt had sunk between her legs, and she felt wetness on her thigh.

"Are you bleeding now?"

"No."

The doctor grabbed her by the shoulders. "Have you lost your mind? You delivered a baby by yourself outside in the cold! I have to examine you--you cannot tell me no, I won't allow it."

She clenched her legs together. "There's no need for you to touch me there."

He let go of her shoulders and put his hands on her knees. "You could die."

"But I won't."

Chapter Seventy-Six

"Start the car," Hershey mumbled frantically. Cars everywhere were starting.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," I whispered, fumbling the keys in inept fingers. "She can't still have been in the truck. He had to have taken her home."

I could barely remember which way to turn the steering wheel to back out and I almost hit the pole that held up the sign for the laundromat. I pulled in behind two or three other cars headed south and turning left onto the old highway to Pickensville. Most of the kids who stayed behind were girls, clustering and clutching their fingers to their mouths like suckling babes.

Winding down my favorite road in the honey moonlight meant for lovers. The only light on the snaking road was the moonlight and whatever came from my headlights. There were no reflectors on the dividing line. I turned on the radio and turned it back off again. Hershey didn't seem to notice. The cars ahead of me were going pretty fast, and by the way Hershey was sitting forward in his seat and pressing his feet into the floorboard I figured he wanted me to speed up with them.

"I'm not going any faster," I said. "I don't like this road."

"Well, you're not going to wreck at this speed," he said.

"Would you rather drive?"

"How far out do you think it is?"

"How would I know?"

Over the broad hill that stretched faintly in the dark sky came the unmistakable pulse of blue lights. We were yet a mile from the bridge, and I loosened my grip on the steering wheel.

"About this far," I said. I touched the brake.

As soon as we topped the hill we could see.

The lights were blue, the lights were red. There were three police cars and an ambulance directly ahead of us, and as I slowed down someone came running up to my car, crossing my headlights. I rolled down the window.

It was a man in overalls, maybe someone who lived nearby. "You cain't come through," he said. "You can park on the road, but they don't want people down there. The curve's too tight and they cain't get the ambulance in."

I craned to see down in the dark. The cars that had been ahead of me were pulling off in the grass.

"It's a truck down there around the telephone pole," he said, shaking his head and holding his hands up to demonstrate. "The ends is almost tetching."

"How many people were inside?" I asked.

"I hadn't got close enough to see. Nobody's said. They's waiting on the Jaws of Life to cut 'em out." Cars were lining up behind me, and the man moved on to wave them into the grass. I heard the wail of another emergency vehicle in the distance.

"Better get off the road," Hershey said. He was already opening his door.

"Well, wait on me," I said. I negotiated the shallow ditch beside the road and pulled into the tall yellow weeds. "Please wait on me."

He didn't answer. I turned the car and the lights off and we both got out. Hershey started toward the police cars, which were pulling side by side to shine their lights on the accident.

"Wait on me," I repeated, stumbling through the weeds in the dark to get to the road.

The fields were filling in the dark with worry and bodies. The townspeople were crawling over the hillside. When the lights of the squad cars were lined up and a floodlight was placed atop the first, I could see the truck.

"God almighty," Hershey said, breaking into a run.

"Don't leave me," I cried, following him, but I didn't want to get too close. I didn't want to see anything.

Policemen were shouting. "Lines are down! Keep back!" They waved the first of the onlookers away. "The jaws has got to get through!"

I hadn't thought about live wires, but Hershey kept going. "Hershey, the wires are down," I called to him, tripping vainly behind, but my voice was beginning to fail me. "Please wait," I whispered.

Whatever was at the bottom of the hill with a telephone pole sticking out of it no longer looked like a truck. It was red and wadded up as if by a giant, angry hand. But it had big fat wheels, splayed out from it like broken legs, and I could make

out parts of the letters spelling "My Chevy" on the crushed windshield.

The wide orange bar of a wrecker truck was flashing, coming over the hill and beeping in a piercing monotone, bearing the giant metal jaws that would tear the truck apart for signs of life. I turned to see it rushing towards us, and when I turned back around, Hershey was gone.

I was in the dark, not quite on the road, and I couldn't see where I was stepping. Hershey was gone. All I could do was stand there and wonder frantically where the live wires might be, and wipe tears off my face. I kept staring at the dead red truck although I was afraid to see anything--but the tinted windows revealed nothing.

The man in overalls passed back by, running, and I called to him, but he didn't hear me. People were rushing by me where I stood and then getting put off by the police as they were putting the jaws of life into position. I was afraid to follow any of them; I knew nobody knew where to go or where not to go. It was all a guess. The man in overalls came back by, and this time I reached out and grabbed his arm without moving my feet.

"Do you know who was in the truck?" I yelled over the din of sirens.

"They's two," he said, trying to keep going, but I had hold of him tightly. "One of 'em was thowed from the truck--didn't have on no seat belt."

"A girl?"

"Cain't say. They's saying the truck belongs to Doris Carson's boy."

"I know."

"Once they get the tags identified they's gonna call her from my house. That's my house up there, up the hill." He pointed. "I got to go now--I got to make sure people's cleared the road so the ambulance can get back th'ough."

I let him go.

A crowd of police officers and a few stray onlookers was forming about forty feet from where the truck lay, in the dark but for a few flashlights. They were looking down at the ground, and I could see through their legs that a paramedic was kneeling over a form in the grass. The policemen held their arms out angrily to keep people back, and shouted for them to stay away. Most came running back to the cars, reporting to everyone what they had almost seen. One girl came back throwing up, right about the time that the jaws of life started tearing metal and making a tremendous racket, and shouting and screaming and crying began in earnest.

Kiley Cleve, the football player, came sprinting past me up the hill, yelling, "I don't know who it is, but it's a girl. She has long dark hair, that's all I could see."

Another boy I couldn't see in the dark was right behind him. "Nobody knows who it is yet."

My feet were becoming part of the mud and weeds.

"Does anybody know who was with Booley?" the boy asked, and the consensus of the group was that nobody had seen.

"It was Rosemary Fairwell," I said quietly under the wail of the ambulance. Nobody heard me. "*It was Rosemary!*" I screamed, "*It was Rosemary!*"

Kiley looked over at me, the only sign I had that anyone had seen me at all. I wasn't even sure that he had heard me until I started hearing the name "Rosemary" trickling back down the hill, buzzing from one group to the next.

The truck, whose cab was now rainbow-shaped, was being peeled back away in slow layers that made horrible noises as they came free, and the unforgiving floodlight was burning right there, threatening to show all of us what was left inside if we kept on looking. Most people did; I couldn't. I made my feet go forward toward the crowd around the person lying in the grass, where the cops were starting to get angry at the spectators. One boy had to be pulled away and pressed against the side of a squad car, and the brightness of the floodlight shone in the tears on his face as the policeman held his shoulders.

It was Hershey.

I tripped over some weeds and practically fell into the roadway. I crossed over to the other side, shading my eyes from the girl in the grass, and stepped with painful deliberation toward the squad car lest any open electricity be running over the ground. I didn't hit any wires, but I did hit a pothole, and twisted my ankle.

Hershey saw me, and called out over the policeman's shoulder, "Gabriel, don't look over there! Don't look!"

I stopped still and pulled at my hair. "I *wasn't*!" I screamed. "I wasn't going to!"

"It's Rosemary." He put both his hands to his head, and the policeman must have believed he was no longer worth wasting his time on, because he let him go and went back to the accident scene. "Gabriel, take me to the hospital. They're about to take her there."

Paramedics were pulling something from the flanks of torn metal that had been the truck; I could see it over Hershey's shoulder but I refused to focus on it.

"*No!*" I yelled. "I'm not going to the fucking hospital!"

Hershey stared, but it was not a stare of concern; it was only incomprehension.

I took one deep breath, pulled at my hair as hard as I could, and stood in the weeds and screamed my head off.

In a matter of seconds a burly policeman was separating my hair from my hands and using his chest to shut me up. "It's gonna be all right, hon," he said. "Can you identify this young lady? Do you know who she is?"

I smelled Old Spice and sweat. I coughed. "I don't know. Is she dead?"

"No, she's not dead, but she's not doing too good, hon. We got to get hold of her parents right away."

"Is she dead?" I asked again, and then realized vaguely that I had already asked. "Where is the man in the overalls? I need to use his phone."

"All right, hon, but first of all, sweetheart, if you can identify this young lady I want you to come over and take a look at her. Can you do that? Now, hon, she's not dead. Do you understand that?" He patted my back.

Hershey was watching me.

"No, I can't," I said, and before he could think to hold on to me, I broke away from the policeman and ran back up the hill, not stopping to worry over live wires or potholes. I knew where to find the man in the overalls. He was directing traffic with an air of solemn importance at the top of the hill, bearing the news grimly to each rolled-down window and bidding them make room for the emergency vehicles.

I ran up and grabbed him by the arm. "Can I use your phone?"

He turned from his task and blinked. "Well--the policemen's gonna have to use it, and I think we should keep the line open."

"This is about the wreck," I spat. "I'm a friend of the victims and it's very important. The police sent me up here."

He nodded quickly. "All right, then. My wife's waiting up there by the front door. You just tell her Horace said it was okay."

Horace's wife looked pale and grim as she let me in. "Lord help us when something like this happens," she said softly.

"Lord help these kids' mamas." She showed me to the phone in the kitchen. "Help yourself."

"Do you have a phone book?"

"In the drawer underneath."

I looked up the number I wanted, and dialed, and, as I expected, it rang on and on with no answer. No answering machine picked up. So I looked up Sanderson, Huey, home on 342 Mockingbird Street in Middlefield, and dialed. I looked at the clock on Horace's stove, which read 12:35.

A male voice came on the line after five rings. "Hello? Dammit, it's the middle of the night!" He sounded half-dead.

"This is Gabriel Sullivan."

"Who?"

"*Gabriel Sullivan*! You can cancel my order!" I screamed. "Cancel my fucking order!"

Horace's grim and pale wife was more than happy to let me out of her house.

The waiting room at the hospital was like a zoo. The nurse at the front desk was getting more irritated every time she looked up and saw more people coming in. She had a funny, ugly little pug nose and a whopping cubic zirconium on her left hand,

and she was playing surreptitiously with a cigarette; I saw her sneak a drag from it every now and then. I marveled at her gall. Her smoke broke against the wall and ceiling, which were both the pale green color of the water left in the pot after you've stewed turnip greens. She saw me looking at her and glared.

I sat with my head on my mama's shoulder.

"We could go wait in Michael's room," she said, "and get out of here."

"But then we won't know what's going on."

"We don't know what's going on now."

Hershey sat across the room from me, playing with a string coming from a hole in his cutoffs. When I had got back to the car from making my phone call, he had been sitting in the passenger seat waiting for me, so I couldn't leave him there like I'd been planning to do. We had gone by my house to pick up Mama and tell her the news, and then we'd driven silently to Middlefield, to the hospital. Hershey had sat down in the first chair he'd found empty, which didn't happen to have an empty seat beside it, so Mama and I had gone to sit on the other side of the room. Neither Rosemary nor Booley had arrived yet; I wondered if their parents had been called. (Mama wouldn't do it because she said you couldn't be sure who was in that truck and she wasn't about to make that kind of mistake.) Kids who'd been at the scene of the accident were starting to congregate around the vending machines.

Hershey was just picking away at that one string, picking, twisting, and letting it go, twisting and letting it go. I felt like marching over there and pulling it out. He looked horribly tired, as if he wouldn't have said a word if I had gone over there and ripped an entire swatch out of his pants. A "Rockford Files" rerun was on the television on the wall, and Hershey's eyes went back and forth from his string to the TV.

"Listen," my mama said then.

A dull roar, like an approaching storm, was building up outside. It sounded like it was descending right on top of the building, slowly swallowing up the puny scream of the ambulance that was pulling up to the sliding doors. As the roar got louder and the people in the waiting room started to look up and at each other, you could tell that the sound was made of the separate regular whips of a blade. It was the LifeFlight helicopter that was used to transport the critically ill up to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville. Some of the kids at the vending machine started to go and have a look outside, but at that moment some paramedics burst through the emergency-room doors with an old man on a stretcher whose face was purple, and the kids were shoved out of the way. A little boy whose knee was bleeding and who up to this point had been holding it very patiently and with manly calm started to cry his eyes out, and his daddy squeezed his shoulder and said, "Son, they'll get to you when they can."

The police scanner behind the nurse at the front desk had been crackling nonstop ever since we'd been there, and now, with

the noise of the helicopter drowning out all the conversation in the waiting room, loud male voices started to come over it insistently. I couldn't understand them except when one said, "We have the five-one, we have the five-one, over," and the nurse stumped out her cigarette and picked up the handset. "Flight 2 is on the pad, over," she mumbled. I counted five small children in the waiting room who were crying.

The nurse leaned her pig's face over the desk and shouted into the din, "Everybody back away from the doors! We have EMTs coming through! And don't nobody leave until the helicopter's taken off--it's too close to the doors for you to get by."

The shriek of an ambulance cut feebly into the commotion of the helicopter, and there was shouting outside.

The automatic doors at the ambulance ramp flung open and three paramedics shoved a stretcher through; a doctor in a green coat came to meet them from the emergency room. The temporary IV attached to the body on the stretcher flailed wildly as the stretcher caught a crack in the concrete. "Nobody's fixed that damn thing yet?" one of the paramedics yelled.

I could see hair hanging down from under the sheet.

"Mama. . . ." I said, but she was already out of her seat. Hershey was on his way across the room.

"Doctor," Mama called frantically, "who is that patient?"

He was already halfway through the swinging doors, taking the patient off to the operating room. He looked around on the

stretcher as if to answer Mama's question, but the doors swung shut before he could say anything.

Two of the paramedics had run back out the door, but the one remaining asked Mama, "Do you know who that girl is? Because she didn't have any ID on her."

"I can take a look," Mama said.

"Are you family?"

"Close."

"Nobody's called her parents yet. Did you see the accident?"

"My daughter did. We'll identify her for you."

"You go," I said. "I don't want to look."

"I'll go with you, Mrs. Sullivan," Hershey said quickly.

"Gabriel, why don't you come on back?" Mama said. "You don't have to come in the room."

The paramedic called to the pug-nosed nurse. "Take these people back to the OR."

We walked tentatively through the wooden double doors to the emergency room and followed the nurse down the green, antiseptic hall. I remembered the time I'd visited the nursing home in Girl Scouts and gotten sick when an old man with rotting teeth had grabbed my arm and called me a name that was not mine. I wondered if I were passing any dying people as we made our way past door after door, some open, some closed. Who had decided that pale green was the color of healing?

I waited out in the hall while the nurse led Mama and Hershey inside the room where the anonymous patient lay.

In just seconds I heard a small, high-pitched sound come from my mama, and she came out of the room with her hand over her mouth. "I'm going to call her mama and daddy," she said. I started to follow her, but she held up her hand and said, "No, you need to go in there for a minute."

"It's Rosemary," I said. "If you know it's Rosemary then I don't want to go in there." But my feet were already walking through the door.

The doctor was saying to Hershey, "You're going to have to leave now," and when I got past the curtain, he said to me, "Ten seconds."

I didn't need ten seconds. I saw what I had to see and got out.

When I got back to the emergency room, Hershey silently at my heels, there was Buddy Scurlock by the glass doors, looking wild-eyed and half-cocked. When he saw me, he seemed to have forgotten that he had ever insulted me and he rushed up to me, grabbing both my arms. "Is it her? Was it her?"

I nodded.

"Somebody called the night shift and told me they'd heard she was in a wreck with Booley Carson . . . what does she look like? How is she?" His eyes were moving back and forth across my face so fast that they almost produced an audible buzz. "Why the hell was she in a truck with Booley Carson?"

I was too angry already tonight to have any more in me for Buddy. "She was doing it for me. I don't know what she was doing, but she was doing it for me."

Then Hershey's voice came plainly from behind me. "You don't have any right to be here."

Buddy for a moment seemed dazed, and then wounded; then, looking over me at Hershey, he sucked all the air he could into his chest. "Don't you dare," he said, his eyes glittering, "tell me what I have a right to do or what I have a right not to do."

I was afraid to get out of the way.

Hershey was so close to my back that his voice vibrated against my skin; I could smell his tired night breath, and I felt like telling him to back off. "What do you care if she's bleeding and bruised? Since when have you cared about that?" His voice was rising.

The pug-nosed nurse had her beady little eyes planted on us.

"I love her," Buddy said. "I have loved her for years now, and I don't need you to make that okay for me."

Hershey grabbed my arm and pushed me out of the way.

"Yeah, that's right," Buddy yelled. "Push the girl, big boy."

"*Hey!*" The nurse was thrusting her face as far out over her desk as she could manage, which was hard because it was so flat. "Take it outside!"

"Rosemary doesn't love you," Hershey said. "And I would die before I'd let her see you in the state she's in."

"*Let* her. Who died and made you God?"

That was it. Hershey reached back and planted whatever was left of his energy right into Buddy's jaw. It didn't sound like it did in the movies; instead of a smack, it was a sick, almost juicy thump. Buddy fell into the lap of an old woman who was waiting to have her attack of phlebitis checked, and she screamed like a chicken on the block. The entire waiting room, rapt by now, gasped nearly in unison. Hershey cried out in pain, shaking his knuckles, and then stuck the offending hand between his knees.

"*Security!*" screamed the nurse, but the guards had already seen it and were on the two of them before Buddy could even get up out of the woman's lap. They pulled Hershey over to the front desk and Buddy to the glass doors. The guard holding Buddy said, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave, son," and Buddy hollered, "*Me?!*" and the guard said, "Yes, you, sir," and Buddy straightened up in his jacket and was escorted out the door by the guard, but he hollered back, "I'll be back! Gabriel, you tell her I'll be back!" The guard who had both of Hershey's hands pinned behind his back told him, "I better not hear nothing more out of you tonight. You're lucky I let you stay in here." Hershey nodded weakly and sat down in the floor by the front desk. The lady with the phlebitis looked ready to die on the spot; she started moaning softly.

My mama came back from the pay phones, having called Rosemary's parents, to find the whole room buzzing, and she said, "Did I miss something?"

The doctor from the emergency room stuck his head back out the double doors, looking for us. When he saw Mama, he said, "She's conscious, if you'd like to see her for a few seconds."

Mama squeezed my hand. Hershey got to his feet. I said, "You two go ahead. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Well, don't be long," Mama said.

I followed them down the hall as far as the restrooms, and I waited for them to turn the corner. Then I fled back through the narrow, pale green hall that stank of chemical cleanness and back through the emergency waiting area, where the nurse stood and shouted to me not to run in the building.

I burst through the glass doors of the emergency room, opening them not with my hands but with the weight of my body. Just beyond the pavement of the emergency parking lot was the helipad; the copter had come and gone and I had forgotten to hear it leave. I knew that it had been Booley that had been borne away to Vanderbilt; I didn't need anyone to tell me that. It meant that he was alive, but only by a thin string. The pad was now quiet and unimportant, lit by bulbs all around, and the ambulances were off picking up other people.

Down the hill were the woods that ran all behind the hospital, but in the grassy expanse between the two some ladies' auxiliary had once built a picnic bench and planted a grove of

ornamentals and fruit trees, in case anyone might ever want to bring a lunch on a sunny day and watch the ambulances roar into the ER with their bloody cargoes. I tore down the hill to the little park, where the vigilant lights of the hospital glowed on the dark grass, and I collapsed onto the bench.

I spread my fingers out onto the table and saw how the moonlight fell on them and made weak shadows on the concrete. Heat coursed up out of my chest and throat and burned my eyes and nose until tears started forming, coming too fast to wait for sobs--they just poured out of my eyes and all over my hands, down my neck and into my shirt while my chest stayed numb. I laid my head down on the table, pulled at my hair with my hands, and moaned, the hill otherwise hushed under the inquisitive eye of the moon. I kicked at the bench on the other side of the table with my foot until I felt pain in my ankle.

A few yards away from the bench stood an oak tree with a massive girth, rooted there long before the little ladies had come with their willow saplings and garden gloves. Its thick, knotty bark was ragged in the silver glow from the hospital lights. I got up off the bench and put my arms around the great trunk, finding that my fingers would not touch on the other side. I closed my eyes and hugged the tree with all my strength, pressing my shoulders in so that I felt the bark poke my skin.

I put my forehead against the tree. *Line up the bat with the ball, son.* Then I reared back--*keep it straight*--and cracked my skull against the tree. I did it again and again and again

until there was ringing in my ears and blood on my shirt, until the bones of my jaw rattled and I heard small popping sounds.

Then, hugging the tree like the friend I never had, I bent my legs, pulling downward, squeezing the life out of it until my arms popped uneasily, dragging my raw face down the length of the tree until I was squatting and feeling pain rush from my face through my scalp, out to my ears, and down my neck. The muscles of my arms were becoming frantic to relax.

I had to let go. I fell on my butt, and I put my hand to my face and felt the feathery texture of skin torn away from its rightful place. But my fingers were covered with tiny bits of dirt and bark, and touching the grit to my raw face made me cry out. The sound of my voice was hollow and thin under the trees. When I got up to do the other side, I couldn't see at first and I fell back a few steps, but once I was hugging the tree I was all right. When I finished and got back to the bottom of the tree, I looked up and saw a tiny piece of my flesh still on the bark. *Fa una canzone, Gabriel, whatever it means, fa you. Stupid, stupid bitch, lie down and hope to be laughed upon, pick your spot in the universe away from everyone else's and shrivel up into it. Despise not my petition, but in your mercy, hear and answer me. Amen. Lower case.*

After a few seconds I stood up and pulled up my T-shirt to wipe off my face in the weak moonlight. The lights from the hospital windows threw clear circles onto the grass in the dark, and I saw from where I was standing, looking into the prim,

neatly pruned trees, a long shadow creeping onto the ground into the light. Two eyes sparkled at me from inside the darkness of the trees, and I wiped my face where I felt new points of blood starting to pop up. I knew the eyes were Buddy's, and I knew then that he had been standing there the whole time.

"Come over here," he said, his voice dark as the lawn under the trees.

I kept my T-shirt over my cheeks, even though I knew Buddy could see everything it was supposed to cover, and I moved from the light into the shadows, looking up at him. He was leaning up against the trunk of a pear tree.

He took all of me in with his eyes, and under his gaze I felt so tired, so tired.

He took my wrists in his hands and gently pulled my arms down. "Why?" he asked me, but there was no question in his voice, and he lifted a single finger to touch the bleeding scratch on my left cheek. The salt of his skin stung my face, and I trembled a little. Suddenly the weight of my body was too much for my legs and I slumped to the grass on my knees, weak but not about to faint. I crawled back over to where it was dark.

Buddy sat down beside me, so close that when he spoke his breath hurt my cheeks.

"I can't go back in there," he said, his throat tight.

I shook my head, looking down at my knees, and tears fell into the cuts on my face and seared my flesh.

"You're not going back in there, either," he said, swallowing.

It was the smells that told me what was going on, before anything else. I smelled Buddy's shirt, his skin, the sweet worried staleness of his breath untainted by alcohol, the faint scent of a shampoo. I smelled all those private smells that were and weren't Rosemary's. And then I felt his fingers on the back middle belt loop of my shorts--not telling, but asking.

I sat there looking down at my knees with my heart pounding for a few moments, the nerves of my fingers tingling, and then I deliberately turned my face up to his.

He looked me in the eyes with eyes that I could barely see in the dark except for the tiny white reflections of the hospital windows. He lowered his head. For a second I felt nothing, and then slowly the heat of his breath touched my neck as his lips lingered there but did not move. I only almost felt his lips, fluttering by like moths. My hair was falling over my shoulders and he took some in one hand and pressed it to his face to smell it. I looked down at him, pressing my face into his hair and then shutting my eyes. His hair burned my cheeks.

He raised his head.

His face came directly to mine. He did not turn or tilt his head, or close his eyes.

He took my bottom lip between his teeth. He held it there for a second; he was shuddering, and I saw tears in his eyes. Then I felt his tongue on my chin, at my lips. He paused there,

as our breaths came unevenly and with poor timing, clashing with each other. He seemed perfectly poised, but I felt off balance, as if I were putting too much weight on one leg.

Then he tilted his head and kissed me with both lips, softly and superficially, making noises foreign to me in the still under the trees as I moved my lips to kiss him back, gently. We were still two separate faces, joining infinitesimally at tiny intervals, our breath escaping into the air.

Then his hand that was in my belt loop pulled insistently, though not forcibly, prodding me onto my back. I eased back into the grass, my hair falling first and making a pillow for my head, and he followed, not on top of me, but at my side. It was then that I finally felt his whole mouth on my neck, his tongue sweeping across my skin and his teeth grasping for a hold. I felt a tree root underneath my back, right under one of my vertebrae, and I kept shifting to try to worm it out from under me.

Then he stopped, raised his head and looked my in the eyes again, and then he ran his tongue across my lips. I opened my mouth. His tongue darted inside and his breath was all over my face, his hands in my hair, and my face stung so much that I sighed painfully from somewhere high up in my vocal cords.

Then Buddy's right hand snaked down and away from my hair. He grasped the bottom of my T-shirt and pulled it out of my shorts, and he laid his hand on the bare skin of my stomach. He didn't move his hand up or down, he didn't dig with his fingers--

he only laid his hand there, the fingers moving slightly, and it was then that warmth started to rush over me from dark bottomless places and I could no longer feel my face or the tree root sticking into my back. The soft whimpering that had started because of the stinging of skin on my wounds was fast becoming something else, and was coming from a different place where I was unaccustomed to the sound of my own voice. Buddy started to dig deeper into my mouth with his, breathing with some deep growl whose vibrations I could feel. I rolled over toward him, and our bodies met front on.

His hand that was on my stomach tugged at the band of my shorts, thumb and one finger working at the silver button, the other three thrust down inside against my bare flesh. The button came undone, the zipper open before I could move. I was clinging to him for dear life, my heart visible in my chest, as one of his hands fumbled to pull my bloody shirt up over my bra, and one plunged where nothing ever had before--his mouth was separate from mine, his tears were falling on my face, and before I knew it, I was rolling in the grass with Buddy Scurlock, rolling under the trees, rolling over and over, away and forever, rolling over and away.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Jeffrey DeWayne Hodkins looks only as handsome and debonair as a boy can look with three-inch sideburns and a turquoise ruffled tuxedo shirt on. But somehow he *is* handsome, and older and more knowing than any of us will ever be. His eyes stare toward the door of the principal's office.

Dead teenagers make intriguing displays in high school lobbies. They have dates following their names. They have found something that all of us want, and they have achieved something that few of us ever will.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Na, na, she whispered to her son so warm on her chest. *Lie soft and think the grand miraculous thoughts of one so fresh from the answers. The halves of your head are yet so soft, incompletely joined, and your mind so close to the surface, that if I keep you near enough my heart perhaps you can impart to me something of where you've been. Will you ever in all your life forgive me? It is difficult for me to say. Will you remember me as I am right now, only recently become separate? I still feel your heart just as if it were still inside me. Na, na, baby, you will never remember. Na, na, baby, oh child mine.*

Chapter Seventy-Nine

I lay in the grass on my back as the skin of my face dried and grew taut. I had eased my shorts back up to my waist, inch by inch, my fingers almost too numb to grasp the belt loops securely, and my legs lay parted, knees outward. I could not bring them back together. The thick seam of the crotch of my shorts touched me only in the barest way but it was like a sharp finger poking into a fatal wound. I breathed slowly and let myself dry up and shrivel under the trees.

Buddy had crawled away from me but he had not gone; he was sitting in the grass at my head, his chin on his knees, and his shadow fell across me. I could occasionally feel a slight tug on my head and so I knew his fingers were roving around in the ends of my hair, which curled up at his feet.

We sat for a while like this, the only sounds those that drifted down from the trees or echoed out of the hospital building, until my breathing began to come not out of the hollow of my gut, quietly and deeply, but instead out of the very top of my throat, making a faint, shallow noise as the corners of my eyes began to tingle and moisten. Finally Buddy spoke, putting one hand on my forehead as tentatively as if it were made of sharp tacks with the points facing up.

"Are you all right?"

My throat had been drying up just like the rest of me. My voice trickling up out of it sounded like a tiny stream running over rocks. "Yes," I said slowly, my voice cracking off into a

whisper halfway through the vowel. I tried to picture the knuckles on the other side of the smooth palm on my forehead.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This was a mistake." His hand remained still except for the index finger, which rubbed lightly and insistently against my hairline.

"I know."

"I'm really, really . . . I don't. . . ."

I reached up with both hands--my shoulders both popped and cracked, they were so stiff--and touched his hand where it lay so helplessly upon my forehead. I lifted it off me, and then, without looking, I tucked his thumb into his palm and folded his four fingers over it, making a fist. I felt the fist carefully with my two hands, running my thumbs lightly over the sharpness of the knuckles, and I placed it against my jaw. Then I let go.

As soon as I let go of his hand, he unclenched the fist and withdrew his hand sharply. "What are you doing?"

I rolled over and faced him. Every inch of skin on me stretched and cracked, and the space between my legs was raw and aching. My shorts hung on my hips, the fly and button still undone. I stared into his face.

He met my eyes only briefly and then he turned his face away. He looked as if he were going to be sick.

My eyes roved down to his neck, to the dark space beneath his chin where the delicate moonlight could not reach, and stayed there as I zipped my shorts with clumsy fingers. "Go on home," I said.

He shook his head. "You're bleeding still."

"I don't care."

"You're bleeding everywhere."

I saw that a faint wash of red was smeared down my thigh. "I don't care."

He rose to his knees, mechanically taking my elbows in his hands. "I can take you home."

"No."

"Yes."

"I don't want you to take me home," I said.

He squinted his eyes painfully, and he leaned forward until his forehead touched mine and his breath covered my face again, only now there was a staleness in it that had not been there before. In the face of all this misplaced tenderness my stomach grew queasy, and I pulled away from him and stood up. I left him there in the grass as I walked with wavering steps toward the hospital, toward the bright windows of the first floor.

I had to wait twenty minutes before I could sneak in through the staff entrance and wind around the back way to the emergency room. I spent ten minutes lying on a gurney behind a curtain as a bunch of nurses walked past; one of them stuck her head in, saw

my bloody face, and asked if someone was seeing me, and I said yes.

Rosemary was in a room alone. I slipped in, shut the door, and moved a medicine cart in front of it. I didn't know if her parents were there yet, although I presumed they must be. I had not seen Hershey or my mother anywhere. In the window across from her bed I could see my reflection: my eyes were two livid holes in my head, my skin peeling and bloody, and there were pieces of grass in my hair so large that I could see them even in the indefinite reflection from the window.

Rosemary's eyes were open.

Her face was purple and swollen, one jagged bloody line spanning her lovely face from the tapered end of one eyebrow, across her nose, and down to the hinge of her jaw on the other side. Thick white wrappings of tape wound around her right ear where it joined her head, and each doe eye sat in the middle of a puffy black pocket of flesh. Her upper lip was sliced up to her nose.

Rosemary lay still, breathing as quietly as she could with tubes taped to her nose and mouth. With every exhalation there was a slight hiss. She seemed not to blink at all as she looked at me, and her eyes were dewy, the wetness darkening the deep brown of the irises. Her whole body was still. Her left arm, which was attached to an IV, lay with the tender light skin of the underside exposed, with no scratches, her palm up and her fingers relaxed in gentle curves.

There was a tall stool beside the bed, and I pulled it up so that I could sit and lean over into her face. Her eyes followed me, swimming in their dampness.

I put my hands down onto the bed rail at first; then I collapsed it with the lever underneath and pushed it out from between us, and I put both my hands on Rosemary's right arm and leaned forward. I squeezed her arm with my fingers and dug my nails in and I stared into her face. She continued to breathe evenly, with a regular hiss, but her wet eyes flickered from side to side.

"Listen to me," I whispered at her. Her swollen eyelids blinked as air from my consonants whistled into her face.

I leaned in closer, and an acrid taste swept up into my mouth in a straight stream from my stomach, and I was afraid I would vomit.

"Rosemary," I said, "I just screwed your boyfriend."

Her eyes continued to flicker, and the square fluorescent lights in the ceiling made bright slicks in their liquid surface. The hissing of her breath was insistent. She did not try to speak, but she made a repeated choking sound in the back of her throat and her tongue clicked against her teeth.

My eyes and nose tingled, but I was so dried and shrivelly all over that there were no tears left in me to come to the surface.

"And," I said, "I want you to know something." I blinked at the stark sound of my voice in the near-empty room.

I reached for the tube at her nose. I touched the plastic with my fingers, the tips feeling the warmth of her skin behind the coolness of the tube, and then I pinched the tube between my fingers and took it out of her nose.

She blinked fiercely, hissing in and out, until some wetness spilled over her bottom lids and dampened her matted lashes.

I lifted the tube over her head and dropped it behind her pillow. Her eyes followed my hands and then returned to my eyes.

I reached for the tape on her left arm which secured the IV needle. I held her limp wrist with one hand, pinching and crushing it with my fingers, and picked at the tape. It was stuck firmly to her skin and did not want to yield even a corner, but finally one buckled up and rolled away from her skin, and I pulled at it gingerly.

Rosemary's damp eyes flickered back and forth over my face, her eyebrows lifting, and she gave a little feathery sigh.

I took the corner of tape and ripped the whole piece off her skin at once. She whimpered. The needle wagged as it suddenly was made to bear the entire weight of the IV tubing, and it poked up into Rosemary's skin. She hissed violently.

I took the needle in my hand, jerked it out of her arm--it did not want to come out, it was clinging to her veins--and dropped it on the floor. Rosemary's mouth flew open, her dry lips clicking and pulling at her teeth, her wet eyes dancing.

I stood up and leaned into her face. "There."

I placed my hand against the side of her face which was badly cut, tapping at it adamantly, watching her eyes roll in pain. I tried to make the blows come harder, to slap her with my palm, but my hand refused to do it. I sat there and patted her face as it if were a baby's. Her eyes swam, and I stared at her.

The nurses would be by shortly to fix what I had done. I went over to the window, lifted the latch, and pushed it open, Rosemary's dark eyes following me and spilling over like broken dams, and I eased my body through the window and onto the ground below without saying goodbye.

Chapter Eighty

The Girl Scouts set up tents once every summer at Neels Branch, part of Boone Creek, and dutifully built a fire contained with damp mud and rocks. Smelling insect repellent as it coated the insides of their noses, they chopped potatoes and carrots and onions on the card table brought by the troop leader. They rolled them up in aluminum foil with ground beef and laid them carefully on the grill placed over the fire. It took an hour for dinner to cook properly, and so they'd hike through the woods awhile, ajitter with the prospect of dark falling over the trees as they went. They would rather have had the stories now, but it was no good unless the sky was pitch black and you could not see into the trees. So they hiked an hour, and came racing back to the tents when the sky was deep purple.

The smell of ashes and simple food was part of what they were waiting for, as the stars began to glow, but they didn't know it; they were aware only that they craved fright. So they all settled around the fire to eat, noses turning rosy, and when the troop leader was done with her potatoes, she got to her feet and began to pace around the fire, deliberately throwing her long shadow into the grass.

It was a dark, dark night a long time ago, she began, and an ecstasy of cold chills shot through the circle of ten-year-old girls. There was mention of all the appropriate elements, appropriately slowly and quietly: the big dark house at the end of the road, a haunting moon, a mad woman who threw herself off

that very bridge over there, can you see? You can still see her some nights, especially on the night she died, which is . . . June the fifth. It would take a few minutes for one pigtailed person to realize what day it was and for the ripple of understanding to pass all around the circle. The troop leader, pretending not to notice, leaned her face forward into the shadows. *And this is a true story, I swear. My grandmother knew the woman.* The troop would shiver with such exquisite pleasure that it was hard for the storyteller not to laugh.

And the story *was* true. There was such a woman. There have been many such women who have gone mad and jumped off bridges. And the bright, helpless fury that drove them there is only a twinkle in the eye of a ten-year-old girl.

Chapter Eighty-One

The baby was baptized Edward Frederick after Mass on Sunday. All while the priest dribbled water over the child's head, she felt blood running down her legs.

Chapter Eighty-Two

I picked some of the biggest pieces of grass out of my hair before I went back to the emergency room so that I wouldn't look like I had just crawled out of a swamp. I kept thinking that my shorts weren't buttoned, although they were, and I ran my finger over the button and touched the zipper about a thousand times. As I came upon the glass doors I could see Rosemary's parents inside, pacing.

Rosemary's mother was short and pale and shriveled-looking even when she wasn't worried half to death. Rosemary had only gotten her lips from her mother. The rest came from her father, who was tall and dark and well-proportioned; I had once seen a visiting Aunt Josie, her father's sister, who bore a striking resemblance to Rosemary and whose laugh, I remembered, was like bells.

The automatic doors parted loudly for me when I got close enough to trip the mechanism. Hershey was sitting on the floor by the front desk, and when he saw me coming through the doors his face went white.

I limped past him to the desk and reached a hand out for the nurse, who was not looking up. "I need to be seen," I croaked.

Her little doglike face snapped to attention. "What on earth happened to you?"

I glared at her and went to sit down. My mama was not in the room. Rosemary's mother was staring dumbly at me through her

tear-swollen eyes, and didn't say a word, but Mr. Fairwell came right over to me and got down on one knee in front of my seat.

"What on earth, Gabriel?" he said. "They didn't tell us you were in the accident."

"She wasn't," Hershey said. He crawled over and started pushing my ratty hair out of my face. "What have you done?"

"I fell," I said simply. I stared straight ahead.

Mr. Fairwell patted my knees. "Rosemary's going into surgery in a few minutes."

"I know."

"Are you in pain?"

"No. Where is my mama?"

"She's in your brother's room," Hershey said. He looked afraid. "Maybe we ought to go find her for you."

"I'll go myself."

"They won't let you back there if you're *bleeding*, for God's sakes," Hershey said.

"Oh, you'd be surprised." I stood up, and so did Mr. Fairwell. "Let me know how Rosemary does."

When Mama saw me, she screamed.

"Sssshhhhh," I said. "God, Mama, the whole floor'll come running."

Michael, who had been sleeping in his bed when I came through the door, stirred and opened his eyes.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked her.

"What on earth has happened to you?" Mama started to cry.

"Where's Daddy?"

She took my hair in her hands and pulled it away from my face. "He's downstairs getting coffee. He wanted to talk to Rosemary's parents. Oh, my God."

Michael was half asleep, calling my name. "Gabriel, Gabriel, I hear you."

"Go back to sleep."

"No, come here."

I pulled away from Mama and went to the side of his bed.

His eyes, barely slits, opened when he saw my face. "Were you in the wreck? Mama said there was a wreck. She didn't say you were in it."

"No, I fell."

"Oh," he breathed, a little drool collecting at the corner of his mouth, his eyes shutting and opening slowly. "Was it a really big flight of stairs?"

"Really big."

"Cool." His eyes stayed shut for several seconds before they opened again. "Are you spending the night in here with me?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe," he repeated, and he was fast asleep.

"You fell," Mama whispered.

"Uh-huh," I nodded, and as she put her arms around me, I began to cry. I sank to the floor and cried and cried and cried until I gagged. Mama never let go of me, and Michael never woke up.

The Sno-Kone booth was going up by the carousels, and the August County Lions' Club was partitioning off the old softball field and setting up Coke bottles to launch fireworks. There had been a little rain in the middle of the night and so the dust was held to the earth and the morning air was clear and cool.

The emergency-room doctors hadn't called me back until five o'clock, and they picked bark out of my face until six-thirty and sent me home with twelve stitches on my right cheek and four on my left. My father saw me and had no idea what to say. Mama strayed no farther than three inches from me from the time she laid eyes on me in Michael's room, and when we went back up there to get her purse afterward and Daddy opened his mouth to ask what in the holy hell was going on, she shut him up with the short words, "She fell."

We drove home with the radio turned on only loud enough to catch sounds going up and sounds going down but no melody. After we crossed into Hope Springs, I asked her to drive me around the park to see the Fourth of July decorations, and we did. The

banners for the Fourth were the only truly magnificent things the city owned; they were shiny and brilliant and hung from every lightpole from the highway all around the park. Each one had a red, white, and blue medallion, and on alternating lightposts the wide streamers hanging from them were red and then blue, red and then blue, red and then blue. Even after rains the fabric sparkled. We drove through and saw the ladies' auxiliary to the Lions' Club up on ladders at every lightpole, hammering the bright banners home.

Mama and I played Boggle for most of the afternoon; we ate cheese and crackers and apples and other things you didn't have to cook until our stomachs were tight. I had to take small bites because anything that bulged into my cheek made tears spring to my eyes. In the late afternoon, when she was home from work, Beth called and found out we were home, and she brought Agnes and Granny over.

When they came in the door, they looked at my face in surprise, but not in horror, and Mama said, "She fell."

Agnes, whose eyes were not puffy that day, said, "I'll be damned. What'd you fall off, a cliff?"

"Basically," I replied.

Beth nodded slowly, sticking her lower lip out in appreciation.

Granny, whose eyes were clear and sparkling as she rocked back and forth on her feet, said, "Let's play Boggle."

So we did, until it got dark, and Beth told us about her date the night before with Mmmmmark. He had taken her to a restaurant near the river in Nashville and for a walk at the Parthenon. "He's good," she said loudly, shaking up the Boggle container. "He's very, very good."

"Granny's proud of you, sweetie," Granny said.

"I think I'll marry him," Beth said.

Agnes grunted.

"If I do," she continued, settling the last unruly letter cubes into their holes, "Gabriel--turn the timer over, Agnes--Gabriel, will you be my maid of honor?"

I nodded.

Agnes flipped over the hourglass. "You decide--" Her mouth trembled. "You decide if that's what you absolutely want first."

Mama put her arm around Agnes's shoulders, but the tears that were coming did not after all. "I think it's a little early to throw rice," Mama said.

"I told Terry he could stay if he quits seeing her," Agnes blurted out. Her questions were sharp and quick: "Is that wrong? Am I stupid? Do I let him back in my bed? Nevermind."

"I've already found three words and I haven't taken the lid off yet," said Beth. "Does that mean I have to do it over?"

"Of *course*," Agnes said.

"Agnes, you be strong for your little girls." Granny held up her left hand briefly and spun the setting of her wedding ring

back around to the front from where it had slipped around her bony finger. "Say, how do you spell 'beagle'?"

"Not like that, and you're cheating if you're looking before I take the lid off," Beth said. "Land sakes, Granny."

I excused myself from the next round and went to my room; I crouched by my bed and pulled out my book of lists, and Father Smiley's sweater. I had thought about burning them out in the woods where I had uprooted my stones, but now it made so much more sense to get rid of them here, while there were so many women in the kitchen playing Boggle. I took them back downstairs, got the kitchen shears out of a drawer, and sat by the trashcan, cutting each page of the book into shreds and disposing of it.

"What on God's green earth are you doing?" Agnes asked me.

I shrugged, and smiled as far as I could without hurting myself.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"Hurts to talk," I said without moving my lips.

"Where did you get that sweater?" Mama asked.

I shrugged.

"Somebody call Ellen," Beth said, writing down her answers furiously and barely looking up from the Boggle tray. "Get her to come over and bring some babies."

"What about June?" Granny asked, wrinkling up her heavily folded lips. "Don't be ugly."

"Fine. Get June too."

I was snipping the last of the pages off when June and Ellen came with baby Margaret. June clearly felt strange about having been asked over, but when Beth threw her a piece of paper and a pencil and told her to get her ass to a chair because this timer was going off *now*, she almost smiled.

All that was left of my notebook was a piece of cardboard and a metal spiral. I hammered the spiral out flat against the kitchen floor with the handle of the shears.

June had volunteered to make some tea when she saw me in the corner. "What are you doing," she breathed, "and what in sweet Jesus's name have you done to your face?"

"She fell," Beth hollered from the table.

Ellen peered around into the corner and her eyes grew wide.

June looked to me for affirmation, and I nodded. I leaned my head against the trashcan. June opened her mouth and then shut it again. "Are those stitches?" she asked sorrowfully.

I nodded.

"Well, Gabriel," she sighed, "where's the sugar?"

When my spiral was hammered into a perfectly straight line, I asked if anybody at the table wanted it.

Beth looked up. "Why, no, Gabriel, I just picked one of those up at the store yesterday."

Agnes snorted. "But thanks for asking."

I bent the wire into fourths and stuck it in the trashcan.

It was nine o'clock when we received the news from Elaine Brink that Booley was dead. We put Boggle away and Granny bade us gather in the living room for a rosary, and no one, not even June, protested.

Chapter Eighty-Three

It was easier to feel in the hottest sun. Rages boiled easier when they started out warm anyway. It was easier to remember the dead when you felt so close to dying yourself. Tragic deaths especially, because you felt particularly tragic. You could imagine suffocation and strangulation both with alarming clarity.

Each drop of sweat could carry away important parts of yourself. It was easy to feel that this perhaps warranted close inspection. To languish in it, to watch the drops trickle down your arm, to feel it like pins pricking and lament it seemed the most natural and logical way to make sure that something was not happening that could not be reversed.

Drink and seek shade, and complain with vigor, because it could all be gone in a moment.

In cold weather, it was different because even if all of you froze and died, it would still be right there with you.

Chapter Eighty-Four

After the brief baptismal ceremony, they rode home in the wagon. Karl was holding the reins; he no longer had trouble climbing up, although it made him wince.

They passed through town with a soft clop-clop of hooves in the cold dirt. They passed all the parishioners who lived near town, walking home from Mass. All the Scotch who went to the Baptist church were yet in services; the street was filled with Catholics.

She watched them with weary eyes and felt faint. She thought she saw a whisper-thin Katie, eyes luminous with recovery but ringed with dark circles, on the arm of her doctor taking light, dainty steps down the walk in front of the dry-goods store. She thought she saw it, but by the time she got home she was almost sure it had been a dream.

Chapter Eighty-Five

My brother's surgery started at 8:00 on the morning of the Fourth, and by 9:00 we knew the news: there was no permanent nerve damage. Once the infection cleared up and the muscles had had a chance to heal and relax, they would stop impinging on the nerve and he would get the feeling back in his fingers. But the doctor insisted that he stay until the sores on his arm were completely scabbed over, and he gave Michael, who was still sedated and groggy, a long and detailed lecture on the importance of taking all of one's medication. My daddy grinned so hard I thought his ears would split off. Mama never let go of my wrist the entire time we were waiting for his surgery to be over, when we heard the news, and then after when we went to see Michael in his room.

"Gabinel," Michael cooed at me.

"What?"

"Are you here for me? Am I finished?"

"You're finished. Your arm is fine."

He tugged on my fingers and blinked his eyes dopily. "Did they fix you?"

"Yes, I have stitches. See?"

"Cool." He was fast asleep.

Daddy stayed with Michael for the rest of the day; Wayne and Hershey would have to coach the Pirates in the championship game. Mama and I went back to Hope Springs. "I'm signed up for the concessions stand and the chicken supper *and* the dunking

machine," she said. "And maybe the carousel. I had almost forgotten."

Rosemary was in intensive care, having come through surgery beautifully, as her father told my father, but I didn't go to see her before I left. They would be keeping a close eye on her for the next 24 hours, and then she would be moved into a room. My daddy told me that her head looked like a football. That was all I needed to know.

The park road was lined with cars from six counties, that I counted, anyway. Someone had hired a band from Lexington, Kentucky, to play bluegrass in the Civic Center parking lot, and the music, which was excellent, was being piped to speakers all over the park. Everything that wasn't moving had giant bundles of balloons tied to it. Sno-Kones and funnel cakes and hot dogs were being parceled out already at 10:00 in the morning, which was when we got there. It was already 92 degrees. Because most of the crowd wasn't even from Hope Springs, there wasn't much respect for the dead in the air to subdue any of the proceedings. There was only gravel dust, and lots of it.

I stayed with my mama in the concessions stand, where she had to work until 1:00; the Tee-Ball championship was being played early in the day. There was an exhibition softball game and a bluegrass concert on the field between Tee-Ball and the Little League championships that night.

Maybe four hundred people asked me what I had done to my face. "She fell," my mama said.

One of those people was Cody the Tee-Ball player's mama, who came to the concessions stand every five minutes for more Sun-drop, only able to stand as close to the window as her stomach would allow, which wasn't very close. It was the third time before she finally mustered the courage to ask me what had happened, and did I have stitches?

"I fell," I said, and adding a new detail, "into a tree. I have sixteen stitches."

"Girl, what was you doing? Running blindfolded?" She took a gulp of the Sun-drop Mama handed her. "I swear, I cain't sit down without getting thirsty. I might as well just stand here by the concessions stand. It's closer to the bathrooms anyway." She set the cup down suddenly. "Oh."

Mama capped the Sun-drop bottle. "What is it, Carlene?"

"Well, *shee*-it," she said, scratching her head. Her face was glistening with a fine sweat. She picked the cup back up and took another sip. "My water broke."

"Are you serious?" Mama asked. "Do you need me to get you some help?"

She sighed. "Why, no. I can get myself to the hospital--" She squinted and grabbed the wooden ledge of the window, but her voice remained as colorless as if she were talking about lawn furniture. "--if it don't drop right here on the ground. Lord, this baby's *coming*. Well, hallelujah. I can barely squeeze myself behind the stupid steering wheel, and this is the *last day*. Hallelujah." She grabbed the ledge again. "Ooohhh."

Mama said, "Are you sure you don't want one of us to drive you?"

Carlene stuck her lower lip out and blew her hair off her forehead. "No, that's okay. It ain't coming in fifteen minutes, and that's all I need. But hey--could you see that Cody gets home okay? One of the other mothers can probably take him, but I just need to know he'll be okay."

"No trouble at all," Mama said. "Now get in the car and get yourself to the hospital."

I tried to watch some of the game from my limited panorama in the back of the concessions stand, but it was hard to see. I looked for little Luther Cordell on Cody's team, but I couldn't find him anywhere. His lumbering father was not in the bleachers, either, nor the mustachioed girl with the cigarettes. After I managed to count all of the batters who came through a rotation of nine, it was apparent that Luther was not there at all, unless he was sitting on the bench. I mentioned it to Mama, and one of the other workers, a mother herself, overheard me.

"Oh, those Cordells," she said, waving her hand. "Luther don't show up sometimes, because his daddy won't let him. Don't have a reason, really, just won't let him. It's sad. I don't know if there's a mama in that situation, or what. But I heard his daddy hollering last week during a game that if Luther couldn't hit the ball past first base, he wasn't going to get to play in the last game."

"Did he hit it?"

"I have no idea."

About half an hour later, Lo-rene showed up, so freshly powdered and perfumed that a faint cloud preceded her. She took one look at me and said, "Gabriel, my precious child, I *heard* that you took a bad, bad fall, and I see that it's true." She squeezed me hard, holding her fingers out wide to keep the manicure true. "And we have all just been devastated hearing about the Carson boy. It is *just* a horrible thing," she whispered, real tears of sorrow wobbling around in her mascara. "And to have to have a carnival today like nothing even happened. Lord, help us, what can we do down here but just pray to see the light? And Gabriel, can I ask, how in the Savior's name did you happen to make a travesty of your face by falling on a tree?"

"I was running blindfolded."

She looked carefully at me and touched my chin with a perfect nail. "I should have guessed as much. But now girls, I want you to know that Carlene Simpson is up there *having* a *baby* on the side of the road."

Slate Hunter Simpson was born at 12:20 P.M. in the backseat of his mother's car, right north of the entrance to the city park, where large crowds were leaving their cars to come to the carnival. Mothers shielded their children's eyes, but when the baby made its first cry, a huge round of applause and cheering

erupted. The paramedics helped, but Carlene did it mostly herself.

I didn't do my turn at the dart booth. I figured the sight of my face would scare the little kids who kept the industry alive, so I had Mama go and tell them so. She was reluctant to leave me on the bleachers alone, where we had decided to watch some of the softball game and eat a Sno-Kone before she had to go take up money at the dunking machine, but I told her it was okay. Cody's team had won the championship, and the breathless players were all either spinning in the dirt and screaming or storming the concessions stand for free Cokes. I sat with my head tilted back and let the sun beat across the stitchery on my face--despite the heat, it was a weak sun filtered by heavy clouds and it did not seem to burn. I knew, of course, that sun always causes damage even when you don't feel like you're getting burned.

I sat like that for a while, waiting on my mama, until I felt a small tug on my ankle. I shaded my eyes with my hand and peered down between the slats.

"Hi," Page said. She was holding a cherry Sno-Kone. "You look terrible."

"Yeah."

"I heard you fell."

"Uh-huh."

Her voice was tiny. "I heard about Booley." She wrinkled up her nose against the faint sun as she looked up at me. "I brought you something."

"Okay."

"Can I come up there and sit?"

"I guess."

She was up there with me in a flash, although quietly; she didn't call out my name or stamp on the bleachers so hard that she shook the folks at the other end. And when she sat, her cocoa-colored knees were pressed together. "I brought you a salve for your face. Here, hold my Sno-Kone. Don't lick on it, I had a cold this week, but if you want one I'll go get it for you."

"That's okay."

Page opened her purse and shoved some things around in it, and then drew out a flat jar with a screw-on lid. "It's made with I-don't-know-what, but it smells like cherries. Oh, it *does* have aloe in it, and a sunscreen, which you need. The last thing you want is to get burned on top of that."

"Page, I don't want gook all over my face."

"Lay your head down in my lap."

"Page, it'll look like I'm oozing from my sores."

"Lay down."

There wouldn't be room to lie down for long, as people started gathering to watch the softball game, but I kicked my

legs up onto the plank and laid my head in Page's lap. She unscrewed the lid off the jar and stuck her finger in the ointment, coming out with a fairly large glob of it.

"Go easy there," I said. "A little dab'll do ya."

"This is gonna feel *so* good," she said softly. "You will be *so* glad I came."

She touched the salve onto the long cut on my left cheek without flinching or asking any questions. It did smell like cherries, pleasant and faintly tingling, and as the sun spread over my face I felt like going to sleep.

"It's my mama's aunt's recipe," she said, "and Mama would always, always put it on me when I skint my knees, which, think about it, was all the time, but some days I felt like skinning 'em on purpose so she'd put this on me."

"Uh-huh," I said. "It smells good."

"Are you tingling yet?"

"A little." Her words were starting to echo in my head.

"I heard from my daddy again," she said, "and he's in Minnesota, God knows why, but he's found him a job up there, and he wants me to come up to see him."

"Are you going?" I shut my eyes and felt her fingers rubbing calmly over my cuts.

"I don't know. That's a long way and I don't have any money, and besides all that I'm kinda pissed off that he didn't call for so long, I mean, I had no idea where he was for all that time, and Mama, Lord, was she mad."

"You should go, Page. He's your daddy."

"Mmm."

"Flesh and blood." I was falling asleep.

"Gabriel." Page's voice was getting farther and farther from me. *Gabriel, my mama didn't meet Joe until I was two years old.*

"Hmmm?"

The night I was conceived there was a convention in town at the hotel where my mama was a maid, Engineers for a Bright Tomorrow--she's told me that a million times--Gabriel, are you listening? Mmm, you need lots of this on your forehead. . . . That's where she met my real father, cleaning his toilet, you know, is that crazy? But he told her she was beautiful and she fell in love with him right there. I think that's beautiful, I think my mama's beautiful too, and Lord, I put too much on that one spot. Let me spread it out some. He went back home, and she had me nine months later to the day, but she didn't tell him. At first. She got married to Joe and waited for years, but she was just so in love with my real father that finally when I was in first grade she wanted him to lay eyes on me, because she says my eyes was so much like his that she couldn't stand for him not to see it. Does it tingle? It should really tingle by now. So we moved to where he was. We moved to his town. We moved here. Do you remember when I first came, Gabriel? I didn't like you at all. Do you remember how we did everything together, though? God, our First Communion. . . . well, anyway, Joe came too but

not at first. He got mad a while and left, but he came back eventually, of course he left again this time, after the first time he ever saw my mama and my real daddy together, in our kitchen, you know? I really love Joe, by the way, he's my daddy. He knew it all this time, I mean, he's not stupid, but he'd never actually put his eyeballs on it before, and that makes it all different, which I know you understand, Gabriel. And how did you fall? I heard you hit a tree.

When I woke up, the softball game was in its third inning, I was lying with my head in my mother's lap, and Page was gone.

"You smell good, sleepyhead," Mama said when my eyes opened. "Like cherries."

The park was so full by the time the Little League championships started that it hardly felt like a real game. Plus, it was the last night of revival, and the singing was loud and joyful from the tents. That was no scheduling accident. Total strangers lined the fence, dripping Sno-Kone juice and funnel-cake sugar onto the field. Total strangers crowded onto the bleachers and so I had to sit up. I was actually almost touching the woman next to me; she had looked at my face with utter curiosity and so it was hard to be almost touching her. I heard somebody below me say that it had got up to 102 degrees that day, and it felt like it still. Soon Beth and Agnes and

Ellen and Joe arrived, adding more hot weight to the creaking stands, although we could not all sit together. The four of them found seats on the bottom row.

The scoreboard was draped with red and blue banners, carefully staple-gunned so as not to obscure the ever-accurate ball and strike tally. This being the Fourth of July and all, we started with a bottle rocket fired off the pitcher's mound and then were prodded by the tape over the PA to join in The Star-Spangled Banner. Boy, and everybody did. They stuck their Sno-Kones into the links of the fence while they put their hands over their hearts and they opened their mouths wide--even during "land of the free." It clashed with the sound of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" which was marching up the hill from the tractor-pull pit. Cheers rose at the end of the anthem, and as they waned, a deep droning voice came over the PA: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 1991 Hope Springs Little League championships. Tonight's home team is the Pirates, coached by Wayne Barfield and Charlie Sullivan. They face the Jays, coached by Jerry Wilson and sponsored by Futures. Remember, folks, your *Futures* in August County." The announcer cleared his throat. "And now we'd like to ask for a moment of silence in remembrance of Booley Carson, who was taken from this world yesterday before his time, and who will be sorely missed."

After an appropriately ceremonious coin toss by the umpires at home plate, it was determined that the Pirates would be the home team. Mama frowned; we were sitting on the away side.

Wayne, who had called tails, nodded in satisfaction and went back to his dugout to huddle with his players, narrowly avoiding a festive bunch of balloons which was swinging down over the entrance. Hershey was inside talking to them already. He was dressed in nice khaki pants and a green shirt and looked like he'd just come from the shower, but his eyes were puffy.

Jerry Dog Wilson was through talking to his players. They were sitting in their dugout meditating, although I saw one reach out and crush a roach with the end of his bat. Jerry Dog was taking a piece of gum out of its wrapper. It was odd because it seemed that gum was part of him, that it came up like cud from some extra stomach and was endlessly recycled, but, no, it was Big Red like ordinary humans bought. Jerry Dog let the wrapper twirl to the ground. The first chews were strong and slow, getting the gum all moist and ready to submit.

His boys were up to the plate first. Jerry Dog started with his three biggest players, including his son Abram, because he knew it would not be my brother they were facing on the mound. Tanner McDonald was pitching, and he was so nervous about throwing the ball in front of such a big crowd that he couldn't stop grinning.

His first throw was a wild ball, and he grinned like a possum. A litany of encouragement began pouring from the bleachers and the fence: "Make it *be* there!" "Let it fly!" "Keep your arm good, son." In the balcony above the concessions stand, where no children were allowed that evening, stood the

four-foot-tall gold trophy that would go to the winner. Tanner kept glancing up at it and adjusting his cap on his head.

On the second pitch, closer to the strike zone, the batter popped the ball up high in the air, high over Tanner's eager grinning head. He caught the ball without even having to move his feet, and the cheering was deafening. When he threw the ball to Lucas, the catcher, so that Lucas could throw it back to him, his shoulders seemed straighter, his chest more like a tiny barrel.

From that point on, the game was a tug-of-war. Tanner would throw solid pitches to the bottom of the strike zone and fool a batter, and then he would get ripped for a double. The Jays got one runner home in the first on a single by their left-fielder before Tanner struck out the last man. When the Pirates came to bat, they were facing a tougher pitcher in Abram, and a drill-martialed defense that squatted and popped up and retreated and squatted again in time and with strange chanting, but they still managed to get runners on base. And when they did, Hershey would emerge in his khaki pants from the dugout, drawing a tangible collective female energy wave from the seats as he clapped his hands together and kept a sharp eye on where the pitcher was going to throw. Hershey got one runner home by lighting a fire under him to tease the catcher and run for the hills. The catcher flailed the ball wildly into centerfield trying to catch him at second base, and the runner rounded the bag, touched

third, and slid across the plate in a cloud of dust. The crowd roared.

Sno-Kones dripped from every side of the field, and you could hear both the revival tent wailing and the fiddle band playing from the pool deck. Every runner, every strike, every out was cause for excitement and two-fingered whistling.

Lucas Gooch's cheering section, the skinny young mother and her greasy husband and mudsucking baby, were planted on the front row, and the husband kept sticking his blackened fingers in the fence and rattling it, shouting, "The ball's good, Lucas! Ball's good! Show 'em what you got!" The baby had on a little blue shirt with red and white stars over its rubber pants, and scarcely had it been placed in the gravel when it made for a crumpled Sun-drop can under the high back planks of the bleachers.

Jerry Dog was wound so tight that you could watch the blood travel from his heart up to his brain and back again. His movements were jerky and his gum-chewing regimented. His assistants, dressed in their tight shorts and shirts, had little American flag pins affixed to their caps.

After the first inning, tied 1-1, the game continued almost tit for tat, but the Jays seemed to maintain a slightly building edge. They had two more runners in the second inning than we managed in the bottom half, and they posted a run to our zip. But even as he struck out the last Pirate batter, something seemed to be wrong with Abram Wilson. He was white as a sheet.

"Look at him," my mama said. "He's absolutely terrified."

Abram's eyes were flickering all over the sidelines, where the clusters of shouting men were thick. But with the last batter out, he jumped off the mound and made tracks for the away dugout, pulling his cap off his head in relief.

Wayne and Hershey huddled over Tanner McDonald before they sent him back out to the mound for the top of the third, and Tanner looked sober as he emerged.

Abram Wilson was behind the away dugout, throwing up.

That entire end of the bleachers pushed toward the other because the woman on the corner nearly got hit with the contents of Abram's stomach. Beth, from her position on the bottom row, looked up at me to see if I was appreciating the spectacle. I kept my hand over my mouth.

"Good Lord, where is his mother?" Mama asked.

The potbellied man in the aquamarine lawn chair who always sat on the Jays' side was watching Abram; Jerry Dog, who was prepping his first batter for the third, was not. The potbellied man got up and poked his nose into the dugout and said something to his son, the Jays' second-string pitcher. He told him to step outside the fence and bring an extra glove with him; onlookers respectfully cleared an avenue by the fence for the father and son to warm up the throwing arm.

Abram looked up weakly at them from where he had collapsed onto the dirt; the woman whose feet had nearly been splashed had leaned over and was tenderly holding his forehead.

The Jays wasted no time loading up the bases on a single and two walks before Tanner had the chance to iron out his pitch and get it in low and straight. Jerry Dog danced in paroxysms of joy, clapping his hands to bring up his fourth batter, who was . . . Abram. Jerry Dog stopped clapping and looked around for his son.

The woman who was holding Abram's sweaty head called out, "Over here."

Hershey strode out to the mound to have a brief and grave talk with Tanner, who had spotted Abram and was staring and pointing in brotherly terror.

"Son," barked Jerry Dog with a terse smile, "what in blazes are you doing over there?"

Abram could not respond, and he inched closer to the woman. She said, "Coach, he's had a little accident."

Jerry Dog's face blanched, and it was clear that the first accident he'd thought of was not retching in the gravel. He peered over the fence, and the woman pointed to the little pile of rocks that had been pushed over the offending spot, and he sighed in relief.

"Is *that* all," he said. "Son, get over here and get yourself a bat."

The potbellied man was eyeing Jerry Dog keenly.

Abram stood slowly, and the woman seemed reluctant to let him go, but he stepped gingerly over the pile of rocks and came

back through the fence, where his father was waiting for him with the longest aluminum bat they had.

"Go to it, boy," Jerry Dog said. "They're going to call delay of game."

Abram dragged the bat to the plate through the dirt.

"Pick the bat up, son." Jerry Dog laughed with incredible brevity.

Abram pulled himself to the plate and hoisted his bat, his face the color of the inside of a cucumber.

Tanner hesitated to throw. His little mouth hung partway open as if to ask Abram, "Really, should I?", but Abram only hung there miserably and awaited the pitch.

It was a good one. Whatever Hershey had said to Tanner had pinned his elbow where it ought to be, and as it struck the catcher's mitt with Abram watching woozily, some jokers out behind centerfield set off firecrackers. The whole crowd cheered.

"Two more!" cried the Pirates' fans. Tanner's mother stood and cupped her hands around her mouth: "Fire it in there like you mean it!"

He did. The next two pitches weren't fast, and Abram might have hit them if he had tried to move his arms, but they landed in the picture-perfect center of the plate uncontested and the umpire doubled himself over to call Abram "*Ouuuuuuuuut*!"

Jerry Dog patted his son's shoulder as he passed him returning to the dugout.

Hershey pounded his fist into his palm and hollered, "Yes! Now do it again!"

Tanner's eyes were all afire as he threw to the next batter. His first pitch didn't have much zing on it, but it was headed low, and the Jays' big Flint Farmer had to dig for it. He nipped the top of the ball, sending it dripping between second and short, where Justin Wright popped it to the second baseman, who flung it with all his heart for first.

"Out!" cried the first-base umpire as Flint stretched mightily for the bag with his lead foot.

The cheering was stout and Sno-Kone juice flew as the Pirates came in from the field. Jerry Dog spat.

Abram, sitting outside the dugout in the corner it made with the fence, seemed devastated that the top of the inning had come and gone. He shrunk with each wave of noise that came from the stands. When more firecrackers were set off beyond centerfield--and the cops who were stationed in the parking lot headed out there to see who was lighting the damn things--Abram shut his eyes and buried his head in his knees.

Beau Finch, Jan's son, started swinging a weighted bat in the on-deck circle. The score was still 2-1 as the bottom of the inning was about to get underway.

The potbellied man ushered his son back toward the dugout; they had stopped throwing to watch Abram bat. "Hey, Wilson!" he hollered. "It's Colby's time to pitch."

Jerry Dog pretended not to hear, looking for Abram. "Son, let's go! Time to throw! Where the hell--"

"Your boy is sick," said the potbellied man. "We're up a run. They ain't hitting worth a damn today anyway. Let Colby pitch."

One of Jerry Dog's assistants, having spotted Abram wilted in the corner, trotted tightly over to the fence to have a look at him. Catching this out of the corner of his eye, Jerry Dog turned around to have a look himself, and although he tried to avoid looking at the potbellied man, it was hard since he was leaning his gut right over Abram's head.

"Let my boy pitch," said the potbellied man, and the carnival sounds began to die away as everyone who was watching tried to glean a better listen.

"Abram, get up," Jerry Dog barked. "This is the championship game, son. This is it. Is this how you want everybody to remember you?"

"He's sick, damn it," Colby's father bellowed, his tummy shaking.

The woman who had cradled Abram's head after he threw up stood up and marched over to the fence, but didn't say a word.

"Abram is on the roster today," Jerry Dog said, speaking to the man's belly and not his face, "and he will pitch. Them's the rules." He put his hand against the gate as if to keep the man out.

The potbellied man turned a brutal shade of red, his jowls becoming prickly-looking where they sunk into his chest. He took his son by the shoulders and set him aside, and he strode away from Jerry Dog toward the outfield, where the fence was shorter. The crowd of men along the fence began to hoot in support, and they backed away to let him pass.

The home plate umpire heard the commotion and took off his mask.

The potbellied man got to the place where the fence was as low to the ground as it was going to get, which was still not all that low, and he swung one leg over. It was an ugly, awkward sight.

Mama shut her eyes as the crowd around us rose to its feet. "I wish your father were here," she said. I looked down the bleachers and saw Beth, whose hands were on her hips, laughing her ass off.

The man was stuck halfway over the fence, his leading leg wiggling in the air and his gut punctured by the points of the link tops, but the crowd rushed to his aid. Several men put hands into the mound of flesh and pushed it over. The man righted himself on the inside after tripping a bit on his tennis shoe, and he pulled his shirt back down as far over his stomach as it would go.

Jerry Dog frantically pulled at Abram's shirt, but the boy was as green and as small as he could be, sinking down into the dirt and hoping to disappear.

The potbellied man strode angrily toward Jerry Dog, all his ample points of weight swinging around inefficiently as they gained momentum. "*You*, sir," he cried, "are going to let my boy pitch!"

Jerry Dog kept his eyes every possible place that wasn't the potbellied man. He signaled to the umpire quickly, motioning to him to come over there to arbitrate.

But it was too late.

The potbellied man hollered, "Take your boy out!"

Jerry Dog did not respond, and all his assistants on the other side of the field began trotting meaningfully over to his side.

"Take him out!"

Jerry Dog turned his back on the man.

The crowd broke its silence and began to roar.

All the emotion in the potbellied man escaped in one apelike cry of dominance.

He was on Jerry Dog's back in a second, heaving his weight up into the air and landing his massive tummy square in the middle of Jerry Dog's spine. Jerry Dog lurched to the ground, lying flat on his stomach, his arms out wide, whatever breath had been in his lungs utterly gone.

The potbellied man rolled off him, not on purpose, but from the sheer inertia of his body mass.

Wayne and Hershey scrambled to get the boys off the field, Jays and Pirates alike.

One of Jerry Dog's henchmen raised his fist high in the air and landed it smack in the soft pillow of the potbellied man's jowls. It made a sickening thud, and the man fell backward into the fresh lime of the first-base line.

Jerry Dog struggled to get up, embarrassed, but had no wind. He flailed a reddening arm in the direction of the potbellied man, who was losing consciousness as the assistant pummeled him a second time in the chest.

The crowd was everywhere, up, off the bleachers, back on again, screaming, cheering. Parents whose children were in the game were rushing the dugouts to get them out. The umpires were upon the group of men in an instant, pulling them away from each other and yelling for the cops to forget about the goddamn firecrackers and get some *weapons* up here on the field. The concessions stand struggled to meet the sudden demand for Cokes.

It was over almost as quickly as it had begun. Jerry Dog lay flat and sick. The potbellied man's eyes did not open. Abram stared dully at the whole scene, and Colby came over and sat down beside him.

When the dust cleared, the umpires had dragged the unconscious man to the dugout and called the paramedics, and had rolled Jerry Dog over and held his arms up above his head until he was breathing normally. Wayne and Hershey were in solemn discussion with the third-base umpire that the crowd on that side of the field was straining to hear. The home-plate umpire joined

the discussion, and after a few minutes headed off the field to chat with the men upstairs in the balcony.

It seemed like a long, electrically charged time before the PA began to crackle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," came the deep, droning voice, "the Little League Association wishes to announce that in no way can we condone this type of behavior at a sporting event. Sports is about learning to participate and cooperate in a spirit of fairness and sportsmanlike conduct. Therefore this game will not continue. It has been declared a forfeit on the part of the team instigating the unsportsmanlike behavior. This year's championship is awarded to the Pirates."

After a stunned second, there was loud cheering, mostly, I presumed, from out-of-town spectators. Just as the cops were arriving back at the field to assess the situation, firecrackers went off again behind the outfield. I heard a loud cry, and saw the mother of the mud-eating baby scoop him up and rip a flattened Coke can from his fingers. Blood was running down his tiny chin.

Hershey and Wayne looked tired, but they lined up their boys to give handshakes to the Jays, who were milling around their dugout in disbelief.

"And," came the voice again over the PA, "in light of the events that have transpired, there will be no awards ceremony."

"Good, gracious, Lord," said my mama.

The crowd began to bleed away into the dark, waiting for the men of the Kiwanis Club to set up the huge fireworks display in centerfield. We just wanted to go home. As we crossed the park to our car--the firecrackers popped everywhere--I saw, walking alone ahead of us, the old umpire, Peanut Springer, carrying a lawn chair in one hand and a Sno-Kone in the other. He was licking it slowly and serenely, careful not to let it trickle into his beard. Perhaps he had been there at every game of the season; I simply had never remembered to look for him. I kept watching him to see what kind of truck he would drive, but he must have been parked far away, because he was still walking long after he had advanced too far into the dark for me to make him out anymore.

The last I saw Hershey, he was with Wayne and carrying the giant winners' trophy in one hand, swinging it back and forth as they walked.

To get home was like letting out a big breath I'd been holding in a long time. The sky was dark on the Fourth of July, and full of cheap fireworks, I thought, as I crawled into the soft goodness of my bed and drifted away with the shadows of the trees falling on my quilt.

Chapter Eighty-Six

Every good Southern town has a party at least once a year, and the best of them have it in the summertime. There is nothing malodorous or sticky about Southern sweat when you're not in a car without air conditioning, all pantyhosed and shaved to go to church. If you're outside in a T-shirt and hauling watermelons from a truck bed to a picnic table, sweat is like gentle rain. It precedes laughter.

Every good Southern town appreciates the wane of the day into purple night, and takes the appropriate precautions against mosquitoes. The best parties start here and end up in blackness under the stars. Someone brings fireworks and launches them up over the quiet trees, and gazes follow them high into the sky, sweet and drowsy. Good Southern parties end with silent prayers of thanksgiving for the watermelon and bright colored reflections in the surfaces of skyward eyes.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

She had hidden her new boning knife in the loft of the barn. Now she wasn't sure she could climb up the ladder anymore; she was weak. She tried it in the cold afternoon, carrying with her a blanket and a rosary, and when she finally was able to crawl into the hay, she was lovely and dewy with perspiration and the barn was spinning around her. She lay against the straw with her legs parted wide, wondering, *Will it be despair if more blood comes from between my legs than from just below my heart?* When the spinning slowed down, she stood carefully and brushed straw from her lap. She snapped the blanket in the air several times to remove dust, holding two corners, and then she laid it out over the straw to make a pallet. The boning knife was stuffed in the hay just behind it, and she placed the rosary on top of the blanket.

She had to climb back down. Anja had a fever that day and needed someone to keep vigil with damp cloths. It took her ten minutes to get down, clinging to the sides of the ladder and squeezing her eyes shut.

Chapter Eighty-Nine

Did bellies grow at the same rate that colanders filled? It all seemed to come from the same place, the same universal garden that would not say no to weeds or to corn, to dandelions or to squash. There was always sun, there was always rain, there would always be seeds. In any drought lay some threat of green.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

On July 5th my mama took me to see the lady she had told me about, the psychiatrist, in Middlefield. Mama waited with me in the waiting room, but of course I went back by myself. The lady was short with tremendous rolls of flesh hanging over the belt of her skirt, although her face might have been pretty but for a moustache. The room was stark white and had lots of engravings of flowers with their botanical names on the walls. One hung so crooked that I couldn't believe she hadn't noticed; she must just not have cared. She didn't inquire about my face, anyway. She asked me lots of questions about whether I thought I slept too much, had I been frightened of anything as a child, who was the disciplinarian in my family, and was I having sex. I answered dutifully to each; I thought the proper answer to the last question was no. Each answer I had prompted furious scribblings of her pencil on her clipboard, and though each one took only a second, there were so many questions that by the time the hour was up we had not yet talked. This didn't seem to bother her. She shook my hand as I left.

We picked Michael up from the hospital, since his scabs were all solid and crusty again. When I walked into his room, he bounced off the bed and hugged me. "You must have really been suffering," I said. Mama raised her eyebrows, and I noticed how tall he was getting; we were almost eye to eye. As we left the building, Mama told him, "If I *ever* see you picking at that arm, I will cut your fingers off." Michael said that now that

baseball was over and he could spend every day at the swimming pool, the chlorine would help it heal. Mama rolled her eyes. I didn't check at the front desk to see about Rosemary, but I found myself glancing around in the halls as we were leaving.

That night the Parish Council met without Father Smiley and held a vote on whether or not to keep him at St. Mary's, although they knew that the vote didn't mean a patoot if Bishop Zelniecz came down from Nashville and said Father could stay. But Daddy, and some others, thought it would be a good idea to see where things stood, regardless. They voted 28-15 to get rid of him. Percy Davis stood up at the end and reminded everybody that this vote didn't affect a damn thing.

It was Friday when Booley's body came back to Hope Springs from Nashville; his name went up on the blinking arrow sign out in front of the funeral home at noon. The funeral home was on the highway at the highest point in town, so it was about the first thing you saw when you drove in from the north. The sign blinked when there was a body in the house. Back when they first put it up, when I started high school, Mama had been just appalled that anybody could be so tacky, but later on she changed her mind. "I know it's awful, but it's nice to be able to drive by and keep up with who's come and gone--especially if you're supposed to take a casserole to the family's house, which for Minnie Kluesner I completely didn't do because nobody told me she was dead."

I knew I would have to go to the funeral on Saturday. I picked out a dark dress to wear, which was really too heavy for

the dense, hot weather we were having, but a funeral was a funeral. My hair was too heavy, too, but I had to let it down because my face looked so bad.

My daddy took a day off from the bank, and he and Mama took me up to the funeral home and stayed with me for the service. Daddy had been Booley's employer for several years, of course, but I could tell he had reservations about my being there, and he kept me under his big arm like a little chick under its mother's wing. It felt nice and warm, not that I needed to be any warmer when it was 102 degrees outside. Every soul I'd ever gone to school with was there in the parking lot waiting to enter the spacious chapel in the rear of the building. Most weren't crying, but lots of the girls had Kleenexes in their hands, and some were starting to get teary-eyed. I saw Rosemary's father standing solemnly near the hearse.

I had heard that Booley's body looked so bad that the casket was going to be kept closed, but that his mama had asked them to fix him up as best they could so she could look at him before they laid him under at Greenlawn. Mama said that the Carsons had hardly been able to recognize him, and that nearly made me sick.

When we got through the doors I could see Mrs. Carson up at the front of the big room. Her face was gray and wet but mostly covered by dark aviator-type glasses, and her husband was holding her up on one side as she greeted mourners by the casket; a woman I didn't know was supporting her on the other. She was not speaking to the well-wishers as they crossed in front of her to

touch the casket and return to their seats, but merely nodding and gripping their hands one by one.

"I don't want to go up there," I whispered into my daddy's armpit.

"Just come with me," he said, not letting me out from under his wing. "You don't have to say anything."

"Yeah, honey," Mama agreed, "we need to go up there and let her know we're here, but we'll be quick."

It took twenty minutes to get to the head of the line. The whole front of the chapel, normally brown and plain with a simple cross suspended from the ceiling, was covered in flowers of every imaginable color, filling the air with a strong, sweet scent. The pall over the casket was a huge arrangement of what must have been a hundred red roses. I was suddenly very cold.

Mrs. Carson noticed us when we were about three people back, but kept on gripping hands unsteadily and leaning on her husband. Daddy cleared his throat about ten times before we were finally facing her. He scooped me into place with him as he extended his other hand to Mrs. Carson; Mama stood behind. "Doris, Stan, we're very sorry about your loss," he said in his sonorous voice; I didn't know what to look at or if I should speak.

Mrs. Carson took a deep, shuddering sigh and nodded her head. Then she reached out her plump hand to my face, touching the scabs on my cheeks, and furrowed her brow up tight. Nodding again, she said, almost fiercely at first, "He loved you, child." Her nose was dripping, and she smiled with wobbly lips. "He just loved you to death."

I nodded, and we moved on.

We sat in one of the back pews for the funeral. Once everybody had come through the receiving line, which was about an hour after we'd passed the casket, the organist started playing "Amazing Grace." The muffled tears being cried all over the room broke loose and became sobs. Mrs. Carson seemed to wilt, and nearly had to be carried to the front pew to sit down.

The pastor from the Carsons' church got up and spoke a while about how we were not supposed to understand the suffering God wills us to endure, but that we should rejoice when we know that one of our own has gone to be with the Lord. When he finally surrendered the pulpit, the organist broke into "In the Garden," and as everyone started singing I felt big tears gathering force in the corners of my eyes.

As the last verse died, a clean young man with a sharp face and a cowlick, a cousin of Booley's, came up to the front with a piece of paper in his hand. The space around his eyes was hollow and dark as if he'd been up all night. "I've been asked to speak a few words," he said softly, "and I just thought I'd share this poem my sister and me wrote for Booley. We're not poets or nothing like that, but this is just from our hearts.

You went away from us too soon
We're crying on this afternoon.
The Lord decided it was time
To take you to his home sublime.
Surely you must feel our love
You're watching us from above.

For you're in heaven now we know

Where Jesus's healing waters flow."

At that point, Doris Carson broke into a low, chilling wail that brought the young man's poem to an abrupt stop. He paused while Stan Carson put both his arms around his wife and squeezed her so hard that the sound died out, and then resumed his reading in a shaky voice.

"To see you again we must wait

For our turn to enter the heavenly gate.

But we wish you were here today

And all our sorrow would go away.

But we'll just wait sadly through the night

While you stand so proud in Jesus's light,

Never feeling any pain

Until in heaven we meet again."

He folded his paper and stepped down.

"Oh, to lose a child," Mama whispered sadly. Daddy had me nearly in a headlock.

After the last hymn, the pallbearers grimly lifted the casket off the metal stand and bore it down the aisle, followed by the family, who huddled together and somehow propelled themselves forward at the same time that they appeared to be shrinking back. The casket passed by very close to me as they neared the door in the back of the chapel; I could see the grain of the wood very clearly.

"I don't want to go to the cemetery," I whispered.

Daddy shook his head. "We won't."

We stood outside in the miserable sun as the procession of cars formed behind the hearse, each turning on its headlights, because we wouldn't be able to get out of the parking lot until it left. The cars crawled sadly along, led by a police escort, and as they inched onto the highway, oncoming traffic pulled over in deference and let them pass.

Chapter Ninety

The last night she wanted to see fell cold and early. She stole out to see the stars settle into the dip of the purple curve over the horizon, milky and soft, where the trees were black. She took one of the young horses from the barn, stopping first to give Frau Bette another pill in her feed, and, upon pausing to think, another. She touched her lips to the smooth old nose and then was gone.

When she reached St. Mary's she could see her breath. The horse waited patiently and somberly in the dark without so much as a snort while she went inside the church, his own breath clouding the air.

She had thought there would be no one there. She had thought it would be dark. But a single candle flickered in the chancel, fitfully illuminating the features of a man who turned suddenly when the door closed behind her.

"Hello?" came his voice in the dark.

She didn't speak at first, not until she could see him clearly, and gradually her eyes adjusted and she was able to make out his round young face in the small light.

"It's just me," she said then, just loud enough for him to hear her on the altar. "It's only me."

She saw his eyes squint into the light, trying to see her, and she saw the scaffolding behind him in the shadow of the high arch. Then his eyes relaxed in recognition of his fellow parishioner. "I was just working in here tonight," he said

softly, and the words echoed in the emptiness, "because I . . . I had in my mind how the topmost angels ought to work, and. . . ." She watched his Irish face turn ruddy in the deep shadows. "I didn't want to wait."

She nodded, sure he couldn't see it.

"Did you come to pray?" he asked bluntly. "Because I can leave, it's nothing really at all, I could work it out at home and paint later."

"No," she said, "go ahead and climb up, I won't be long. Besides, I am grateful for the candle."

She knelt in the first pew, saving her first words to heaven until after the young man got safely up to the top. He went slowly up the scaffolding bearing the tallow in one hand just as surely as if he were walking along the ground, and then settled himself easily on the board rigged across the wide emptiness of the arch. She would have been queasy seeing it, except that there was no longer any reason to be queasy. She merely was fascinated as he stood up on the board and pressed himself into the plaster surface, nearly three stories above the ground, and began to paint by the fleeting light of the candle.

Oh, Mother Mary, she began, *stay me.*

The board creaked as the young painter shifted weight.

Greta, Therese, Joseph, Friedrich, Anja, Edward. The painter never looked down. He kept his face inches from the painting surface.

To thee do I cry, poor banished child of Eve. I mourn, I weep, I leave my children for you in the deepest valley of tears.

The tiny light cast no help upon the crucifix over the altar. She could not make out the face of the Lord.

Lead me not into temptation, the bright sky full of stars and the arms of the trees! I know that the blood runs out of my heart and never back in! I know I cannot give what I do not have!

She lifted her damp eyes to the drowsily lit arch, sweet and almost disappearing in the dim fluttering light, and saw the face of an angel appear stroke by stroke, its mouth beginning to utter its first word of praise. She sighed. Here, in this church, her children would look upon the face of that angel whose creation she witnessed and think of her. Her children's children would see it, and her children's children's children, and on and on forevermore. She clung to that as she lifted herself from her knees and disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter Ninety-One

The Sunday *Arrow* ran a copy of the poem read at Booley's funeral, signed, "We love you, we miss you, Mama and Daddy, Family & Friends." I read it over breakfast and spilled orange juice on it accidentally. We all, my mama and daddy and brother and I, lingered some over the paper that morning together; my mama ran her hand through my ratty hair as Daddy read aloud a 4-H article about the cattle market that was full of misspellings, pronouncing it as it was written and not as it was supposed to be. Michael dropped a little piece of bacon on his arm and when he tried to retrieve it Mama thought he was picking off a scab, and nearly whopped him over the head with the Piggly Wiggly section.

Just as we were going out the door to church, the phone rang, and I ran back inside to get it. "Hello?"

"Hello, may I speak to Gabriel?"

"This is."

"Gabriel, this is Father Smiley."

Daddy was holding the door open for me, and I held up a finger so he would wait. "Yes?"

"I'm glad to see you changed your mind."

"What, were you just going to call over here and see if I was dead?"

"Gabriel, I prayed for you and I knew you were all right."

"Uh, my daddy's waiting for me so we can go to church."

"Wait--I called to ask if you'd play the organ for Mass today. Lilah has quit."

"Oh." Daddy waved his hand at me; we were a little late because we'd spent too much time on the paper. I chewed my tongue for a second and then sighed. "Uh, okay. I will. I guess."

"Wonderful. I've laid out the songbooks for you so you won't have to look for them during Mass."

When I hung up the phone, Daddy asked me who it was, and I told him. "Lilah quit," I said as we got into the car. "I told Father Smiley I would play Mass today. Is that a bad thing?"

"I thought you didn't play for anybody but the television set," Daddy said.

"Nobody can see my face from up in the choir loft."

We all sat quietly for a minute, and then Daddy put on his seat belt. "You're playing for the Lord, not for Father Smiley. There's nothing wrong with that."

The bells were ringing, and I was to start playing when they stopped. I sat at the organ and held my left foot suspended over the pedals, and kept my right foot on the volume. My hands didn't even tremble. I didn't care. The bells died, and I launched into "Holy, Holy, Holy," with a daring rev of the volume pedal. And I played it fast. I wasn't about to let the

congregation sing at Lilah's pace; Father picked up the lead and matched me note for note, singing his heart out all the way down the aisle. People craned their necks to see what the hell had got hold of Lilah.

Mama sat up there with me and handed me songbooks, which was helpful because Father had lined them up near the railing, where I refused to go. It was enough that I was up there at all. I tried to keep my eyes on the music. I got through the opening hymn and the Alleluia before the gospel, although I missed a pedal once; I crossed my eyes at the cross-eyed angel.

Then it was time for Father's sermon. The church was a lot fuller than it had been the week before, in large part because people wanted to see if Father had got wind of the vote, and what he would do. The nuns were even there, all three of them; Sister Bernard was not, I noticed, significantly thinner. They spread themselves upon the very front pew, right under Father's nose.

There was no peaceful pause before the words came. As soon as his lips were square with the microphone they started. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," Father intoned. "Abraham Lincoln said it, of course, but *Jesus said it first.*" He put the microphone away from him in disgust and stepped down off the altar and into the aisle. "Where is the love in this church?"

No one knew.

"Who can stand in here and tell me that he or she is practicing the love of the Lord? Who can do it?"

Everybody looked around. Each person seemed insulted that he or she was not standing or expected to stand, but nobody was about to be the first one to do it.

"I am your minister," Father cried. He gestured at the scaffolding. "I cannot minister to a people who become angry over paint and plaster! I cannot minister to a people who won't sing songs just because they're new! I cannot minister to a people who won't come out of the past!"

He strode up and down the aisle then, throwing hard and fervent looks all over the room. "*Who*," he nearly whispered, "can tell me where the love of Jesus is?"

Then, like a rocket out of her seat, Sister Cecilia stood.

"I can tell you where it's not," she said coldly. "It's not in the sexual love of a priest for a young female parishioner."

I scrambled off the organ bench and went to the railing.

"It's not in secret lustful meetings with a woman," she said loudly, and I thought I could hear molecules of air banging together. Sister turned to face the entire congregation. "Yes, it's true. This man is a lecher."

The silence broke. Clarence Meisterand stood up, and so did John Whittington, both speaking at once, and suddenly the whole room was aroar.

"This is a Mass," Clarence was yelling, "not a talk show."

"Do you have any kind of proof?" John Whittington asked. "You better, because nun or not, a liar is a liar, and a gossip is a gossip."

"It don't matter," roared Clarence. "This ain't the place!"

Then everybody was standing up at once, yelling or trying to hear what was being yelled. The great arch of the high altar had never borne the shouting of so many people before, and the sound was so deafening I expected to see hunks of plaster fall through the scaffolding. Father Smiley stood in the middle of it all, in the center aisle, twitching, unsmiling, looking pale under his tan.

Finally he raised his arms at his sides as if he were starting the opening prayer. "*Stop it!*" he cried. The commotion died away and he lowered his arms slowly. "This is a Mass!" he boomed, though not without emotion in his voice, which was unusual. "A celebration of the Holy Eucharist!"

"This is a sham!" cried Sister Cecilia. "You are no man of God, and there's one among us who can tell it."

A steady drip came from the air-conditioning unit running along the walls of church. Something was leaking, and every one of us heard the sound of water plinking against metal.

Sister Cecilia was looking right at me.

She was staring. Some people seemed to think she was just staring up into the heavens; they turned to each other and whispered. But others turned their heads up to the choir loft to see what Sister was looking at. They looked at me and over me and past me in confusion. My scabby face felt three feet thick. I felt my mama at my elbow.

"What?" she whispered in my ear. "What is she talking about?"

"She's lying," I whispered back. "Oh, God."

Father Smiley looked up into the choir loft but never let his gaze fall on me.

"Wednesday," he said deliberately, lingering over the *n*, "the painters are coming. Now let's settle back down, everyone to his seat, and have a Mass."

Those who didn't walk out of church did just that.

The second the last hymn was over--there had been no vestiges of the hand-holding left at the Our Father--I could hear footsteps pounding up into the choir loft. It was Beth.

"Gabriel?"

I climbed down off the bench. My hands were shaking.

"Gabriel," Beth said breathlessly, "you should know what some people are saying about you."

"Who are some people, and what are they saying?" Mama demanded.

"Some people might be Sister Cecilia and Elaine Brink, for two," Beth said, "and--"

"Don't," I whispered. "I know what they're saying."

"Nobody believes it," Beth said, "at least I don't think they do."

"Oh, God," Mama was saying as she cracked eggs into the bowl. Tears were running down her face.

"Please stop that before Joe and Will get here," I said, "because I don't want them to know."

"They may have heard," Beth murmured, putting her hand gently on the top of my head. "Bishop Zelniecz is on his way down as we speak."

"I wanted Father to go," said Agnes, flour on her face, "but not like this. Why on earth did you ever go to see him, Gabriel?"

"He asked me to."

"When?"

"In confession."

"Did you see a psychiatrist in Middlefield?" Beth asked. "Because that's part of what's going around, and that you're having emotional problems."

"Thanks, Elaine," I said.

"I'm sorry," Mama whispered. She batted miserably at the eggs with a fork until Beth took the bowl from her and started to beat them herself.

"Nothing happened," I said.

"I know that, baby."

"Is Daddy going to be mad?" He had stayed behind at church to be part of the group that was awaiting the bishop's arrival.

"If he is, he better have someplace else to sleep."

Agnes made a nearly imperceptible whimper.

"Look at it this way--the important thing is that Father will have to leave," Beth said.

"That's *not* the important thing at all," Mama snapped.

Beth poured the eggs into the skillet silently.

Granny, humming to herself, washed her dining-room table over and over again.

Long after the biscuits were cold, Daddy came in the doors to announce that the bishop had ordered Father out of Hope Springs. "It's official." He looked very tired, and he didn't look at me.

"When does he have to be gone?" Mama asked.

"By Thursday, to give the bishop time to find him a new assignment."

Beth said, "He's going to *assign* him someplace else? After this?"

Daddy rubbed his eyes with his big, broad hand. "There just aren't enough priests in the South, Beth."

I spent the next three days poring over course offerings for the fall at the University of Tennessee. Mama was on me like a squawking mother hen almost every minute, asking if I felt okay, and did I need something to drink. Or something. I didn't. I just wanted to see what was in the book. Mama let Michael go off to the pool every day as long as he put sunblock on, because he hadn't picked up on any of what had happened in church other than that Father was in big trouble, and she thought it would be best if he were out of the house.

Rosemary came home from the hospital on Wednesday. That was also supposed to be the day that the painters came and started to redo the church building, but they had been called and told it was a mistake. I found out about Rosemary from Lo-rene, who was in the grocery store when Mama dragged me out there with her for the weekly shopping. She didn't want to leave me in the house alone, even though I explained to her that everything was all right.

Lo-rene pushed her buggy right up behind us before we noticed her, and that made her laugh. Her laugh lines cut deep into the thick layer of foundation she'd laid against her skin.

"Child, your face looks better," she said.

"A little."

"I hear the little Fairwell girl is going home today, even though she's pretty beat up," she said, tugging at her short shorts. "I knew she was your friend, so I thought I'd ask you."

"Oh, yeah, she's coming home," I said, and Mama looked at me sharply.

"Don't you worry about that face of yours," Lo-rene said. "You'll be lovely again. You won't need a stitch of makeup."

After we were through with the groceries Mama wanted to drive out to Ruby James's beauty salon to take her some canned beans and corn, since Mama'd had her hair cut there a week or so before and Ruby had told her that she hadn't planted any corn because she could never get it to stand the heat. As we drove out on the old highway to Pickensville, Mama asked me to point out where the wreck had been, and I did; there were a few skidmarks and the telephone pole had already been replaced. We passed the bridge and rode through Pickensville, which looked almost cheerful, in a forsaken way, in the clear sunlight.

A couple of cars were parked at Ruby's when we got there, and I hesitated with my hand on the door handle before I got all the way out of the car. Mama waited on me, and walked with one hand on my back and a jar in the other, plus two under her wing.

Ruby had a woman almost completely in rollers when she saw my face. "Well, I declare," she said, stopping with one strand of hair pulled taut between her fingers. "I had *heard* you met with a tree, and it appears to be true--hidy, Claire. Oh, goody, you brought me my corn. Just set it over there on the Coke machine, if you don't care."

Pearl was at the sink vigorously scouring the nearly bald head of an old woman, who was so short that Pearl was almost

pulling her head off its stalk to get her into the sink. Pearl squinted at me. "I'm not afraid to ask," she said, "how in thunder you could have run into a tree so hard as to nearly tear off your face." Now the woman in rollers was looking into the mirror at me.

"I was pushed."

"Pushed?! Who did the pushing?"

"I don't know. It was dark."

"Gabriel," Pearl said, digging her fingernails in hard, "that is a likely story. But, I can see you want to keep it to yourself, so fine."

"Them's stitches, ain't they?" Ruby asked, rolling the section of hair firmly and perfectly to the scalp.

"She's gonna be fine," Mama said, putting her arm around me.

"Well, that we're sure of," Pearl said, lathering. "She's bright and God-fearing."

"And as to this other stuff that's been going around," Ruby said meaningfully, pointing her comb at me, "we have told everybody that come in here that it *ain't true. Everybody.*"

"Lord's truth," Pearl said. "We've told 'em you's sweet and God-fearing."

I turned red under my stitches. "Thanks."

"Damn liars in this town." Ruby shook her head.

Mama touched my arm. "Well, Ruby, we ought to be going--hope you enjoy those. We've had so much to put up this time, just let me know if you need any more vegetables."

"Oh, and hey," I said, "how was your trip to see the Braves?"

Pearl snorted, and Ruby groaned. "*At*-lanta is the *most. God. Awful. Place,*" Pearl said.

"I don't know what I was expecting," said Ruby with a wave of her hand, misting the curlers, "but it was more of a crowd than you could shake a stick at, and I just was not comfortable with so many people touching me all the time."

"And not just any old people--it was *rude* people," added Pearl.

"Law, yes. Half of 'em watn't even Southerners, I know. *More* than half."

"Annie Davidson, bless her heart," said Pearl, "was spat upon."

"Some guy behind us," Ruby said.

"Well, how was the game?" I asked.

"Braves lost," Pearl said flatly.

"Watn't even close," Ruby echoed.

Pearl yanked the sprayer nozzle out from its repository and aimed it at the old woman's head. "From now on when I watch a Braves baseball game, it will be from my own couch."

Daddy reported at 8:00 that evening that Father Smiley was still packing to leave. He said that as soon as Father had

stuffed his last box into the U-Haul, he and several other Parish Council members were going to go over that night and take down the scaffolding in church. Percy Davis had suggested that they leave it up in case the Council voted to start renovations, but Clarence Meisterand had told him to shut up.

I wanted to see it happen. I slipped out of the house in the dark and walked the farm road in the hazy moonlight to St. Mary's, coming up from behind the church and convent through the woods. I saw the U-Haul van backed up to the convent driveway, and I stood at the edge of the trees to watch what was going on. Not much was. I waited for a glimpse of Father, but all I saw was John Whittington huffing back and forth between the van and the house with boxes of computer equipment.

The convent was all lit up, but the church was dark. The stained-glass saints, from the outside, looked to be composed of so many shades of black and nothing more. I crossed the school playground in the shadows and stood on the dark cement plot behind the church building, careful not to step into any of the pools of light thrown on the grass by the security lamps. The only one around seemed to be John Whittington, but it would not do to be seen at all.

I looked around me and over my shoulder just because it was dark and I was alone. I noticed that the back door to the church just behind me was open a crack. I reached out to touch it, not sure whether to shut it, wondering if anyone knew it was open. When I touched it, it didn't move. It had been propped open with

a rock. The heavy lock was turned so that the bolt probably would have caught the door anyway, as if somebody who had a key to church was leaving it open for someone who didn't. No light was seeping through the door.

I lined my eyeball up with the crack and looked inside. I couldn't see anything.

I stuck my fingers through the crack and pulled the door farther ajar. It was a new door into the sacristy, added just a few years before, so it didn't squeak.

The inside of the church was inky. The little back room where I was, the sacristy, wrapped around the end of church where the main altar was, opening onto the altar from doors on both the left and the right, and was where all the chalices and albs and candles and whatnot were kept, where the altar boys disappeared to during Mass when water or wine was running low. It was windowless. I stepped inside and let the door shut behind me. Once it had fallen against the lock and my breath grew quiet, I could hear. There was someone else here in the church, in the dark.

I was suddenly afraid. I was afraid to leave, and afraid to stay. I couldn't move.

I could hear someone else's voice, deep and quiet, humming; the longer I stood trembling in my spot the more apparent it was that there indeed was a light in the church, a tiny spot of light that flickered past the doorway into the sacristy, which appeared to me as a grayness only slightly less dense than black until my

eyes adjusted. Then I could see where the sacristy opened up onto the altar, and I tiptoed forward, manipulating my weight painstakingly with each step until I could tell whether or not each board under my foot was going to squeak.

The light was coming from high up, I could tell as it swung past the door. Someone was up on the scaffolding. I could hear the movement against the bars. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark and I became satisfied that I was alone in the sacristy, I moved into the doorway to church and looked up into the arch over the high altar. It was crisscrossed with the skeletal bars that made it possible to climb all the way up to the apex of the arch.

At first, I couldn't see.

Then my eyes found the tiny pinprick of light that shone up near the top. It was a flashlight.

A long board was strung across the scaffolding, bridging the entire high arch, and someone was standing right in the middle, more than twenty feet up in the air. He held the flashlight with one hand, and in the other he held a paintbrush.

I stepped out onto the altar, forgetting to be quiet. My eyes were beginning to see.

From the right side of church to the middle, on the high arch, there were no more angels in the plaster.

The man standing on the board was Father Smiley, working his brush feverishly, slapping beige paint across the old frescoes as fast as he could wave his arm. My little angel with the crooked mouth was already gone, covered over in what appeared to be gray

in the weak light but what I knew was the color of a manila envelope. I had seen the beige paint buckets stacked on the empty rectory carport.

Father was unaware of me. He plunged his brush into the bucket and tiptoed on the board to reach the plaster over his head. He seemed completely undisturbed by the height or the fact that the board wobbled under his feet. There was only a bar at his back to help him balance. My stomach turned over.

I saw a glob of paint fall from the brush; I heard it splat against the old wood floors.

My throat was dry.

Father reached up and slathered paint over a delicate singing face. The bow-shaped mouth, supplicant under softly closed eyes, was the first thing to disappear.

I gasped and made no noise, so I cleared my throat. "What do you think you're *doing?*" I rasped.

Father Smiley jumped. The board teetered, he grabbed for the support bar, and paint sloshed from the can and fell thirty feet to the floor.

When the sound of the board scraping against the bars of the scaffolding stopped echoing through the church, Father righted himself slowly. "Gabriel?"

"Come down from there. I can't look up at you."

"Gabriel," he called down, "don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

He set his flashlight at his feet. "There are some things we need to talk about."

I looked up at him incredulously, but I was sure he couldn't see it. "Throw the brush down."

"What?"

"Throw the brush down here, right now, or I'm going to get John Whittington. He's right over at the convent."

Father folded his arms and leaned on the bar. He was silent.

I paused, stung. "Or, I mean, I'll go get my daddy."

"Gabriel."

"Throw the brush *down*."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Like hell you can't."

His great thundering voice was painfully even and firm. "Don't talk that way in church."

"How dare you?" I said, tears springing to my eyes. "How dare you vandalize this church and then tell me to watch my mouth? You better start climbing down right now."

He did not respond, and I grabbed hold of the scaffolding with both hands.

"I swear to God," I said, "if you don't start climbing down right now, I'll pull this down with you on it."

He still did not move.

"I'm going to get Daddy," I whispered.

Still nothing.

I grabbed hold of the bars and gave them a mighty shake.

The bucket of paint came crashing down as the board tipped over, and Father grabbed hold of the bar just as his support crashed toward the ground. "*Gabriel!*" he roared. He was hanging by both arms from the top bar of the scaffolding, three stories above my head, with nowhere to put his feet. The board was caught halfway down, the flashlight shattered on the floor, and paint was everywhere.

I ran.

I took off across the playground toward the woods, and John Whittington did not look up from loading boxes.

I tried to run all the way home, but by the time I got to the old farm road I was heaving and I had to slow to a walk. When I finally staggered in my front door, I was completely out of breath but I was able to get across to Daddy that he needed to shake a leg and get over to church.

"It's Father Smiley," I gasped. "He's . . . hanging from the . . . scaffolding."

It didn't occur to me until after Daddy had called my uncle Joe and Clarence Meisterand and had blasted out the door that maybe that was the wrong way to put it.

It was nearly three hours before my father returned, and I spent those hours in my room choosing what clothes I would take away with me to college. I divided my closet into halves, one half to bring along, the other to leave behind. When it was done, I shut the closet door.

I went into the bathroom and leaned forward into the mirror, touching the scabs on my face; one was starting to peel off and I was careful to leave it alone. I was supposed to have my stitches out by the next Friday. Michael was lying in his room in the dark, unmoving, having suffered a royal sunburn at the pool that day. I wet a washcloth to take in to him. I heard my mother downstairs on the phone, calling Agnes and Beth and Ellen with the news that Father Smiley was dangling from the church ceiling, spattered in paint.

I got the tap water as cold as I could, so cold that it turned my skin white as I wrung out the washcloth. As I stood there wringing and staring at my face in the mirror, I felt something wet on my leg, and my heart stopped. I shut the door, undid my belt and shorts, and dropped them around my ankles. Checking my underwear, I found blood all over the crotch that was seeping onto my leg. I breathed a prayer of thanks to God and went into the bedroom to change clothes, and it was then I heard Daddy coming in the door. I pulled on some shorts, took the washcloth to Michael, who was now sleeping with his mouth open, and trotted down the stairs.

Mama was pulling on Daddy's arm and asking, "How much damage did he do?"

Daddy and Joe and Clarence had found Father a third of the way down the scaffolding, he told us. He had pulled himself hand-over-hand to the side and had wrapped his legs around the bars, but had not had enough time to get very far on the perilous climb down.

"I'm not sure what made him fall," Daddy said. "He wasn't talking."

I swallowed. "The archway is ruined, isn't it?"

Daddy passed his big hand over his mouth, rubbing at his chin, and there were tears in his eyes. "It looks like it, but we'll have to get somebody in here who knows about it to tell for sure."

Daddy had called the police to come get Father down, and when they got there and inspected the damage they asked if the parish would want to press charges. Daddy told them that he couldn't speak for the whole group, but his own personal inclination would be to lock Father up. Which was what they did.

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A few weeks after I'd heard that Rosemary had come home from the hospital, her mother called and invited me to their house; I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken to the woman. Her voice was quiet and not unfriendly as she asked me would I please come keep Rosemary company. It had been nearly a month since I had talked to Rosemary at all, but I said that yes, I would be there within the hour.

The air had been so heavy that whole day with a waiting rain that you could practically poke your finger at it and see drops fall. The clouds finally let loose as I was getting into the car, and by the time I got to Rosemary's it was raining cats and dogs. I smelled it, and I was soaked with it as I dashed onto her front porch, and I thought that it seemed so long since cool weather and skies that were porcelain blue instead of rolling and white--but here I was facing August, and fall would come after. It pretty much had to.

Rosemary's sober-faced mother met me at the door and took me upstairs to Rosemary's room. "I've kept the lights off in there," she whispered resignedly, "but I'm not sure why--I guess she's still got to lie on her back a lot, you know, and I don't want her to have to squint."

I went in by myself, and Rosemary was propped up on her pillows, reading a magazine.

"She won't let me have a light on," she said.

"I know."

Rosemary's face looked better than mine did--my scabs were coming off--although her left eye was still puffy and had stitches over it.

"It's awful about Booley," she said quietly, flipping forcefully through the pages of the magazine with her thumb.

I sat on the end of her bed, facing the wall.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you in the hospital," I said.

"He would have killed somebody eventually, though. He was an angry boy."

I sat there, just breathing and swallowing.

She sighed. "Angry."

I sat.

She sighed again and shut the magazine. "You know, Gabriel, I've been thinking, I--well, this surgery I've had and all, I don't know how long it will be before . . . before I don't need my parents or whoever to help me with stuff, and I was just thinking that maybe I should wait a semester to start school. Maybe I should go a semester at Columbia State or something, you know, just to get me started."

I nodded.

"But I will definitely, definitely be there with you in the spring. Or next fall. Definitely one of the two." She reached up and touched my hair with her long fingers. "You had a piece of fuzz," she said. "And I was thinking that you should have my

stuff I bought for the dorm room, because, I mean, I won't be using it. You can keep it until I get there."

"Okay."

"If you go ahead and get in a sorority, then you can pull me in when I get there."

I felt a scab on my face itching.

"Gabriel, I heard something about you--"

"It's not true."

"I know. I told the woman I heard it from that."

"Thanks."

The rain kicked up and pounded on the window, and we sat and listened to it for a long while. I felt her looking at me.

"Your face," she said finally. It wasn't really a question.

I nodded. "Yeah."

I saw the psychiatrist lady four more times before I left for school. She didn't seem to think that that was enough, especially since I didn't have a whole lot to say to her, and so she called the UT Health Clinic in Knoxville and arranged for another doctor to assume my therapy after I got to school. On my last visit to her, she emphasized the importance of my continuing the sessions for a while. "Gabriel," she said quietly, "I don't think you realize the cathartic benefits of counseling. You haven't let go yet. When you finally start to talk about the

things that bother you, it will hurt. It will be like bleeding. But you bleed a while, and then it stops, and then you have a wound, and it heals, and finally the scars fade away." She looked at my face and then seemed embarrassed to have spoken. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll go to the clinic," but I wasn't sure if I was telling the truth.

Hershey Crawford did not leave town after the Little League ball season was over. In fact, he continued to hold training sessions, just for fun, for Tee-Ballers and their proud parents through the beginning of August. He stayed at Wayne's right up until two days before classes started back at Vanderbilt, which was a week before I was supposed to leave for Knoxville, and I knew this because Michael and Tyler Barfield went to the pool together almost every day. But I never saw him myself, or heard his voice. Until the Sunday he left, when he showed up on my doorstep. My mama and daddy both left the living room when they saw him coming down the driveway on his Moped.

"Your face looks better," he said when I answered the door.

"Better than with blood running down it? Well, sure," I replied, letting him in.

"I'm sorry I haven't called," he said quietly.

I blinked dry eyes at him. "Why are you here?"

He blinked back. "To show you something." He had his satchel slung over his shoulder, and he reached down into it and pulled out his sketchpad. "I thought you'd want to see the final drawings I made of you."

"Oh."

He had the drawings on separate sheets of paper, covered with sheets of parchment and sandwiched in between the pages of the drawing pad. When he pulled one of the sheets out, I noticed that his hand was trembling. "I . . . I'm really anxious for you to see these," he mumbled, peeling back the parchment to show me the sketch.

The first one was the one he'd drawn of me at the creek, hanging over the water from a tree.

"Oh," I said.

There was no tree. I was suspended upside down in mid-air, my arms flung out reaching for who knew what.

My body had no features, no clothes, no bellybutton. It was solid and shaped like a wispy cirrus cloud, colored in red. He had colored me red. And I had no face. He had taken the blossoms out of my hair.

But where my face should have been, there were angry red marks.

And my hair was a glorious fall of silken curls.

"Oh," I said. I could almost smell Hershey sweating, and the throb of blood to my head was making footstep noises in my ears.

Then he showed me the one of me at the organ in church. The organ was monstrous, like something in a horror movie, and he had added pipes. The lines were jumpy, so that the whole picture

looked like it was wiggling. And there I was, a mass of hair at the keys, without a face, my flowing skirt etched in red.

"Are your parents here?" he whispered.

"In the kitchen or something."

He slid out the last drawing, rattling it between his fingers, barely touching it.

It was me in the living room chair, all hair.

"I had to do the details," he muttered, "otherwise it wouldn't be a nude. The teacher won't give me credit unless--"

"I know that. Shut up."

There was no skimping on the shadows or lights of my body; everything that was on me was there. I had a bellybutton, among other things. He had drawn in the face; it wasn't exactly my face, because the nose was much straighter. That didn't surprise me at all. "It's nice," I said.

"I'm leaving today."

"Probably a good idea. Class starts this week."

He tucked the drawings back in the sketchbook slowly, making sure that no edges stuck out that would get bent in the satchel. "I wanted to tell you that I liked your book of lists."

"Really?"

"Yeah--I wanted to tell you that if you would just put verbs in there, you would have a story."

"Well, that's clever, but I cut that book into a million pieces and unless you want to tape it back together yourself, I don't think I'll be writing any stories."

His lips parted a little. "You did what?"

"I'm going to be an engineer," I said flatly.

He kept looking at me dumbly while he fastened the buckle on his satchel. Whatever words were in his mind, if there were any at all, never came to his lips.

"Well," he said finally, "I just came to say goodbye."

"See ya."

Once he was out the door, he didn't look back. And I didn't watch him putt up the driveway, over the hill.

Page came over the night before I was supposed to leave for Knoxville, as I was packing things into my graduation luggage, and brought me a present. It was a T-shirt that said, "We have it better in Hope Springs."

"They are just today starting to sell these at Annie Davidson's gift shop," she said, "and just in time for you to have one to take with you to school."

"Thanks," I said. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to," she said, and her eyes filled up with tears. "I don't want you to go," she sniffled, putting her arms around me, and I hugged her back.

"Me either," I said.

My parents and Michael took me to Knoxville the next day, the car stuffed to the gills with my junk. (I would not have a car at school, and I would have to get rides home from a Hope Springs boy I barely knew who was already a junior at UT.) I had not thought I would be taking so much, but Mama had encouraged me

to take as many things as I could that would make my room more like home. I had Rosemary's comforter and curtains, which took up half the trunk. The ride over was quiet. Michael and I had a microwave Mama and Daddy had bought me in between us, with my pillows on top, and he kept throwing fuzzballs he was picking off the back of the driver's seat over the top of the pillows. I threw wadded-up Kleenexes back at him, and it was four or five before he realized that they were ones I'd been using to dry my tears and wipe my nose. "Gross!" he yelled.

After we had moved my things into the dorm and they were ready to get back on the road to Hope Springs--my new roommate had not yet arrived--there was nothing for me to do but to sit on the stiff bed and watch them go. Mama was crying, and Daddy looked uncomfortable, and Michael was looking out the window. "It's a long, long way down," he said. I was on the sixth floor. "You better not look, Gabriel, it'll make you sick."

"Okay," I said.

He came over and sat down on the bed, trying to bounce on it, but it barely moved. "Not like your bed at home," he said blithely.

"No," I replied.

"Well, we better go," Daddy said. "Will you be okay?"

"Oh, wait," Michael said. He reached into his back jeans pocket and brought out a stiff piece of white paper, which was folded into fourths. He unfolded it and handed it to me. It was a badly creased picture of him standing on the mound, winding up,

ready to pitch. "The newspaper guy took it," he said proudly. "I brought it for you to hang on your wall. See, I already put tape on it." He had. Four rolled-up pieces of tape on the back were covered with blue fuzz from his jeans pocket.

"Thanks," I said. I slapped it against the bare white wall. It barely stuck.

"You may have to retape it," he said seriously.

I hugged each of them once and briefly--Michael even kissed me on the cheek--and I didn't go downstairs with them because I didn't think I could stand it. Before I knew it they were gone, and the door was shutting on me and my white-walled room.

It did not surprise me when one October afternoon, lying on my narrow bed when my roommate was gone and staring out the dirty window at the outlines of strange trees, I received a phone call from my mother telling me that Rosemary was pregnant, and that she and Hershey would be getting married sometime before Thanksgiving. It was weeks before Rosemary called me herself to ask with barely audible trepidation if I would be her maid of honor.

It was a cold, white weekend in November when I stood in her living room, dressed in navy blue and holding roses, and she and Hershey were joined in holy matrimony by Reverend Arnett Holley

of the United Methodist Church beside her mother's floral-print couch. Although the scars on my face had nearly faded completely, the cold weather made me white as snow and so faint stripes appeared on either side of my nose. I didn't try to cover it up with makeup. I didn't even wear any lipstick that day, and Rosemary looked afraid to say anything to me about it. She wore her dark hair tucked up under a felt Juliet cap and looked very elegant herself in a white silk suit. Her eyes nearly jumped off her face, they were so wide and dark against the pristine clothes she was wearing.

No mention was made of Buddy Scurlock. I knew that he had quit his job and moved away somewhere, and that of the two of us, me and Rosemary, I had been the last one to see him.

I never made any eye contact with Hershey at all, which wasn't hard because he seemed to go out of his way to stay on the opposite side of the room from me. But I heard him laughing several times, when the ceremony was over and we had moved to the dining room to eat cake, and his laughter was hearty and happy. Rosemary's mother even looked close to smiling, although she never stood very close to Rosemary's father. I ate a piece of cake and drank a cup of punch, and then I told Mama I thought we should go. I got my coat off Rosemary's bed upstairs and then left with Mama through the kitchen door where nobody saw us.

Hershey was going to stay in school, I had heard somebody say, and Rosemary and he were going to move into an apartment in Nashville, where she would look for a temporary job until the

baby came. A few weeks after Christmas, she started writing me letters from Nashville, telling me about their tiny apartment and their neighbors and her morning sickness, which her doctor had told her to alleviate with ginger tea, "but Hershey made me get ginger snaps instead because those are his favorite cookie anyway. But Gabriel I have a feeling that these will not be his favorite cookies much longer." She was throwing up a lot.

It wasn't until March that I began to write her back. I told her about my dorm room and my roommate, who always walked around naked after she showered, and my honors calculus class which was eating ulcerous holes in my stomach lining. She wrote back that she thought I should get out of math altogether and switch to English. "Your letters are so funny," she said, "and Hershey always asks me to read them out loud to him. You should write. He says you should write." I wrote her back and told her that yesterday morning was the first morning I woke up in Knoxville and knew where I was, and it was true. I had memorized the shape of the tree outside my window.

Page, meanwhile, spent our entire first year of college, hers at Columbia State and mine in Knoxville, calling me every single night. I had a cordless phone and I would walk around the dorm room while she talked, straightening up my desk or making my bed or brushing my teeth to the sound of her voice. She just couldn't believe it about Rosemary and Hershey. "I mean, Good Lord, Gabriel, I thought that he would like her at first, you know, because I remember telling you that. Do you remember me

telling you that? Because I did. But I never ever thought this would happen. First of all, I was starting to think that he was *gay* or something, you know, and please don't ask me to explain that because it's stuff you *just* don't want to hear about, but then second of all and very important, I never ever *ever* would have pictured her getting pregnant. I mean, never. Could you? I mean, and *don't* ask me why I thought he was gay." She paused.

"Why did you think he was gay?"

"Oh, just a feeling. But he would not give me the time of day after he just obviously was flirting with me, and I know I never told you this, but he totally blew me off one night, and I won't share with you the circumstances, but I figured that he was maybe gay or something. Especially after I heard he was drawing pictures of you. I mean, how feminine is that?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, at Ruby James's."

"I thought you didn't have your hair done there anymore."

"She apologized to me for my highlights one day at the grocery store, so I figured, hell, why not give her one more chance?"

I had washed my face and brushed my teeth and was settled down into my bed, where although my sheets were freshly washed I could still smell the dampness and cement that I always smelled in that room. I turned out the light and closed my eyes and sunk my head down into the pillow as Page continued to speak. "So, I'm thinking, Rosemary *must* have gone up to Nashville and gotten

herself pregnant over Labor Day, or maybe after, because I had heard she was going up there all the time to see him, and you know, counting backwards and looking at the size of her stomach, which if you haven't seen it, is huge. God, Gabriel, I miss having you here."

Na, na, baby, the time flies. Beths marry Mmmarks, Agneses let their husbands back into their beds, and Grannies wash their dining room tables until the cloths turn to absolute shreds. Junes henpeck, and Junes even convert, it's true, and Ellens grow more radiant and detached with each new baby. Na, na, baby, and none of us looks older, at least in the way that I expected us to. Except for the Luthers who grow a foot in a year's time and begin to hold cigarettes in dirty fingers; they get older than I ever thought possible for a human being to do. Some Ernies, to remind us of life's sweet and tricky blessings, grow up to be mild-mannered and lovable.

I got my degree, did you know, wide eyes? You wouldn't have thought otherwise, I know, but it is important for me to say that I am an engineer. I engineer. I make wheels turn. I also take lists and put verbs in to make them whole; it's a habit I started a while ago and that I can't seem to shake. I couldn't have said that to you hours ago, even.

I met your daddy on the commons. Many girls hope to meet men on the commons and in the courtyards, they make sure that there are ribbons in their hair even for breakfast in the gray hours when no one's eyes are even open, let alone looking. And

many--no, most--do not meet any men on the commons; some don't meet them anywhere else. But one sunny day I labored through calculus down a bench from him, unusually so because I was afraid of the sun, and when a Frisbee hit me in the back of the head he dropped his biology lab and ran after the perpetrators. It always is supposed to begin that way, with a Frisbee in the back of the head or a bee in the hair, and I let go.

We married under an arch half full of old Irish angels and half full of soulless contemporary copies; we married under the hands of the second priest to come after the one who lost his tan in three months in a jail cell and drained his diocese's coffers with a court settlement. We did not, however, marry to the tune of a guitar, although we could have if we'd asked. I walked down the aisle after Rosemary and Page, whom I sent together for simple fun and to avoid having to choose, and your daddy smiled at them, waiting for me. First at Page, whom he knew from the weekends she would drive up to visit, and then at Rosemary, whom he'd never met. I still cannot forgive him for never having met her, and likely I never will. For what shall I say when you ask me for the answers? I will only be able to pray that you find them yourself. Do you see? He never met her, and I will never have the strength to simply be.

Hershey sat in the back pew of church for my wedding, bouncing his dark child upon his knee, and he smiled at me when I came through the doors in a wholly amiable way that rang old, sad bells for me.

Na, na, baby, don't ask me, close your eyes. Draw from where you have been and remember the answers. Whisper them to me, yawn in that tiny way that will turn my heart and make me forget that I feared you, and years from now, I will repeat to you what you told me, and forget all the stories I ever knew. Rosemary is coming to fawn over you, and I want you to look into her eyes when they smile down into your face. Tell me later what you see; I will remember after you have forgotten and I will tell you when it is important for you to know. Page will come later, and you will know the sound of her voice better than you yet know mine.

Your hair is red. It could be brown, but I think it is red. Your grandaddy is so proud that it might be red, and your grandmama too in the selfless way that is hers (her hair is brown). You will grow and grow in my arms and theirs. In your daddy's arms and his parents'. You will crawl and walk and speak, and your grandaddy will tell you stories. Some night not so many moons from now, we'll sit in the kitchen and snap beans, which your grandaddy will help with because he simply wants to be near you, and he'll tell you the story of the summer that your uncle Michael nearly lost his pitching arm, back before he was a famous man. That, my sweetest child, is the way he remembers it.