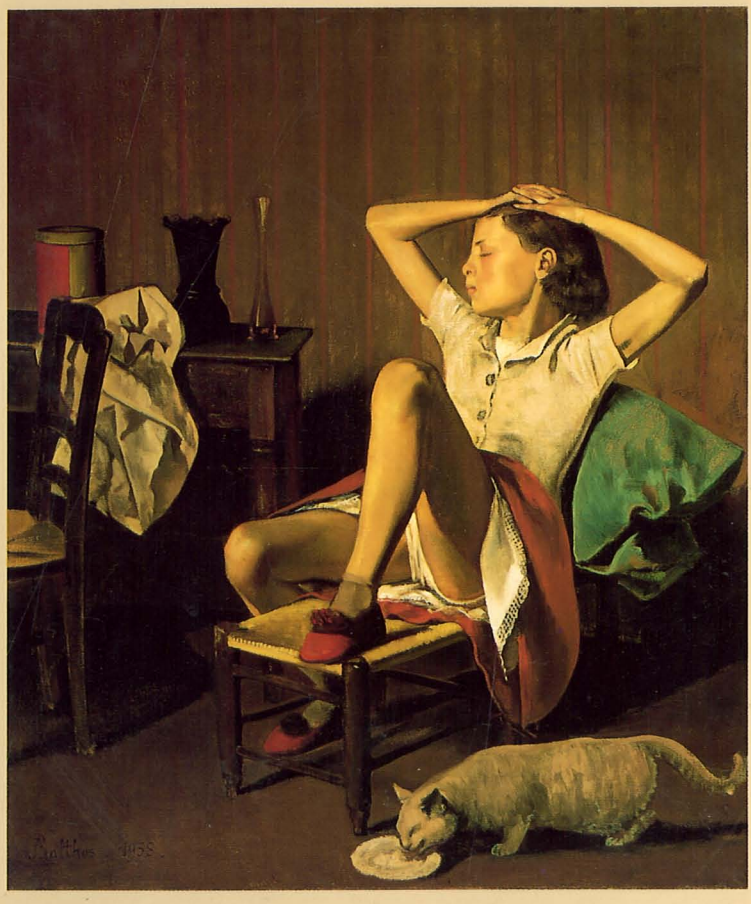
THE JOHN SIMMONS SHORT FICTION AWARD

IMAGINARY MEN



ENID SHOMER

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IMAGINARY MEN

BY ENID SHOMER

1992 John Simmons Short Fiction Award Winner

Selected by James Salter

Even the tamest characters in *Imaginary Men* test the rules to see where they can be broken and where they hold true. In Enid Shomer's world, endless misunderstandings sprout from goodwill, women and men burn with a desire that forces them to create themselves as they evolve, people grasp their relatedness to others only fleetingly, goodness is as great a mystery as evil.

For the unappreciated Harry Goldring, tormented by his unshakable label of family *mensch*, wildness is expressed first in panic attacks, then in daydreams. At the other end of Shomer's highly colored spectrum is killer Elvis Thornberry, a "man you wouldn't notice unless he held a gun to your head or saved your life." Balancing these more troubled characters are Shomer's many improbable lovers and friends: Lavell, who sees something of herself in the untrainable hunting dog owned by her younger lover; Diane, who takes back her unfaithful husband only after inventing a lie that puts her on an equal footing; Leila Pinkerton and Fontane Walker, who were "as close to friendship as they could get, given that Leila was white, Fontane was black, and they lived in a world full of people who claimed to know what that meant."

In all of Shomer's powerful stories, family is the mold we break out of as well as the lap we seek comfort in; family myths create mysterious emblems of freedom. Listening to her resonant voice, we witness the wild, raw moments when people lose control, when the wildness—submerged or not—that they both avoid and rush toward bleeds through.

Imaginary Men

The

John

Simmons

Short

Fiction

Award

University
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Enid Shomer Enid Shomer

Imaginary Men

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For Nirah and for Oren

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"On the Boil" won the H. E. Francis Fiction Award offered by the Ruth Hindman Foundation as well as the *Iowa Woman* Fiction Prize. It appeared in *Hometown Press* and *Iowa Woman* and has also been reprinted in the anthology *Lovers* (Crossing Press, 1992).

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"Tropical Aunts" has been reprinted in *NEW VISIONS: Fiction by Florida Writers* (Tampa: Arbiter Press, 1989).

Contents

In the Family

Street Signs

My brother, Beryl, was eleven when he decided to change his name. The kids at school had taunted him about it for years, insisting it sounded like a girl's name or a kind of fruit. Raspberyl, blueberyl, blackberyl. My parents were reluctant to agree: he was the only namesake for my mother's Great Uncle Beryl, a man famous for overturning with his bare arms a wagonful of Cossacks who had called him a Jew-dog and ordered him off the road. The story went that when the Cossacks came looking for him in the village the next day, even the gentiles lied to protect him. This all happened in the Ukraine, in the dim ages before we spoke English.

"Pick a name that begins with 'B,' all right?" my mother said. "Maybe Bruce?"

My brother said he liked the name Brad.

"Brad is that little brass thing on envelopes. Like a paper clip."

He must have given it quite a bit of advance thought. "Then Bart," he said. "I want to be called Bart."

"Rhymes with fart," my father said.

He was not discouraged. "Bob? Just plain old Bob?"

Finally they settled on Barry. It didn't sound too ordinary, my mother said, or too gentile. It sounded a little French, a little continental.

They went downtown to the courthouse the next day after school. My brother told me if I ever called him Beryl again he would pour calamine lotion in my eyes while I was asleep.

After that, only my brother's best friend, Asher Levandowski, was allowed to call him Beryl, and only in private. Beryl and Asher were both born in August, which accounted, Mother claimed, for their sticky temperaments, her way of saying they were pests. I hated them most of the time. They were boys. They were vulgar. They picked their noses and ate it. They said bad words when no adults were listening, then denied it on their lives. At the movies on Saturday afternoons they waited until there was kissing on the screen, then exploded their popcorn boxes. Worst of all, they played the pinball machines on Georgia Avenue, a known hangout for hoodlums.

Asher would have liked to change his name, too, but his parents were religious—recent refugees from Europe. Because the Levandowskis had paid dearly for their heritage, Mother said, they were determined to keep it intact. The Levandowskis made no concessions to the *meshugos*, the crazinesses of "Amerikeh." The result was that Asher behaved as if he were two different people. At home he was obedient, dutiful, and careful. He took piano lessons and was not allowed to read trash like comic books. Asher's house on Friday nights and Saturdays was a dreadfully quiet place even my brother avoided.

The other Asher was hell-bent on adventure, despite the oversized galoshes, the leather cap with earflaps, the heavy wool mittens, and, of course, the umbrella. Mrs. Levandowski believed that the umbrella was the first bulwark against catching colds. She fastened it to Asher's coat sleeve with a giant safety pin. Later, he carried the large black umbrella hooked over his forearm. It gave him a formal appearance, as if he were about to bow. Like Beryl, Asher wore thick eyeglasses which he broke about once a month. That may have added to their

camaraderie. Also, Asher understood Yiddish. He had always known that the name Beryl meant a great, ferocious bear.

Now they are widening the road that leads to my brother's house. Alongside the hilly, winding blacktop, giant backhoes churn and shovels drool uprooted sod. These are the first road improvements since Barry and his wife moved out there twenty-five years ago. He wanted his kids to grow up with plenty of trees, birds, and fresh air, the occasional wild rabbit and raccoon. He didn't want them subject to the push and tumble of city life, by which he meant our old house on Garfield Place. I thought we had enough of the countryside in the old neighborhood. We had stinkbomb trees and mimosas and acorn oaks. We had room in the backyard for Mother to raise a few tomatoes. We had the workmanlike sound of the garbage trucks in the morning and the dreamy whir of the street-cleaning machine at night.

He moved farther out than he had to, but then that was always his way.

From the sidewalk outside Rudy's Pinball Palace you could hear the machines—they sounded like a hundred cash registers going at once—and see their lights flashing. It was a hot day in late September when I bribed Barry and Asher with a dollar apiece to take me there. I had saved up three weeks' allowance and scoured the house for *gefineneh gelt*—the loose change that disappeared into sofas, chairs, and the washing machine.

The double entrance doors were open, and three ceiling fans chopped away at the heat. I followed Barry and Asher into the deepening gloom, past boys of all ages intently pushing buttons and flipping levers.

They chose a game called Frisco Goldrush. Barry said he'd kill me or Asher if we touched the machine. He released the first ball, then began pushing and leaning on the machine with all his weight. That was just like him: he was always making rules for other people and breaking them himself. Asher didn't seem to mind. Mother said Barry was a born ringleader and that he had Asher going in circles.

Around us, buzzers and bells rang as less skillful players made their machines go tilt. His score climbed rapidly: 500, 900, 1,200.

"His best is 42,000," Asher said.

"Shut up!" Barry hissed. "I can't concentrate."

But he was concentrating. The lights of the machine reflected off his glasses, giving him a powerful look, as if the colors were zooming out from his head, like Superman's X-ray vision.

"Shit!" he cried, as the silver ball dropped into an alley.

"Double shit," Asher said. "Piss."

There was almost nothing as satisfying as hearing them curse. I had no desire to do it myself. My mother's speech was filled with euphemisms like heck, darn, and shoot. Naturally, she disapproved of indelicate language, which for her also included speaking Yiddish in the presence of non-Jews, something she considered rude and old-fashioned. On the other hand, nothing pleased her more than to hear a gentile use the word "goy" or Sammy Davis, Jr., say "*schvartza.*"

Some older boys draped themselves around our machine and lit cigarettes. They had thin, sharp noses and stiff, oiled pompadours. They were what we called "rocks."

"Who's the slit?" one of them asked.

"His sister," Asher said.

They glared at me. "This is no place for girls," the same boy said. I moved to the next machine and dropped my dime in.

"Give me a drag," Barry said.

"Yeah," Asher said. "I want to hotbox it."

The older boys passed their cigarettes to them. Barry and Asher inhaled deeply and made the tips of the cigarettes glow bright red. The idea was to see how long an ember you could make.

Afterward, they bought peppermint candies to sweeten their breath. I had been scared to go to Rudy's alone. When I returned home, it struck me that Barry and Asher might have been afraid, too. But together they acted like they could take over the whole world.

Do you think the teachers at school were diplomatic about my brother's name change? They kept remarking on it, or forgetting it momentarily, so that the two names were strung together into a hor-

rible long new one—Berylbarry. This marked the beginning of my brother's difficulties at school.

In those days bad behavior wasn't called hyperactivity or social skills deficits. It was called simply "discipline" and occupied an intimidating square outlined in bold black on our report cards. That fall, his grades changed from SP for Satisfactory Progress to UP, Unsatisfactory Progress, with remarks in the discipline box like "talks too much," "constantly disrupts the classroom," and "challenges the teacher."

Things went from bad to worse. Finally, during Passover that year, he crumbled some matzohs he had brought to school as snacks and dumped them inside Sheila Green's jumper. Sheila had to be sent home. Her mother told my mother her skin was red and irritated. Mother said yes, she was sure that it was, because no cracker in this world had edges as sharp as a broken matzoh. Barry was suspended from school for two days. I remember how agitated my parents were about this incident. Could it be the teachers had said something derogatory about the matzoh in the first place? Did they know it was a ritual food? And most important of all, what was Barry thinking, desecrating the matzoh like that? On the eighth day of Passover, Mother threw out the leftover matzohs, something she had never done before.

The next afternoon, Barry came home from Asher's house and went up to his small attic bedroom and cried. Mother and I both heard him. He didn't cry the way I did—silently into a pillow until it was soggy and cold. His tears were always accompanied by temper tantrums. He beat on the wall with his fists and wailed.

"Barry!" Mother shouted up the stairs. "What's wrong?"

"None of your business." His voice was muffled by the closed door.

If Dad had been home, he wouldn't have dared to answer her like that. She looked crushed and then, gradually, angry.

"Come down here this instant!" she yelled.

No sound from his room. She mounted the stairs and pushed the door open. Then she dragged him by his shirt collar down the steps into the kitchen and poured him a glass of cold milk to calm him down.

"What is it, Beryleh?" she asked quietly.

"Barry."

"Barry, then."

"Mrs. Levandowski heard about the matzohs." He choked up a little.

"And?"

"She kicked me out of the house."

Mother was silent for a moment. She glared at me so that I wouldn't say anything. "She'll get over it," she said.

"No, she won't. She said I can't come back." Barry sipped at the milk.

Though there was always a lot of yelling and screaming in our family, there was very little of the kind of quiet terror I imagined Mrs. Levandowski to be capable of. In our house, no matter what anyone said, we all knew that the person didn't really mean it. The glue that held us together could not be dissolved by a flare-up in temper, no matter how severe. It was a special kind of permissiveness—perhaps a Jewish permissiveness. We were made to feel guilty, but we never doubted that we could redeem ourselves. There were no absolutes, only a kind of ongoing tug-of-war run by parents who almost never stuck by anything they said if we pressed them hard enough. I could not imagine my mother ordering a child from her house. It was far too rude and arbitrary. But Mrs. Levandowski was another case. She reminded me of my Russian Grandma Bella—a stubborn and strict woman who stuck to a gallstone diet long after her gall bladder was removed and whose favorite food was laxatives.

"Just like that?" my mother asked. "What else did Mrs. Levandowski say?"

My brother looked up from his glass of milk. "I already told you."

"I mean, I want to know her exact words." Mother was always asking for people's exact words, as if she could insert herself into another person's head if she had enough information.

Barry gazed out the window toward the alley that separated Asher's street from ours. I looked out expecting to see one of the neighborhood kids there, but it was empty. "She said she was ashamed for me. About the matzoh and all."

"Oh." Now mother was getting indignant. "Who is she to call names?"

"She didn't call me any names. She just said I couldn't come to the house."

"We'll see about that," Mother said.

"I don't want you talking to her for me." Barry stood up. "I'm not a baby, you know. And it's none of your business."

From there on, the argument grew familiar. I knew Mother would win but that it would take a long time to bring him around. She explained that when he beat his head against the wall it was her business, that the whole neighborhood was her business if she said it was, even Mrs. Levandowski. But she promised to be tactful. She promised not to get angry at Mrs. Levandowski. Barry made her swear that she wouldn't say anything to make the situation worse.

Once I saw a film of a house-raising in an Amish community. The sides of the house were laid out and nailed together on the ground. Ruddy men wearing overalls, straw hats, and carpenters' aprons swarmed over the wood frame like bees over a hive. Nails poked cheerfully out of their mouths instead of words. In the distance, other farmhouses they had built squatted like salt cellars on a great laid table. A field of summer corn swayed behind them, its deep treads and waves repeating the grain of the wood, the hanks of their hair. You could hear a communal hum of pleasure when the sides went up. This happened near one of those towns in eastern Pennsylvania like Paradise or Intercourse where tourists are always stealing the road signs.

Barry moved into Wildwood Estates right before his first child was born. All the streets bear the names of trees and woodland flowers. At the corner of Azalea and Bluet lived a profoundly deaf child whose parents arranged to have a special yellow sign like the ones used for dangerous curves and deer-crossings installed at the entrance to the subdivision. It said Deaf CAUTION Child. At least that is the way I always read it, because the word "caution" was sandwiched between the other two. I remember thinking that like all signs, it would become invisible after a while. But I liked the idea of a public notice for a single child. It seemed both extravagant and absolutely essential. I could imagine a neighborhood full of such signs: Blind Caution Child, Lame Caution Child, Shy or Fat Caution Child, Doesn't Understand Where Road Leads Caution Child.

Whenever Barry gave directions to his house, he'd always say turn

right one block after deaf child. Then he'd take pleasure in explaining what that was.

Mother telephoned Mrs. Levandowski the next day. Barry stood right next to her, listening. I was arranging my dolls under the kitchen table in their own little fallout shelter.

"Sadie?" Mother said. "Sadie Levandowski?"

I had been to Asher's house many times to play the piano. I knew Mrs. Levandowski would be standing in the kitchen like Mother, most likely stirring or kneading something. She kept a kosher kitchen, which meant, basically, that nobody else could touch anything in it, not even Mr. Levandowski. There was no neutral zone for the uninitiated among all those cabinets, shelves, and drawers. I felt like a barbarian, stranded between the *milchadik* and the *fleshadik*. When I drank a glass of milk, I was afraid to set it down anywhere, even in the double sink. I always handed it back to her.

"Danken Gott, the whole family is fine," Mother said. "Yours?"

Of course when Mother said the whole family was fine, she was referring to about forty people—all our aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. Mrs. Levandowski had one cousin in Detroit, her husband, and son. The rest of the family had been killed in the War.

"Sadie, how would you like to come over for a cup of coffee?" Mother's voice was warm and sincere. "Sure, I have tea."

They decided on Saturday afternoon. Mrs. Levandowski preferred Saturday after shul because she'd already be dressed.

Barry was three years older than I. Three years in the life of a child is a crucial, heartbreaking span. It is the difference between counting on your fingers and long division, between being confined to a few streets and wandering freely through the neighborhood. People were always assuring me that three years would be nothing once we were grown. But at the time, it seemed that Barry would always be smarter, taller, and faster, that I would never catch up. Even when I tried to imagine the two of us in our dotage, Barry was a

white-haired gentleman walking ten steps ahead, talking a mile a minute to the blank air in front of him, and I was an old lady scrambling to keep pace like our Grandma Bella, who couldn't get out of the way of her own great fallen bosoms.

I often sneaked into his room to see the Lionel train setup which occupied most of it. He always left little scraps of paper jammed into the tracks and wheels so that he could tell if I played with it while he was out. But I didn't need to turn it on. I'd stare at the miniature cows and sheep fastened to their painted green pasture until I felt myself settled peacefully in that tiny, immobile landscape. Then I'd comfort myself with the thought that along with more privileges, Barry also ran into more trouble. As a toddler, he had been kept on a leash. He had set the house on fire accidentally the year before during a paper drive. He was sicklier than I was. His eyes itched and watered, and he suffered sneezing fits. The doctor said Barry was allergic to himself but that he would outgrow it.

Several times in going through his desk I'd encountered his Hebrew books. That was one advantage I had over him. Because I was a girl, I didn't have to go to Hebrew school. Barry, like Asher, spent three afternoons a week at Agudas Achim synagogue to prepare for his bar mitzvah. The synagogue was walking distance from our house, but it was orthodox. Did the other members know that we ate hardshell crabs by the bushel in summer and ordered Lobster Cantonese at the Shanghai restaurant?

The thick black Hebrew letters reminded me of the symbols in cartoons when the character is exasperated and runs out of words. Though I had heard Barry read Hebrew out loud, I was still amazed that such foreign sounds could come from his mouth. Even my parents could not understand most of it.

The next Saturday morning was spent in preparation for Mrs. Levandowski's visit. My mother insisted that we make our beds and clean our closets just in case Mrs. Levandowski wanted to take the ten-cent tour. I always hated it when we had company, for then she would stalk the house anxiously grumbling as she checked for dust, fingerprints, smears, and stray hairs.

It has always struck me as odd that children become intimate with

their neighbors while their parents often never set foot in their houses. I had seen Mr. and Mrs. Levandowski in their pajamas on Sunday morning. I knew that Mrs. Levandowski wore a thick layer of Noxzema cream on her face at home, even if Asher brought company. I had seen her watch TV in the living room in the evening, white-faced, smelling like a Vick's cough drop, dead to shame about her appearance. I had even heard her burp once at the kitchen table. She had excused herself, but she wasn't embarrassed.

Mrs. Levandowski arrived at 2 P.M. She was dressed in a navy print dress with a large white collar that spread out from her cleavage like wings and flapped into her face when she leaned forward. Her accent was Polish, her speech, even in English, filled with the gentle clicking and mewing of that tongue. The blood red lipstick she wore made her face look extremely pale. Barry and I said hello, then sat down on the loveseat opposite the sofa where the two women sat, each turned slightly on one haunch toward the other. Mrs. Levandowski withdrew a huge deadly hatpin from her hat, removed the hat, and patted her hair. "In Europe we had cafés where to talk," she said.

"Oh? You mean sidewalk cafés?"

"Sidewalk, yes. On the street. In Warsaw we had many. We walked there."

"I see," Mother said.

"We didn't drive. Who needed a car in Warsaw?"

"I hate to drive," Mother said. This wasn't exactly true. We used to have a blue stick-shift Ford that Mother was unable to master. But once we got the Chrysler with the automatic transmission, she was jumping into it every chance she got.

"My husband, Zaichik, he drives."

"Yes," Mother said.

The kettle was whistling. Mother got up to fix the tea and told us to keep Asher's mother company. The three of us sat silently until she returned. Mrs. Levandowski looked around at everything in the room, not furtively, but as if she were searching for something familiar. She picked up the plate of cookies my mother had set out, chose two, and put them in her lap. Her hands were meaty and slow-moving. They were as big as a man's.

Mother returned with the tea service on a tray. "I have sugar cubes, if you like," she said, offering her the good crystal sugar bowl.

My grandparents from Russia drank tea with sugar cubes in their mouths. Mrs. Levandowski took her tea unsweetened.

Suddenly, the two of them were speaking the secret language, Yiddish. Mrs. Levandowski spoke much faster than she had in English. Mother stumbled a bit, groping for words. They talked for a long time, until their voices were a drone in the room. I looked at Barry fidgeting and was happy to see he couldn't understand them either. Then, all of a sudden, dead silence. Mother lit a cigarette and blew a plume of smoke to one side.

"The world," Mrs. Levandowski said, addressing me and Barry, "is not a happy place. Once maybe, but never again . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Dos iz nisht Warsaw, Sadie. Dos iz America," Mother said.

Mrs. Levandowski glowered at her and spoke some more in Yiddish. I could pick out the words "matzoh" and "Pesach." She pointed to Barry and counted off four fingers on one hand, each accompanied by a name.

Mother continued to smoke, but with her free hand she was pressing her thumbnail along her jaw, a nervous habit I'd seen before. Then, her voice quaking and high-pitched, she said something long and pleading in Yiddish to Mrs. Levandowski.

"Nein." Mrs. Levandowski shook her head. Her teacup rattled in the saucer as she set it down. She pushed up her left sleeve until small blue numbers appeared on her forearm. "Don't be fooled," she said. She reached across the sofa, took Mother's arm and gently turned it over to expose the wrist, with its tracery of veins and smooth, finely textured skin. "Your arm is the accident," she said, "not mine."

Mrs. Levandowski stood up to leave. "Asher understands," she said. She picked up her hat and walked to the door. Mother thanked her for coming. They shook hands, something I had never seen two women do before. They looked like heads of state. "Goodbye to you," Mrs. Levandowski said.

Mother watched through the living room window as Mrs. Levandowski trudged down the pavement. Then she burst into tears and went upstairs to her bedroom. "I knew you wouldn't be able to change her mind," Barry shouted up at her, a note of righteousness in his voice, as if Mrs. Levandowski had not disappointed him.

For some time after that, Barry and Asher continued to be friends,

though only on the street. Barry was not allowed in Asher's house, and Asher avoided our house, not because his mother had forbidden him to enter it, but because, I think, it held too much for him to reconcile. Eventually, of course, he had to choose. Perhaps if he had been a few years older, he'd have chosen Barry. But he was young then. So young that the choice must have felt to him simply like a gradual turning in the direction of his mother's pale insistent face and dark lips, a slight inclination of his head so that her lament came clearer to his ears and became, finally, his lament.

When Barry saw that new neighborhoods and shopping centers were sprouting near his subdivision on land formerly given to tobacco and horse pasture, he thought about moving farther out. But of his three children, only one lives at home now, and she'll be going away to college in the fall. Instead, he and his wife bought a large cabin-cruiser where they spend every weekend in good weather. He says the sea is the last open road.

I was surprised to see the old Deaf CAUTION Child sign relocated to the side of the newly widened road to his house. I like to imagine that the road workers preserved it out of reverence, for surely they could have guessed from its battered condition that the deaf child was long since gone. But perhaps they were simply daunted by the prospect of discovering whether, in all those houses, there was still someone who lived in a markedly different world, one which could not be changed and needed protecting.

Barry says he barely remembers Asher, and he does not know what became of him or his parents. This is nothing unusual or sad for a human being. The memories of children do not so much record the past as bury it.

The full story about Mother's Great Uncle Beryl is this: when he overturned the Cossack wagon into the ditch he wasn't just showing off. He was in quite desperate circumstances. He was a drayman and made his living hauling things—barrels of salt herring, household

goods, sacks of flour and barley. His buckboard was full that day. He couldn't have moved it out of the way if he had wanted to. The road was narrow and steep, with deep culverts on either side. Mother said he must have reached the breaking point, sitting up high on his rig, looking into that dark ditch where the Cossacks expected him to tumble without a fight. It was perhaps the tenth or the hundredth time he had been called a Jew-dog. That was a common insult in his world of shtetls and pogroms. What matters—what aroused such ferocity—is what he saw from his rig: the dark ditch waiting for him.

After he overturned the Cossacks, it was said that their horses were so frightened by the sight of a wheel that they had to be sold for meat and glue. In the countryside, word of his bravery spread, exciting admiration among gentiles and Jews alike. The family celebrated and toasted him that night with wine, even his aged mother, for whom I am named, and who, I am told, tossed off her shoes and danced.

Tropical Aunts

Aunt Debs and Aunt Ava. They were my father's sisters. Dramatic, glamorous women who, my mother said, had "been around." I saw them every July when we traded the humidity of Washington, D.C., for the even more oppressive heat of Miami, where my father's people lived amid piña coladas, guava jelly, and floral print clothing. I still have a picture of them mounted in one of those plastic telescopes that were popular key chain trinkets in the 1950s. They look tan and healthy and non-Jewish standing arm-in-arm in front of the cardboard palm trees.

Debs was the older, a stormy, rich blond who had been widowed. She lived a reclusive life in a houseboat on the Miami River. Without a phone, she could only be contacted through her attorney, like a

movie star. Ava was a redhead with a reputation for borrowing money. Everyone knew she'd had to get married to her first husband. This was the biggest scandal so far in our family. After she had the baby, she got divorced, lost custody, and married an osteopath who worked nights as a stand-up comic in the hotels of Miami Beach.

My Florida aunts came north to visit us only twice. The first time was for my sister Fran's wedding. They drove up together in a big white Chrysler sedan. "My teeth started to chatter as soon as we hit North Carolina," Aunt Debs said, hugging herself as she closed the car door. She regarded our snow-covered lawn as if it were the surface of the moon. Then she picked her way slowly up the front walk. Ava followed, relatively surefooted in doeskin loafers and thick white socks. She leaned down to touch the snow shoveled into a heap alongside the front stoop and put a drop of it on her tongue. "Sometimes we put Hershey's syrup on it and make snowcones," I told her. I knew they'd be exclaiming and complaining about the weather but that the cold fascinated them. Also, when I saw my aunt Ava eating snow, just like that, I understood how she could have gotten pregnant.

As soon as they had hung up their clothes, they unveiled the presents: chocolate-covered coconut patties (my favorite candy), sea-grape jelly, and fresh papayas. For my mother, a white lace bathing suit cover-up, for my father, a book called *Fish of the Southern Waters*. My gift was a pearly pink comb-and-brush set with tiny shells and seahorses embedded in the handles. For Fran they'd chosen salmon-colored lingerie that made my father blush as my sister eagerly held it up for us to admire. "Baby-dolls," Aunt Ava explained to Fran. "I hope your Herb will like them."

The night before the Florida aunts arrived my mother had given my sister and me a briefing. "Don't mention Uncle Teddy," she cautioned. Teddy was Aunt Debs's dead husband.

My father, within earshot in his lounger, pitched in. "Did you put away the liquor?" Fran and I looked at each other. The only time my parents drank was at Passover, when they sipped reluctantly at four glasses of Manischewitz Concord wine. Beer had never crossed our threshold. Once at a restaurant I had seen my mother drink a Brandy

Alexander, but afterward someone told her mixed drinks were fattening and she never had another one.

"All I have is the bottle of schnapps," my mother said. I knew exactly which bottle she was talking about. It belonged to my grandfather, Velvel. My mother kept it on hand for him the way you'd keep medicine for an emergency asthma attack.

"Are we supposed to pretend Uncle Teddy never existed or what?" Fran asked.

"She took his death so hard," my mother said. "Just avoid the subject if you can."

I remembered when Great Uncle Benny had died. The whole family mourned for a week at my aunt Florence's house where the gilt mirrors were covered with black cloth and the satin loveseats crowded out by low, uncomfortable, wooden folding chairs.

"Aunt Debs must have really been in love," I said, looking at my sister and remembering an old movie about a girl whose fiancé was killed on the way to the wedding. Would Fran turn to drink if Herb were tragically killed after the final head count had been given to the caterer?

"Teddy was a real charmer," my mother said. "Could charm the birds out of the trees."

My father lit a Lucky Strike. "That girl really suffered when he went. I even had to hide the scissors. No hospital could have handled it."

This explained, at last, my father's prolonged visit to Florida the autumn before. My parents had flown down for the funeral, but my father had stayed an extra three weeks. At the time he had said he was helping Aunt Debs settle Uncle Teddy's estate. Now my imagination ran wild with passionate scenes in which my aunt Debs, her large blue eyes reddened by grief and alcohol, was saved from self-destruction by *my father,* who in my experience had not been up to dealing with bloody knees or temper tantrums.

Later that evening I persuaded Fran to let me into her room. She was setting her hair. I eyed the birch bedroom set and pink clock-radio, the wallpaper with its soothing dusky primroses being visited by small yellow birds. As soon as Fran was married I'd be moving in. I smeared some of her Dippity-Do on my hair.

"Your bangs will look like sheet metal if you use that much," she said through a mouthful of bobby pins.

"Who do you like best, Aunt Ava, Aunt Debs, or Aunt Florence?"

"You must be joking. Ava and Debs treat us like their own kids."

"Mom says they spoil us rotten."

"That's because they don't get to see us very often," Fran said.

"I wish Aunt Florence would move to Alaska," I said. Aunt Florence was our mother's brother's wife. She was a stout woman, later diagnosed as diabetic, whose bleached-blond hair was done up in a zillion curls like a telephone cord on top of her head. She referred to her kids as "my Maury" and "my Melissa," even if they were standing right next to her. I was jealous of and hated both these cousins. "I'm glad you're getting married before Melissa," I said.

"Melissa's a bit young to be thinking of marriage," Fran said, from her great tower of eighteen years. Melissa was sixteen.

"Aunt Ava eloped when she was sixteen." "Eloped" was the word everybody in our family used for her shotgun wedding.

"Aunt Ava's different," Fran said as she opened the door and gestured me through it. "You can't talk about her and Melissa in the same breath."

Fran was right. The Florida aunts were different. Aunt Ava was a model, but not the kind who strolls down runways or appears on the cover of *Vogue*. Her portfolio was full of magazine ads for shoes, gloves, detergent, and jewelry. She had supplied the hands and feet for the photos. "A perfect size 7B," she'd say, pointing her toe. "And feet don't show age like a face does."

Aunt Debs had kept her husband's accounts. "They weren't ordinary books," my father had told my mother last fall after Uncle Teddy died. "Well, when he had the dry-goods stores, all right, pretty regular. But after the deal in Las Vegas?" His voice had trailed off to a low, knowing snicker.

At the wedding the two sides of our family would have a chance to get to know one another better, my mother said at breakfast the next day. The Florida aunts were still upstairs asleep.

The northern half of my family—my mother's side—had always acted superior to the Florida half. It had nothing to do with pedigrees—they were all immigrant Jews from Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. I think now it was envy, for the northern relatives vacationed in Florida for two weeks each winter and talked of retiring

there to a life of golf, sunshine, and shrimp cocktails. For them, Florida meant relaxation. Anyone who lived there year-round had chosen good weather over hard work. My father had told me at least a thousand times that I wasn't a Yankee like them. This was confusing coming on the heels of my mother's pleas that I attend Hebrew school and join the Young Judea group at my junior high. Would they need to know if I was a northern or southern Jew?

My father's family—fifteen of them—had left Baltimore's harbor district in the early 20s, part of the Florida land boom. My father spoke of this period with such reverence that as a very young child I pictured them in covered wagons, carrying rifles and beef jerky. My grandmother Minerva opened a beauty shop in Lemon City, claimed to have invented the permanent wave before Nestlé, and dropped dead of heart failure at the pari-mutuel window when I was four. She and her children took to the tropical landscape without a hitch. They ate hearts of palm, gambled on dogs, horses, and jai alai, and carried fishing tackle at all times in the trunks of their cars. Though my father claimed that the aunts spoke Yiddish just like my mother's side of the family, I'd never heard a word of it pass their lips in eleven summers in Miami. They had picked up *un poquito español*, which, Ava said, came in handy on weekends in Havana.

"I want to sit with the aunts at the wedding," I told my mother, handing her my empty cereal bowl.

"Out of the question. We've already discussed it."

"It's *my* sister getting married," I argued. No good. I looked at the wall calendar where the large red circle that represented Fran's wedding loomed at me like an angry eye. The entire month of December was full of arrows and asterisks and my mother's notes to herself. If I ever got married, I'd run away to Elkton, Maryland, just for spite.

On the day of the wedding, Debs and Ava included me in all their beauty rituals: eyebrow tweezing, oatmeal facials, shampooing, hair setting, leg waxing, manicuring, and eyelash curling. Much of this was new to me because my mother, a size 20 most of her life, spent her cosmetic energy experimenting with the silhouettes various corsets and girdles provided. She paid little attention to her face. I'd watched her countless times after her morning bath. She used no

foundation but blotted her shiny freckled face with a puff dipped in light rachel powder. The lipstick was applied the way you'd put a dash in a sentence.

Finally, after six hours of primping, we got dressed. Debs wore a green satin sheath that showed off how slim she was—without dieting, my mother said. Ava was startling in a silver sequined dress that fell from her body like enchanted water. I stepped out the door in my red french-heel pumps as if I were wearing someone else's body, one that was fragile, required stiff posture, and allowed no contact with anything that might smudge my makeup.

The wedding went exactly as rehearsed. I had to eat with Maury and Melissa, but after dessert Debs and Ava made room for me at their table. Debs was a little drunk. She leaned on her elbow, her chin in her hand, and spoke slowly, drawling and cooing like a pigeon. Ava spent much of the night on the dance floor, sometimes dancing alone. The light bounced off her silver dress as she twirled and dipped. At eleven o'clock Fran tossed her bouquet—right through Aunt Debs's arms and onto the floor. Debs stumbled trying to pick it up but managed not to fall.

After the wedding my mother relaxed, went off her diet, and spent a week with her feet up playing card games with the aunts while a record snowstorm buried the capital city. She set aside the donor luncheon she was organizing for the synagogue where she was president of the sisterhood and where the rest of us set foot only for the high holidays.

Looking back now, I think she didn't quite approve of the Florida aunts. If they had been men, she'd have had no trouble appreciating their guts and eccentricities. But as women they must have frightened her. They had survived hurricanes. They had moved alone through nightclubs, funeral parlors, divorce courts, and casinos.

Under their influence my mother recollected her girlhood. "When I was fourteen I had a blue silk matching coat and dress that cost $200," she told Aunt Debs. She turned to me to explain. "That was when you could buy a dress for $6.95."

"Hen," Aunt Debs said, taking the pack in a canasta game, "you wouldn't believe some of the getups I've seen in Vegas."

"Not in your wildest dreams," Ava added. She had visited Debs and Teddy while the casino was being built. "It's hard to tell the hookers from the rest of the crowd."

"Hookers?" I asked.

"Whores," Debs explained.

"Please watch what you say," my mother whispered, glancing at me.

"I'm old enough to hear," I protested.

"I'll decide that," my mother said.

"Teddy knew everybody," Debs said, without a hint of wistfulness in her voice. This remark was met with silence by my mother and Ava.

"Even Frank Sinatra?" I asked.

"Sure," Debs said. "You want to know something about Frank Sinatra?" I nodded. "He still calls his mother every day. Just to check in."

They talked, too, about people who were long dead, people out of the family mythology. They ran through a slew of names and infamies, recalled favorite foods, recited the names of my grandmother Minerva's eight brothers and sisters, listed every set of twins on both sides of the family, and praised the spirit which had brought all our relatives out of the hopeless bondage of eastern Europe and onto the shores of America.

"You know you're part Gypsy, don't you?" Aunt Ava asked me at the end of one of these recitations.

We were playing rummy in teams. My mother and I against the aunts. "Gypsies?" my mother and I repeated.

"Our grandfather's father was a Gypsy who became a stable boy for a branch of the royal Romanian family," Ava explained.

"Really?" I asked, my mind already full of campfires, gold hoop earrings, and wide, colorful skirts.

"Absolutely," Debs said, stubbing out a cigarette and lighting another.

"I never heard that one," my mother said.

Aunt Debs cupped my chin in her free hand. "That's why you're so dark. Like your great-great-grandfather."

"Come on," my mother said. "There are no Jewish Gypsies." Her laughter was met with silence.

"Hen, we wouldn't kid about a family thing," Debs said. "He worked in the stables, taking care of the horses. And the riding boots."

"Riding boots?" My mother's voice sounded for a second just like Eleanor Roosevelt's, it was so shaky and high-pitched.

Ava elbowed me and smiled. "If you ever get the urge to roam, you'll know where it comes from."

I knew it had to be true. I could already feel the Gypsy blood in my veins. It had always been there. It was the reason I didn't want to join Young Judea. I couldn't belong to any group.

"He must have converted," my mother said, still puzzling out loud.

After the aunts left, I moved into Fran's room. The wallpaper with its profusion of birds and flowers reminded me of the house we had rented the year before in Miami with its hibiscus bushes and iridescent hummingbirds. But we didn't go to Florida the following summer. My parents sent me, instead, to a Jewish camp in the Poconos, where I stumbled through transliterations of blessings and songs and sneaked out at night to smoke with the boys. I didn't see the aunts again for eleven years. They stayed in touch, though—chatty letters on pastel stationery arrived several times a year.

Debs continued to live in seclusion on her houseboat. She became involved with the Humane Society, gave up meat, and adopted a variety of dogs and cats. Ava gave up Judaism, a faith she claimed only barely to have embraced, for the teachings of an Indian avatar named Meher Baba. When I was about fifteen she sent us a photograph of him with his finger to his lips. Her letter said he'd taken a vow of silence more than twenty years before and that she was going to India to live in an ashram with his followers.

I wasn't too surprised to learn in the mid-60s that Ava and her husband were living in a religious commune near Orlando and that Debs, who'd been hitting the bottle again, had been persuaded to join them.

I like to tell my friends that I was the poster child for my family—the one with something wrong that no one could fix. After

Fran married, she moved into a split-level home ten minutes away from my parents and had four children in quick succession. I tried not to hold it against her that my parents never complained about her, that she was my mother's idea of a model daughter. My own interactions with my father and mother over the following years went something like this.

"Have you met any nice boys lately? What about that boy Maury introduced you to? What does his father do? Is he going to college?"

"*What* boy?"

"Maury's friend."

"Maury *who*?"

"Your Aunt Florence thinks you should go to college here in town. What's wrong with George Washington University?"

"It's here in town."

"She hates me. My own daughter hates me."

My brilliant report cards failed to impress them. In my mother's eyes, I was valuable cargo waiting to be unloaded. Then her marriage mode would set in: invitations, napkins, and matchbook covers with a red embossed heart and my name intertwined with the name of someone nice, someone they approved of, someone Jewish. Caterer. Photographer. Bridesmaids' gowns. Ushers' handkerchiefs. Dyed silk pumps. And me, dressed up in white, an offering to the same God my mother served at her donor luncheons.

At last I graduated from high school and won a scholarship to a college in New England, a Yankee after all, my father complained. I didn't come home for the summers. After college, I went to Europe for a year. I threaded my way across the continent on a Eurail pass, picked grapes in Italy, and worked as a secretary in London. I pictured my relatives speaking of me the way they used to speak of the Florida branch—with the slightly disapproving nonchalance reserved for the inexplicable. My parents sent me a couple of hundred dollars every month, an emotional blackmail I gladly extorted knowing they felt helpless—except financially—to influence my life.

It was a beautiful fall day when I picked up my mother's letter from general delivery in Edinburgh, where I was visiting friends from college. General delivery was the only address I used that whole year;

it gave me the illusion that I never had to settle down, that I was beyond the reach of family. The letter was marked URGENT and explained that Fran was very sick. It ended with a plea for me to telephone as soon as possible.

"She had a tumor on her spine," my mother said when I finally reached her. "We think it came from a bad fall when she took the kids roller skating. They removed it," she whispered. "It was malignant."

The word "cancer" filled my mind, hordes of fiddler crabs with their pincers upraised like the ones I'd chased every summer as a child along Biscayne Bay. I tried to imagine Fran with a life-threatening disease but could only produce the image of her with baby after baby in the maternity ward of the hospital. "Will she be all right?" I asked.

"I waited to write you, hoping to have good news."

"When—?"

"Two months ago. She's had radiation and all her hair fell out. She weighs eighty-six pounds."

I remember looking through the window of my friends' house at the heather that purpled the September fields and wondering if heather grew anywhere else in the world. Everybody was pitching in, my mother said. Herb, though, was falling apart. Could I come home and take care of the kids? I could sleep in the guest room in the basement. I agreed and made arrangements for the next plane back to the States. In my mother's voice there had been a music, a music that caught me up in its melody, its refrain. We can save her, it said, if the sacrifice is big enough.

But we couldn't save Fran, and my mother, who lived all her life conservatively as a kind of white magic against such a tragedy, was beyond consolation. My father called in the Florida aunts toward the end of Fran's illness. They flew to Washington and stayed at Fran's house with me, sleeping on cots in the rec room. They took on cooking and cleaning and babysitting with a fervor I wouldn't have expected of them. But even they, with their perpetual Florida tans and tropical radiance, were lost in the larger crowd of family, in that swaying throng of mourners dressed in black.

The funeral was held in the poshly appointed Zimmerman's Star of David, the largest Jewish establishment in town. I had never ex-

perienced grief before, and now I used it as an excuse to avoid Melissa, Maury, and the rest of the Washington clan. Everyone overlooked my aloofness, impressed, I knew, with my devotion to Fran, with my selflessness. I held onto my sacrifice like a shield and refused to cry through the rabbi's long eulogy. All the time I kept waiting for the grief to hit me like a tidal wave, for it to grab me like a claw.

At the cemetery, a beautiful snow-covered hillside in Virginia, both my parents fainted and were helped back to their feet by the Florida aunts. Those two were everywhere, consoling the family, lending a hand when the awning threatened to blow down at the graveside, helping mourners into and out of cars. They wept unashamedly, not so much for themselves, as Debs confided to me in the limousine, but on my parents' behalf. Ava was more silent than I had remembered her. She had a silver streak through her hair—whether natural or peroxided—like Indira Gandhi. It gave her an otherworldly look, as if it were the badge of some wisdom obtained at great expense. All she said to me that afternoon was, "There are no rewards for us here." Her green eyes swept the horizon and arced into the clouds and back.

After the burial, there was the *shiva*, the period of ritual mourning. Zimmerman's had delivered to Fran's house a dozen wooden chairs small enough to be elementary school furniture. When we returned from the grave, my aunts dutifully unfolded them and set about serving the platters that friends of the family had sent. Only the immediate family had to sit in the little chairs, terribly uncomfortable on purpose to keep the mourners' attention on pain and grief. The aunts brought us food and encouraged us to eat. During all of this service they were as humble and quiet as geishas.

The eating and crying continued all evening until the last guest left and my sister's husband, Herb, collapsed into sleep. Finally, only my parents, the aunts, and I remained. Ava suggested my mother switch from her mourner's chair to the sofa. My mother, mute as she had been all day, obeyed, moving in a daze. She took off her shoes and stretched out the length of the couch. "God," she suddenly said. "I helped Frannie pick out this fabric." She felt the nubby tweed of it and sobbed. "What's the point?" she asked us all.

"Oh, Hen, I'm so sorry," Ava said.

"I know," my mother said.

"But Hen," Ava went on, "there's something I want to tell you. Something you have to know."

All of us looked at her.

"She isn't really dead," Ava announced. I could hear the sound of genuine jubilation in her voice, of conviction. "No one really dies. We all come back. I knew it when I was in India. You mustn't think of her as lost forever."

My mother looked to Aunt Debs.

"Yes," Debs agreed. "It's a comfort. Somewhere your Fran and my Teddy go on. Transformed." She exhaled, and we watched her cigarette smoke hang in the air for a moment like a magician's rope trick.

Then my mother bolted upright on the couch. "You're crazy!" she shouted. "Both of you."

"No, Hen, you don't understand—"

"You've always been crazy. Only now you call it religion. We're leaving. Get our coats," she ordered my father.

"Please," Aunt Debs begged, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Wait, Ma," I called to her as she punched her fists through her coat sleeves.

"Wait for what?" my mother said, turning on me the same venom she felt for the aunts. "My Frannie's dead. Who cares if she comes back as something else? She isn't coming back to those four children. Or," she socked her chest, "to me."

That was the last time she ever saw the aunts, though she and my father eventually retired to Florida. The aunts tried to contact her repeatedly, but she dismissed all apologies and offers of reconciliation and returned their letters unopened. And I think, mild as she was, that she took pride in having taken so absolute a stand against them. Years afterward she refused to speak their names. She tended her anger like a rock garden, nourishing it once a year on the anniversary of Fran's death. Fifteen years later, when I came home for a visit, I saw her light the *yahrzeit* candle and heard her say bitterly, "Back as a flame? Only a little flame?"

The aunts left the day after the funeral, hugging thin coats around their print dresses at the airport as we waited for their call to board the plane. I knew I'd want to defend them if their names ever came up, if I ever found myself sorting through the family mythology. And

I knew I'd never change my parents' minds about the incident. They needed that anger too much. I could imagine myself far into the future, living perhaps in Taos or San Francisco, some place I'd never been, talking to a child with a face I couldn't picture clearly, a dark face like mine. I'd tell her about the wedding—not my own, but Fran's.

When their plane taxied down the runway I wished I were on it with them, our faces leaning together in a threesome toward the small window, the city spreading out below us like a game board. The trip south would have felt like walking under a very large shade tree, a tree so large that the coolness under its branches went on and on into nightfall.

Goldring among the Cicadas

Harry Goldring was fifty-nine years old and still worried about upsetting his mother, Bella. On alternate Wednesdays, he ate lunch in her apartment. Today, he was going to talk to her about moving to a retirement village. He really was. She would pitch a fit. He would feel disloyal.

Despite his age, Harry still felt like a young man with his whole future stretching out before him. When he dealt with Bella, though, he felt old. He thought this was unusual. Most people he knew complained of feeling like little kids around their parents.

While Bella stuffed peaches with cottage cheese, Harry studied a photo of his younger brother. Mel was pushing fifty, but in the pic-

ture on Bella's mahogany sideboard he was a perpetual nineteen, tan and muscular from months of holding action against the Japanese.

Bella noticed Harry staring at the picture. "Such a handsome boy," she said. "We almost lost him."

Harry asked if she wanted a glass of tea, but it was too late.

"Quinine, quinine, quinine," she chanted, cutting her peach into bite-sized bits. "I never saw a human being take so much medicine. We supported the drugstore."

Next she would be calling Mel her Yiddishah Marine. Harry resisted the urge to remind her that he had tried to enlist, too, but had been declared 4F—volatile blood pressure even then. In Bella's mind Mel held the title of family hero while Harry was the family mensch. That meant Harry bought ambulances for Israel while Mel invested in the Redskins and socialized with goyim, knocking back martinis and who knows what other poison. Mel was shrewd, Bella always said, while Harry—*Harry had a heart as big as his body.* He'd always been fat. He loved food. He was married to a fat woman and his son, Maury, was even fatter. Harry couldn't recall a single movie or book that showed what fat people were really like. They never got to rescue anything but leftovers.

Harry always pretended to be on a diet when he visited his mother. Now he arranged his cottage cheese in a neat mound and rehearsed what he and Mel had agreed on. *Ma, it's time to give up the apartment. Even with the maid you work too hard. You need people around you.* But Bella didn't just live in her apartment like other people, Harry realized, looking at the mirrors from Czechoslovakia, the Persian rugs. She was a curator, for Christ's sake, and the apartment was a museum of Velvel's success and her own good taste. You couldn't fit a museum into the one-bedroom units of the Potomac Retirement Village. Still, Bella was eighty-two years old. She'd fallen twice in the two years since Velvel died. Once she'd fractured an ankle and the other time suffered a mild concussion. Both times she'd been waxing the floor. When Velvel was alive, if he caught her climbing a stepladder to vacuum drapes, he'd yell something in Russian, and she'd giggle and stop. Now there was no one to make her giggle or stop.

Bella put their plates in the sink, then walked slowly to the bedroom and returned with an ornate hat in a plastic bag. "I want Florence to have this. I wore it for your thirtieth anniversary."

Harry thanked her, though he knew that Florence would give it to the maid. The day he'd won the low-income housing contract—his biggest deal ever—he'd been relaxing in the den, feeling kingly in his household, the master of a notable destiny, when Jolie Mae walked by, dragging the Hoover and wearing Bella's mink-collared sweater over her uniform. Now he frowned as he imagined the old black woman in the fancy beanie.

Bella moved carefully toward the TV and flipped on an afternoon soap. "Mama," Harry began, "I've been thinking—"

"Not now," Bella said. "I want to see if that stupid Ann keeps her baby. You'll think later." She angled her cheek toward his face, prompting him to lean down and kiss her goodbye. He felt the blood rush to his head. Then something sputtered right under his breast bone, like a failing car starter. Something scurried there, threatening to run away.

Harry sat staring through the french doors at the patio where a small wind-devil of autumn leaves sucked at the flagstones. Soon it would be his busy season. The nation's capital would be limping through another winter. Pipes would be freezing and bursting all over town.

He let a Hershey's Kiss dissolve in his mouth and thought with pride of his fleet of four white panel vans. *Goldring's Plumbing*—the "o" a gold ring set with a huge diamond solitaire. Under it, his slogan: *Service is an engagement we take seriously*. There were worse ways to make a living. He didn't expect his customers to remember him when they were taking a nice steamy shower. But when the tap ran cold, when the toilet backed up or the garbage disposal choked on steak bones, then, *then* they were calling his name.

The phone rang. His son, Maury, was having a problem. His wife needed breast reduction surgery, and their insurance company wouldn't pay. The plastic surgeon had sent two letters explaining that her heavy breasts were straining the thoracic vertebrae. "'Purely cosmetic,'" Maury read to Harry from the insurance company's letter. "These guys have no compassion. Can you imagine? All her life, she thinks she's lucky to have big boobs, and it turns out they're making her hunchback."

"How much will it cost?"

"Five thousand, give or take."

"That's a lot of money," Harry said. The exact amount he'd put aside for a down payment on that condo in West Palm Beach.

"I'm not asking for myself." Maury's voice dropped. "Damn it, the doctor told us it would be covered. She's scheduled for next Friday afternoon."

"What about a bank loan?"

"I'm willing to pay you interest, Dad," Maury said. "Why should the bank know Elaine's bust size?"

Elaine was such a nice girl. From Georgia, where they knew what good manners were. Hunchback. Harry remembered Charles Laughton's twisted face as he lurched around like a wild animal in the bell tower.

They agreed on 5 percent a year. "*Rachmones*," Harry mumbled as he hung up. Compassion.

Maury just couldn't seem to break in as a lawyer. Harry had thrown him customers over the years, but they drifted away. It wasn't personal, they assured Harry. Maury was such a nice guy, maybe even too nice. At least Elaine substitute-taught a couple days a week. They had two adorable sons. The kids were on diets, but when they visited Harry, they stuffed their pockets with bounty from his candy drawer—Snickers bars, Milky Ways, caramels.

When the doctor suggested he get psychotherapy for his hypertension, Harry had laughed, but now he regarded his Wednesday afternoon session as a small oasis in his week.

Dr. Toland's offices were dimly lit, like a bedroom. The layout reminded Harry of a series of check-valves. There were two waiting rooms and a separate entrance and exit so patients never saw each other. Even though he detested waiting, he always arrived early for appointments. Why was that?

It had taken Harry a while to relax with Dr. Toland. Bella and Velvel had ingrained in him the idea that he mustn't trust anyone who wasn't family. A few times Harry had gone home angry at not knowing anything about the doctor except what schools he had gradu-

ated from, information Harry had gathered from the diplomas on the wall. Also, he had asked if the doctor happened to be Jewish. The doctor happened not to be.

During the first session, Dr. Toland had explained that high blood pressure was one of the ways Harry had developed to cope with the world, but there were other ways, and he could learn them. The doctor said it was a little like switching from being right- to left-handed.

"Ready to go to work?" Toland asked as Harry entered the office. Harry heard him click on the tape recorder.

It felt good to have his legs up, to stare at the dimpled ceiling while the doctor lavished attention on him in the form of simple questions. When Toland asked, How are you? he really meant it. Sometimes, though, Harry thought Dr. Toland was trying to trip him up, trying to get him to admit to something awful once his defenses were down. Harry was sure he wasn't hiding anything. He'd long ago decided that he wasn't a very deep person. He was conscientious, but his politics and philosophy were only about an inch thick. Under that lay strange questions and ideas not fit for conversation, such as: How many people worldwide still named their sons Adolf? Had there always been Jewish prostitutes, or were they a result of the establishment of Israel?

"You were saying you get along well with people."

"Sure, people like me," Harry said. "They can see I haven't got a mean bone in my body." Those were Mel's words, the family's words. His official description. Possibly, his epitaph.

"Why else do people like you?"

"I'm generous—not to brag, but I am. And I'm easy to please. You know," Harry lifted his head, "there's only one food I don't like. Beets. I hate beets."

"What exactly pleases you?"

"People please me," Harry said firmly.

"All the time?"

Harry scanned a portrait gallery of his family in his mind. Only Florence had ever really been angry with him. But that was natural. "Yes."

"You always get your way?"

"Who's talking about getting my way?"

"What animal are you this instant? Say it now."

"I'm . . . a Budweiser Clydesdale. I've got big white shaggy feet."

"Where are you?"

Harry let the images flood his brain. "I'm pulling a wagon full of beer through a cobblestone street. Part of a team."

"Now you're going up a steep hill."

"My feet make a lot of noise. My big chest is pulling the wagon up."

"Feel your body," Dr. Toland ordered.

Harry became aware of his tight stomach muscles, his hands curled into fists, his forehead furrowed with effort.

"Hold that tension for a moment," Toland said. "Now the day's work is done. You're in a pasture, lying down with the other horses. Night is falling."

Harry felt his body begin to go limp. He sank deeper into the leather couch. His legs relaxed until his feet formed a V.

"Now you see your mother and brother, wife and children. All the members of your family are slowly walking into the pasture."

Harry could see them clearly. First was Bella, and holding her arm, Mel. They were dressed up like royalty, but they looked sad. "They're all crying," Harry told the doctor. He felt tension return to his body as his relatives filled the pasture, which had sand traps and rolling hills like a golf course. He watched the horde of people arrive until the pasture was tweeded with color like a football stadium on TV. And then his time was up.

Harry and Mel were having lunch at Duke Zeibert's, a restaurant where people went to be seen and where the owner, Duke, circulated among the tables. Normally, Harry brought in deli and ate it one-handed as he presided over the office hustle-bustle. He liked to eat fast. He looked at the menu. What could he order that would take a long time? Something leafy. Maybe something with bones, tiny bones.

The waiter appeared. Mel ordered a soufflé. Harry ordered smoked whitefish with cucumbers and sour cream.

"I've been thinking we ought to talk to Mama together," Harry said.

"Hmmm," Mel said.

Unlike the rest of the family, Mel talked little. Harry figured this was the result of being in the War, of having seen things that words could not change. *The Goldring Boys*, that's how they were known. But the two of them were so different. Mel vacationed at a hacienda in Mexico; Harry went to Miami where his overeating was practically deemed a mitzvah. Mel had a future as an alcoholic. Harry imagined himself keeling over on the golf course. Heart. The big heart would just stop.

"You'd think an eighty-two-year-old woman would be starved for company," Mel finally said.

Harry tried to picture Bella in the retirement home, but her figure kept looming out of focus, an expression of terror on her face. "The only people she ever wanted around was the family."

Mel set his fork down. "Suppose I call her? Make it real casual?" He signaled the waiter to bring a phone.

"You're going to tell her on the phone?"

"Mama, how are you feeling?" Mel began. A long silence followed during which, Harry knew, Bella was reporting on the condition of her bowels. "Listen," Mel said. "I want to tell you a secret." Harry perked up. "Your apartment building is going for condominiums. So Harry and I have found you a new place." Long silence. "It's big, sure. Roomy. Harry will take you to see it"—he looked over at Harry for a date—"next Thursday morning."

Harry couldn't believe it. Snap. Just like that. He had more trouble tying his shoes.

Mel was purring into the phone again. "Oh, Mama, I love you, too." He hung up. "At least she's agreed to look at the place."

"What if she doesn't like it?"

"I'm not a magician."

"Think about it," Harry countered. They both reached for the check.

Moments later, Harry handed his ticket to the valet and watched him sprint into the parking lot. When was the last time Bella had told him she loved him? His car squealed to a halt in front of him. The day of the Japanese surrender. They were listening to the radio—he and Velvel and Bella and Florence. "My Mel is coming home!" Bella shouted. She wrapped herself around Harry. "I love you," she said. "Today I love the whole world."

"Mrs. Liberman has agreed to let us look in on her." The director of the Potomac Retirement Village punched the elevator button for the eighth floor. Bella gripped the railing and stared at the numbers. They had toured the card room, the pool deck, and the arts and crafts center. Bella hadn't said a word.

Harry tried to imagine his own old age. He'd be bald as a cue ball, like Velvel. Still fat. Maybe a cane. He'd live in a condo in Florida and eat snapper almondine. Once a year he'd go north to pay his respects to family, dead and alive. The rest of the year he'd play golf and lie in the sun.

The door of 804 opened before the bell stopped chiming. "Come in!" Mrs. Liberman sang, ushering them into the foyer as the director made the introductions. Harry noticed the doorway made extrawide for wheelchairs, the red emergency buzzer, and speaker on the wall. He steered Bella to the window. "What do you think of this?" he asked. He pointed to the gardens below. "Some nice view, huh?"

"View?" Bella said. "Who sits and looks out a window all day? You have children?" she asked, turning to Mrs. Liberman.

"Of course. Over here by the sofa." Harry and Bella followed the woman to the coffee table where she picked up two framed photographs. "My son, Alan, and his wife, Marian. He's in ski equipment. Three children. All smart as a whip."

They could have been Harry's niece and nephew. His own kids, even. He'd read somewhere that the entire human race consisted of fiftieth cousins. How many pictures of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were there at the Village? The faces ran together in his mind, interchangeable. Weddings, bar mitzvahs, kids in braces. Pieces of paper. Pieces of paper.

"Your children visit you?" Bella pressed.

"They moved to Colorado." Mrs. Liberman gently returned the faces to their shrine. "They used to visit. Every Saturday. Now they drop me beautiful postcards."

"Terrible," Bella whispered.

Bella the nosy. Bella with her talent for going straight to the heartache.

Mrs. Liberman scooped a handful of glossy cards from the end-

table drawer. "See? The Grand Canyon. Coulee Dam. A prairie dog. A coyote."

Bella took the woman aside by the elbow. "You like it here?"

"Mrs. Liberman has been a Villager for more than three years," the director said. "She's practically a founding member, aren't you?" Mrs. Liberman nodded uncertainly.

"You have good shopping nearby?" Bella continued her interrogation. "A&P? Shoe store? Dress shop?"

"They take us on a bus." Mrs. Liberman smiled. "Sometimes we sing on the way. You'll see."

"Me? A bus?" Bella laughed. "I haven't been on a bus since Roosevelt." Harry's heart sank. His temples began to throb. Bella continued. "But I wish you long life and *nachas* from your children." She started for the door. "I hope they move back from Colorado." She exited into the hallway and stood puzzling over which way to go.

During the car ride home, Bella called the retirement village a high-priced, high-rise shtetl. Harry pointed out that she'd have maid service, a doctor on call night and day, and planned social activities. Bella said Harry had taste in his mouth. In his rear end. She wasn't going to be buried on the eighth floor like poor Mrs. Liberman. Why couldn't she buy her apartment when the building went for condos?

"You can't afford it," Harry said.

Bella glared at him. "You'll have to drag me," she announced. "I'll lie down on the floor like a hippie before I'll move."

It'll be her last move, Harry thought to himself. He was sorry he hadn't allowed the director to show them the nursing home wing. Bella could use a little humility. She'd never once referred to her own death, unlike Velvel who planned for it the way other people plan for a vacation. Oh no, mustn't aggravate Bella. That was the first commandment at home. *I'm the complaint department,* Velvel would say, smiling.

"So I'll get old like everybody else," Bella said, back in her apartment. "But not in front of strangers."

Harry and Florence agreed to watch their two grandsons the weekend after Elaine's breast surgery. Bella would join them for Friday dinner. Late that afternoon, Harry went around the den salting the

overstuffed sofas with loose change so the boys would have something to hunt for. Weren't those kids lucky to have a grandfather like him? Still in good health, able to help out with a summer camp tuition here, a basketball hoop there. A grandfather who *spent time* with his grandsons. So what if Maury wasn't on his feet yet? Florence always said generosity and love never hurt anybody.

Maury phoned at 5:30 to report on Elaine. He told Harry the doctor had removed enough tissue to make another pair of breasts. Now they had Elaine packed in ice to prevent swelling. While Maury talked, Harry's gaze wandered to the den wallpaper, a pattern of grape leaves wound around fuzzy black vines. The room looked like a goddamn fruit farm. Why didn't he have a room like the ones in Chivas Regal ads? A leather-topped desk with gold flourishes all around the edges like a stock certificate. Wallpaper with a fox being chased by spotted dogs. The hunt. That's what he should have insisted on when Florence redecorated.

"Elaine's hot to take tennis lessons again," Maury was saying. "Nothing to get in the way of her forehand now."

"She should live and be well," Harry said. "Kiss her for me." He hung up.

He lay back in his Barcalounger, waiting and fidgeting. Florence had taken Bella with her to the beauty parlor and then to pick up the kids. Jolie Mae was in the kitchen fixing a feast. He could smell the caramel cake in the oven. His mouth watered. He remembered Bella's cooking—stuffed derma, eggplant salad. Chicken soup with kreplach on Fridays. And the cooking odors that hung in the hallways of the apartment building where he grew up. Something happened to food smells trapped there. When they all came together, the result was awful, like inhaling someone else's belch. It made him sick to remember it.

He readjusted his chair, closed his eyes, and tried to summon the Clydesdale he'd invented at Dr. Toland's. He wanted to lie down in the pasture again, but it eluded him. Instead, the evening to come played like a home movie. Florence would arrive with Bella and the boys. Bella would have that damn blue hair, and Florence's hair would feel like wire lath.

When he opened his eyes, the grapevines of the wallpaper began to twist and slither like snakes. Stress, he told himself. He shut his eyes and opened them quickly. The room was glowing, as if it had

heated up. The vines were so thick and active now they threatened to pull down the walls. The bookcase leaned and swayed, ready to crash to the floor. Harry jumped up and threw his back against it. Overhead, the chandelier glinted, its long crystal drops a hundred sharpened blades. He pushed until the bookcase knocked against the wall. Suddenly he felt his heart. Not the beat of it, but its weight and shape. Big and slippery and fragile. Like one of his top-of-the-line porcelain bathtubs being delivered through a window. His whole body was slick with sweat, little pools of it in the bags under his eyes, in the folds of his neck and chin. "I'm cracking up," he said. "The end. Finito." The sound of his own voice gave him courage. He began to feel cool. He let go of the bookcase and willed the walls plumb again, the furniture upright. Then he staggered to the bathroom and took a blood pressure pill.

He returned to the den, eyeing the room from the doorway until he was certain everything in it was normal. He stretched out in the lounge chair. I'm all right. I'm in my own house. So then what was all this tumult, this brooding? he asked himself. And in the same instant he had the answer. Dr. Toland had told him to pay attention to his fantasies, to the weirdest ideas that crossed his mind. He did. And what they meant was clear: he was dying.

It wasn't as if he had pains in his chest or down his arm. He knew the signs of heart attack. This was more subtle, not symptoms but a premonition. On Saturday morning he made an appointment with the family doctor for Monday.

In the meantime, he enjoyed the easy courage of the condemned. He felt a sense of wisdom descend and wait nearby along with his own death. He was starry-eyed, like someone who had fallen in love. It irritated everyone around him. He was slow to answer questions, indecisive in the car on Sunday when they took the boys and Bella for a drive in the country. In exasperation, Florence took the wheel and drove them to Martin's Dairy. He didn't eat ice cream with the others but stood at the farm fence and watched the clouds float by, forming and re-forming like ideas in his head. A certain elegance inhabited his body.

He took the wheel for the ride home. As he pulled onto the main

highway, he looked into the rearview mirror and saw Bella there, stiff as a little doll, a great-grandchild on each side of her like a set of bookends. Bella had never driven a car. How many times had she sat in the backseat, obstructing his view? A hundred? A thousand? "Mama, you're not made of glass," he said.

Bella didn't move.

"Switch places with one of the boys," he told her. "Sit by a door."

Bella was making faces, unaware he could see her in the mirror. She squirmed over and sat directly behind him.

Harry looked at the countryside flowing by. It was so beautiful, even in November with the fields died back. And the foothills, curved like a woman. Like hips and thighs and ass. God, the world was gorgeous. And he'd be leaving it soon. He'd seen his share though. He'd been to Puerto Rico and Las Vegas and everywhere plumbing conventions were held. He'd been to Israel. He and Florence had been pampered at the Duke University fat farm. He'd lived it up in Manhattan—Broadway shows, Mama Leone's, the works.

"I'm not going," Bella suddenly whispered in his ear. "I even told Mel."

Harry swerved onto the dirt shoulder of the road and stopped. A cloud of reddish dust engulfed them.

"Where are we?" one of the kids asked.

"Nowhere," Harry said. "I'm resting."

"Resting my eye," Bella snapped.

"Mama!" Harry twisted around to face her.

"Grandpa's getting *mad*," the younger boy said.

"We're going for a walk, Mama." Harry opened the door of the Buick and helped her from the car. She was biting down on her lower lip. She was always biting down on her lower lip. He did all her banking, the hiring and firing of her maids. Schlepp, schlepp. He brought her to the house once a month for dinner. What did he get for it? Bella, biting down on her lower lip.

They started walking down the white sideline of the road. Harry turned briefly back to the car, sending a signal that nailed Florence and the boys to the spot. Don't move, his eyes said. Don't you dare move or speak. His chest was pounding. His lungs felt like two pockets turned inside out. Dust went up his nose, in his mouth.

"Crazy," Bella said. "*Meshugge*."

Harry held her by the elbow as they walked along, taking small steps.

"I'm ruining these shoes."

"Shoes are meant to be walked in, Mama." A bird flew by. "Look at that," Harry said, pointing.

"A bird," Bella said. "So what?"

"So nothing. The whole world could be without birds. Would it bother you?"

"You dragged me out here to talk about birds?"

"I want to tell you something, Mama."

Bella stopped and pulled her coat around her.

"The story of the happiest day of my life," he said, not knowing what he would say next. What was the happiest day? His wedding? The day Maury was born? The day he moved into his big new office? No. Something farther back, simpler. "Remember when I graduated high school? June 1929. The seventeen-year cicadas were out."

"Birds," Bella said. "Now bugs. So?"

"So I was eighteen, and I had a white robe and a mortarboard with a gold tassel." He hadn't looked fat in the graduation robe. He'd looked massive, imposing, a walking Greek column. The day came back to him clearly. He could see the old-model cars on the street, big and shiny and black. "It was so hot," Harry said. The day had been all green and gold and white. On the bandstand were two hundred white scrolled diplomas tied with gold ribbons. Nearby, a green-and-white striped pavilion shaded long picnic tables full of iced lemonade, the glasses already sweating in the heat. The principal read the long list of names. It was hard to hear over the racket of the cicadas, the fuzzy gold insects that lived underground for seventeen years at a stretch, then emerged for a month to mate. *Harry Goldring*, the principal said. "Remember how slowly I walked across the platform?" he asked Bella. "I kept thinking, I'm the first person to graduate high school in the whole entire family. Me. Number one."

"Number one," Bella repeated.

"I remember that Polish girl who was the valedictorian," Harry continued. "She wrote the class motto. 'Each of us will go our separate ways, holding high the banner of excellence.'" *Separate* ways. He had believed it that afternoon. He had pictured himself living in his own small apartment, riding on trains, going to the movies on his

own. He stared at Bella. "Everything was gold—the drinks, the sun, the cicadas sitting in the trees. Singing. That's a love song, that noise they make—"

"I'm getting cold," Bella said. "It's nice you graduated. I'm getting cold just thinking how hot it was that day. A person could have passed out—"

"Oh God," Harry cried at the sky. "Why are You letting her interrupt me?" He grabbed Bella by the shoulders. "Don't you understand? That day," he said more quietly, tears springing to his eyes. "That day. I'm telling you everything."

She looked at him blankly. "What?" she raised her voice. "What do you want from me?"

She didn't know. None of them knew. There was a fire in him now. The fat man starving, the shoemaker who goes barefoot. I can't get enough, he thought. Why can't I ever get enough?

"Take me home," Bella said. She looked frightened. He let go of her.

They walked back to the car and got in. Florence and the boys seemed to have stopped breathing.

"I'm begging you, Harry," Bella said, pulling out a handkerchief. "Don't make me go to that place."

"I'm not making you go," Harry answered. "Just promise me you'll try it for six months. Just that long."

The idea of a compromise had obviously not occurred to Bella until now. She took a long time to answer. "No," she said.

On Monday, Harry went for a checkup. His EKG looked good, blood count completely normal. His pressure was a little high, but nothing alarming. Harry described in detail what had happened on Friday afternoon: the vines turning to snakes, the furniture about to topple, the certain knowledge that he would soon be dead. The doctor said it sounded like a panic attack.

"Do these panic attacks cause heart attacks?" Harry asked.

The doctor said they didn't. Judging from Harry's EKG, he wasn't going to have a heart attack any time soon. Harry was not relieved. The doctor suggested he talk to Toland.

On Tuesday afternoon Harry didn't lie on the couch right away. He sat across the desk from Toland. Toland nodded the whole time Harry talked, writing notes occasionally. "I still feel like I'm dying," Harry said as he finished the story.

"Yes," Toland said. "I can see that."

"You can?"

"It's just an expression."

"Oh."

"Let's try some imaging on the couch," Toland said.

Even as he stretched out, Harry saw himself blanched white as an almond, lying dead on a rug somewhere, looking much heavier than he actually was because in that position the fat spread out. He banished the image from his mind, but it hovered at the edge like a page number.

"First, tell me what's been happening. At work. With the family."

Harry told him about visiting the Village with Bella. "Bella's eighty-two, and she's not worried about dying."

"Everybody's dying," Toland said.

"It's like a job," Harry said.

"What is?"

"Dying. You're born, and then you spend the rest of your life dying. Breathing in and out. Looking at trees."

"Close your eyes," Toland said. "Let your mind drift. You're very relaxed."

But Harry couldn't relax. What about Bella? What about the Village? No, *not* the Village. Screw the Village. Good God, why had he ever considered the place? Mel's stupid idea. What did Mel know? *Gornisht*. Bella would be miserable with a social life. Better to hire a companion, someone bossy with a sense of humor. An older Jewish woman, maybe, a pensioned widow—

"You're not relaxing." Toland got up and put on a tape recording of masted ships in the wind. "Try again."

"All right," Harry said. Behind his eyes he saw nothing but a deep orange color. He listened to the peaceful creaking of canvas and rigging. The ocean yawned gently. The ships rocked in the white-toothed waves.

"Go wherever you like," Toland said.

Harry drove to Florida in a dove gray Cadillac. The car had a sail, like a boat, and sped down U.S. 1 and then I-95 on gusts of wind. The trees changed from hardwoods to pine and then cabbage palms and magnolias. Farther south, swaying royal palms bowed down before him. He could smell the cold steam of the ocean. When he reached Coconut Grove, he parked his car on the beach, aimed at Africa, where the surf would be crashing over it by morning. He got out and walked toward a dense thicket of mangroves. Weeks passed, months. "I've gone into the tropics. Into the wilderness," he told Toland dreamily. He was going to live off his own fat, ha ha, instead of the fat of the land. Much much later, he surfaced on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach, a thin figure in a white suit that caught the neon glow of the hotel signs. "No one recognizes me," Harry said. He opened his eyes and grinned.

"Give them a little time," Toland said.

Her Michelangelo

Riva Stern was going to save Paul Auerbach. She was going to save him for college and law school and a house in the suburbs and three or four children. She would save him for the world, like bolstering Albert Schweitzer at a crucial point early in his career.

Paul was the poorest person Riva knew. He was poorer than the maid who had taken care of the Sterns for more than fifteen years. He was poorer, even, than Tante and Uncle, her old Russian relatives who still had a party line and lived in a black neighborhood. They spoke hatchet English, and their dingy little apartment always smelled of candle wax and boiled beef with carrots. Riva had never seen Tante in anything but a housecoat. Because of their age and piety, no one

in the family took note of their poverty in a critical way. No one pointed to it as a sign of failure. They did not drive a car. They couldn't afford to go anywhere but the synagogue, and they received the hand-me-downs and charity of at least twenty-five family members with utter dignity. And Paul Auerbach was poorer even than that, though his poverty had the same sort of grace, a kind of storybook quality.

Paul had been working for his uncle at the wholesale produce market in downtown Washington since he was nine years old. He hawked fruits and vegetables from 4 A.M. to noon on Saturdays and on Wednesday mornings until it was time to go to school. Once, right after she got her license, Riva had driven there and from her car had watched the customers surge along the narrow streets and alleys lined with pushcarts and trucks. Haggard men in knit caps and shabby coats weighed and bagged tomatoes, celery, endive, calling out their bargains to passersby. Torn vegetables slicked the pavements, and the gutters ran with the juices of the discards, the overripe, the accidentally dropped. Paul, wearing big leather gloves and a dirty white apron over several layers of old clothes, was carrying bushels of something heavy, his body moving with the fierce rhythms of concentration, his face red with effort and the cold. He hadn't seen her.

You couldn't tell Paul was poor. Until she began to date him, Riva thought he was shy or antisocial. He had a beat-up car, which, she found out later, he owned with his older brother who had already left home. Paul, in fact, spent most of his energy trying to look and act as middle class as anyone else, even though his home life was a nightmare. Riva didn't mind having to buck him up. He was worth it. Because poverty was abstract to Riva, she had a bottomless faith in his ability to overcome it, and her faith was contagious. Also, she was good at talking people into things.

Now she sat in her mother's Buick in a downpour in front of the public library waiting for Paul. She had told her parents she'd be out until ten, studying for a Latin exam. On the phone, Paul had said something was wrong. He needed to see her. Riva loved being needed. She thought she would make a wonderful wife for some brilliant, successful man, like a physicist or a writer.

Through the sheeting rain, she made out his finned, grass green Oldsmobile. She pulled up the hood of her raincoat and when Paul drove up alongside, darted from her car to his. Then she slid across

the seat and kissed him on the cheek. "I don't know why I came," he said. "Talking about it isn't going to change a thing."

"Let's go someplace."

He headed in the direction of Tacoma Park, to a back road that dead-ended under a train trestle. They often went there to neck. They had discovered it one Sunday in the fall when they took a hamper lunch to the park.

It had taken Riva months to get Paul to confide in her. He was deeply ashamed of his family. But now he trusted her completely in a way that he would probably never trust anyone again in his life. His need was that great.

The sky was a dull red above the glistening street lights as he maneuvered through traffic along Georgia Avenue. The rain made liquid jewels of the neon signs for Little Tavern hamburgers and Midas mufflers and Ramco Auto Upholstery. Riva had become more aware of her surroundings lately. She would be leaving for college in the fall, and she would probably never live here again, except for the summers. She and Paul planned to write to each other and spend vacations together. She liked thinking about that arrangement—Paul tucked away in her life, like a lucky coin you could keep in your pocket and never spend. Riva was a "brain," and Paul was the only boy at Hoover High School she had ever dated. Unlike most boys, he wasn't afraid to date a girl who made better grades than he did. Or maybe he figured that his grades would have matched hers if he had more time to spend on schoolwork.

Paul parked under the trestle, and they cracked their windows. It was the end of March, and they could smell the change of seasons in the sharp, damp air. Outside the car, the first green shoots worked their way up through a thick brown carpet of dead grass.

"I won't be going to San Antonio," he said. He linked his hands together and cracked his knuckles. Paul had won the school debating contest. The prize was $300 and the honor of representing the school at the National Polemics Competition.

"Oh no," Riva said. The story would be terrible; it would make her cry for Paul. The story would be about his disreputable father and his pathetic mother. She put her arms around him and lay her head on his shoulder and waited.

"He heard about the money. He said he had to pay these bills. He showed me a bill for three months' rent for the apartment."

"How did he find out?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Maybe he heard your mother telling somebody about the prize." As soon as Riva said it, she could see Mrs. Auerbach herself telling her husband about the money—being proud of Paul, not realizing what would happen next. "You have to go. You could win the $2,500 grand prize."

"I know."

"You've still got three weeks. Maybe your brother can help you out. Maybe you'll let me help you out—"

"No!" His eyes flashed. He punched the dashboard with his fist.

"Don't do that to yourself." Riva stroked his hand.

He forced a smile and combed through his hair with his fingers. "Right. New topic. You've got your big test tomorrow. Come on, let's conjugate a couple of verbs." He whispered it into her ear. "You're so luscious."

"God, you're sweet." She kissed his hand. "You could take the money out of your college savings."

Paul had a savings account at the bank that only Riva—not even his mother or brother—knew about. In three years he had managed to save $1,500 toward tuition at George Washington University.

"I can't do that. I'm already short for the first semester unless I can get a loan. I'm counting on getting a loan."

She stroked his sand-colored, slightly greasy hair that felt like silk in her fingers, like silk embroidery floss. She comforted him, and together they tried to figure a way for him to accumulate the money before the end of April. Then they necked, just a little, just to cheer him up. She unzipped his pants and drew circles around his cock with her fingers until he was hard, and then they kissed a little more, and then he drove her back to the library.

The next morning was a Friday, and Riva lay in bed before the alarm clock rang pondering Paul's problems. Paul had a secret that no one at school except Riva knew: he supported himself. Sometimes he had to help support his mother and father. This had been going on since he was fourteen. In the past, in addition to working at the farmers' market, Paul had held various part-time jobs, most of them in

sales. He had sold Kirby vacuum cleaners and the Encyclopedia Judaica and men's monogrammed golfing shirts. He had demonstrated the Kirby for Riva and her mother one Sunday evening. Mrs. Stern had taken quite an interest in it until she realized that she didn't care what kind of vacuum she owned since the maid was the only one who used it. But she admired its engineering, she told Paul. In two months' time, he sold only one Kirby.

Riva had tried to lend him money, but he refused it. The most she could offer was a gift now and then—a sweater for his birthday, a shirt at Hanukkah. Paul loved clothes. He took fastidious care of his few things, ironing the shirts himself, keeping them folded in Saran Wrap in his drawer. He was the only boy she knew who polished his shoes. He couldn't achieve the flashy look of the wealthier boys, but he bought quality. He watched the papers for sales. He chose conservative colors and styles that blended together. Almost nobody noticed him one way or the other. When Riva first talked about dating him, her friends had difficulty calling up the matching face: "Paul Auerbach? Who does he hang out with?" And Riva would patiently explain where he sat in Chemistry or World Lit and that he didn't have time for a real social life like other kids.

She could remember the exact moment she had noticed him. It was the third week of school, in Civics. She was in her assigned seat in the first row and he was standing right in front of her giving an oral report and the edge of her desk cut into his thighs. He was nervous and stuttered a little. His intense hazel eyes stared fixedly at the back of the room where Dr. Voski sat, grading him on completeness, accuracy, and presentation. For a moment, it looked like he was getting a hard-on from his nerves. That happened to some boys, Riva knew, but then he shifted his weight and the bulge disappeared. He dropped a note card on her desk toward the end, and when she handed it back to him, he had looked startled, as if he hadn't noticed her before. That night she had dreamed about him. It was one of those dreams that makes you fall in love, whether you want to or not. This had happened to Riva before. When she was twelve, she had dreamed about Tab Hunter after she saw him in a movie. She had a terrible crush on him after that. And in eighth grade she'd had a love dream about Eliot Finkelstein that rendered her mute for weeks in his presence. After her dream about Paul, she had talked to him in school the next day. What had been the pretext? She had sold him a ticket for the

Latin Club's raffle, and then he had walked her to the cafeteria and asked her for a date.

"Riva! Riva diva!" Barry called out. "I'm leaving here in exactly five minutes." Barry was her twenty-one-year-old brother. He dropped her off at school every morning on the way to work.

Riva lunged from between the covers and reached for the day's clothes draped across a chair, a cerise wool skirt and matching sweater. "Be right down," she called back.

Paul was absent that day from school. During lunch she called his house. She had to be careful about phoning there. His father did not like Paul to receive calls from girls. His mother was more understanding. His mother, Riva thought with a start, would not know how to push a rat away that was gnawing on her face.

"Why aren't you here?" Riva asked.

"He's left again. She's very upset."

"He left even though you gave him the money?"

"Yeah. Look," Paul whispered, "I can't talk now."

"Call me tonight. I love you."

"Tonight."

That night, after she and Paul talked, Riva wrote in her diary. She made a list of ways she could help him raise the money for San Antonio. She wrote down everything she could think of, as fast as she could write:

1. *Get the money somehow and make him let me lend it to him.*
2. *Give the money to the school (after I get it) and have them give it to him, compliments of "anonymous."*
3. *Give the money to his mother to give him. Swear her to secrecy.*
4. *TALK TO POP GOLDRING!!!*

She had been keeping a diary for nearly three years. When she entered high school, her mother had bought her a "Chums" desk set—a matching blotter, pencil holder, scrapbook, and five-year diary in pink leather. Carefree teenagers resembling the "Archie" cartoon

characters strolled along each piece, their books slung casually across their hips. The diary had lasted a little more than a year. Then Riva spilled over into a serious-looking lined notebook with a black-and-white marbleized cardboard cover. She kept the diary and the notebook hidden in her closet at the bottom of a tall Kotex box, along with the novel she had written in eighth grade. "Once Only" was the story of a fifteen-year-old girl who fell in love with an alien from another galaxy. It was based loosely on her crush for Eliot Finkelstein.

Riva had devised a code for her diaries. She stashed the code-key in the pages of an old Honey Bunch mystery. *The blood the first two days this month was the color of crushed rubies. . . . I like the sickening feeling I get before my period comes—like when you eat too much chocolate and the stomachache reminds you of all that pleasure. Only this reminds me that I can bring a new human being into the world any time I want!* She would have died if anybody else read these passages. Especially Barry. Even though he was grown-up, she still remembered the days when he unscrewed the heads of her dolls, put raw oysters in her bed, and shot food at her across restaurant tables. Barry had grown into his lanky body and turned out to be handsome, much to Riva's surprise. Now he was engaged to Olivia Wykowski, a beautiful redhead two years older than he. Riva's family believed in early marriage. Her sister, Fran, had married at eighteen and so had her cousin Melissa. Whenever Riva saw distant relatives, they talked about living to dance at her wedding.

Olivia had the look of an airline stewardess—a permanent smile and perfect makeup, her hair sprayed into a stiff beehive. Riva couldn't stand her. Her diary was full of invective for PV (Olivia's code name, short for Professional Virgin) who, five years Riva's senior, treated her like a little mouse. Now that they were officially engaged, Barry and Olivia were planning to go to Atlantic City the last weekend in April. They talked about it all the time in front of her parents as if to forestall suspicion that they would Do Anything. Riva was sure Olivia hadn't done it. You could tell by looking in her eyes, Riva believed. She got up from her desk and studied her reflection. Anybody could see she was still untouched, even though Paul had been pressing his case hard since January. Riva hadn't worked out a philosophy to justify why she hadn't done it yet. It was just safer to say "no." She felt the same urges Paul did. Sometimes she nearly

went crazy when they were fingerfucking. She had to remind herself that it wasn't just a technicality, the difference between a finger and the real thing.

Riva had a four o'clock appointment with Pop Goldring on Tuesday. As soon as school let out at three, she took the streetcar and bus to Du Pont Circle, stopping for a cherry Coke at the drugstore on the ground floor of his building so that she wouldn't be early.

Pop Goldring was prosperous. He had a construction company with his son, Mel, and had built many office and apartment buildings around the city. Mrs. Stern kept a scrapbook of clippings about her father and brother, who were periodically honored for their philanthropy. Pop Goldring had planted a lot of trees in Israel. He probably had a whole forest by now. But he wasn't generous just for the publicity or the tax deductions. Once, many years before, he had supported an American artist in Italy. Alongside the plaques and certificates in his office hung a huge painting by the man, the portrait of a family of jesters. They wore velvety red clothing and stocking caps with bells. They were traveling to their next court performance, the artist had explained. The father jester walked along, playing the flute. The mother and one child perched astride an ox. A mysterious winged infant balanced on the ox's rump, his back to the viewer. Behind them, fields, sky, and mountains flattened into shapeless daubs of bright blue, yellow, and orange. No one in the family knew what had happened to the artist—whether he kept on painting or was butchering meat somewhere for a living. Pop called the painting "my Michelangelo," and he thought it just as artistic as the bust of Moses by the other Michelangelo that sat on his desk.

The receptionist buzzed his office, and he promptly appeared in the reception area. He was a squat, heavyset man with light blue eyes and wisps of white hair around a large bald spot. His face was wide and Slavic-looking, with high cheekbones and a broad forehead. "Sweetheart," he said, giving her a big hug. He had a heavy Russian-Yiddish accent. Years later, Riva would melt whenever she heard that accent, even from the mouths of second-rate stand-up comics.

His office was uncluttered, outfitted with modern furniture that was sleek and low-slung like cats relaxing all around the room. Even the

desk top was clear except for a few letters and an ashtray with a half-smoked cigar in it. His home was the opposite—it glittered with gilt tables, Victorian whatnots, and crystal decanters. Grandma Bella was constantly rearranging it like a gigantic still life. Only the den was livable. As a child, it was the only room Riva had been allowed in.

"How's my Einstein?" he asked.

"Everything's great. I came to ask you a favor."

His gaze intensified. Riva had never asked him for anything before.

"I have a good friend who needs money, and I want you to give it to him. I want you to buy him an airline ticket to San Antonio, Texas."

"You're asking for a complete stranger?"

"Actually, you met him during Christmas when he picked me up at your apartment. His name is Paul Auerbach."

Pop Goldring narrowed his eyes, trying to recall the boy. He shook his head. "I don't remember any Paul. What does his father do? He's a Jewish boy?"

"Yes. His father drives a cab."

"A taxi driver?"

"They're very poor. His mother can't work. She's an invalid. She got polio right after Paul was born. She has an awful limp and a bad lung."

"A shame," Pop said. "He's smart?"

Riva told him about the debate contest and how hard Paul had worked all his life. He listened attentively. "You love him? You're going to marry him?"

"I'm too young to marry anybody," Riva said. It was the one area where she and her grandfather would never see eye to eye. While he celebrated her triumphs at school, he would never really be relaxed about her future until she married.

"All right. I'll do it. Call Nancy with the details."

Riva jumped up and kissed him. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"He'll take charity, your Paul?"

"He doesn't know about it yet. I hope I can make him accept it. He'll probably want to repay you someday. He has a lot of pride."

"I hope so, if only for your sake."

"Pop? Can we keep this a secret? I don't want anybody else in the family to know. It might be embarrassing later."

Riva's family had memories like elephants, especially for foibles and mistakes. The only way you could live something down with them was to be reincarnated. If she did end up marrying Paul, it would be bad enough when her family learned how disreputable the Auerbachs were. That would be soon enough for them to begin doubting Paul. Riva was certain that Paul's noble character had survived and maybe even been honed by his terrible family, but she knew how adults saw these things. They wouldn't praise him for overcoming so many handicaps; they would wait for the day when the offspring reverted to type, when the ugly head of the parent reared up in the child.

Paul lived in a small apartment building in a neighborhood tucked between a Trailways bus terminal and a complex of warehouses. Tonight, when she arrived, Riva was relieved that Mr. Auerbach's cab wasn't anywhere in sight. The parking lot was brightly lit, but the stairs to the entrance were dark, and the hallway smelled rank. The Auerbachs lived on the ground floor. Their living room was full of black vinyl furniture and cheap pole lamps. Everything in it was ugly except for the afghans that Mrs. Auerbach crocheted and draped over the furniture.

If she had called first tonight, Paul would have wanted to meet her someplace. She wanted him to know she didn't care where he lived or who his father was. She wanted to tell him about Pop Goldring. She would tell his mother, too, if she felt like it. There would be nothing any of them could do to ruin it. The airline ticket was in Paul's name. Nancy, Pop's secretary, had reserved a room at the Gunter Hotel, and when Paul tried to settle the bill, he would find that it was already paid.

Paul was embarrassed at first to hear her news. Then he was very grateful. Afterward, he followed her home in his car. They told Mrs. Stern they were going to the Hot Shoppe for a snack. She and Paul went to the park.

"How can I ever pay you back? It worries me, Riva. Money between friends can lead to problems." He was carefully unbuttoning her blouse.

"What kind of problems?"

"I don't know exactly. I know my father hasn't got a friend left in the world, and they've all helped him."

"You're not your father."

He buried his head between her breasts, then rolled from one to the other, kissing. He had the softest lips of any human being alive and a tongue like a sweet little animal. "Oh God," he moaned, "I love you so much. You'll never know how much it means to have your love."

Before he went to San Antonio, Paul spent every spare minute beefing up his debate skills on the assigned topic: Should the U.S. Recognize Castro's Cuba? Three-by-five index cards accumulated in drifts on his desk in study hall. Paul would be called upon to argue both sides. That was the thing about being a good debater—you had to be able to fake the passion of your argument, and you had to know what the opposition was going to say. Paul would make a fine lawyer. His poverty gave him an appetite for justice in the world.

Things at home improved. His father had returned after a spree in Florida and was driving his cab every day. A couple of mornings he had slipped Paul a five spot at breakfast.

Paul left for Texas on a Thursday evening at the end of April. He called Riva twice. On Saturday, he sounded ecstatic. He praised Tex-Mex foods she had never heard of—sauces concocted of chocolate and hot peppers, cactus fruit and *cabrito* and tequila. He had gone to a nightclub where a Mexican mariachi band with huge guitars played until dawn. He cursed the afternoon tour-bus driver and called one of his debate opponents a "pubic hair" in Spanish. He had made dozens of friends, he said, despite the pressures of the competition. Everyone was so friendly. He loved the Lone Star State. It was southern and western at the same time—the best of both worlds. The weather was perfect. He'd even been swimming at the hotel pool. He didn't worry about the chlorine ruining his new madras shorts. He was having too good a time to worry about anything. His joy confirmed what Riva had long believed about Paul—that given half a chance in life he would be a raving success. He would know how to work hard and play hard. He would achieve what Pop Goldring had—the happiness of the self-made man.

"What about your debates?"

"I'm doing great. I'm here, I'm having fun. For the first time in my life, I'm really having fun. You know," he grew wistful, "now I see what I've missed all my life."

"You mean a vacation?"

"Some people's lives are vacations," Paul said. "I've got to go. I'm on early tomorrow morning again."

A huge storm front lashed the mid-Atlantic states that weekend. It rained in Washington and Virginia and Maryland and Delaware and even in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where Barry and Olivia huddled, no doubt, against the dampness in their hotel suite. Riva missed Paul. She watched her parents moving past each other all weekend and thought what a waste it was that they were in the same house yet kept their bodies completely separate. She walked from room to room, staring out at the rain. She imagined herself inside a paperweight, a raining paperweight. Beyond her windows, it wasn't raining. The sun was beating down everywhere else on shining streets, giving off that summery odor of heat and growth, especially in San Antonio, Texas.

Olivia and Barry brought back saltwater taffy twisted in waxed paper like party favors for everyone in the family. Paul brought Riva a silver pin from Mexico—the figure of a peasant in a serape drowsing under a huge sombrero, kind of like the Frito Bandito, he said, describing it over the phone to her late Sunday night when he returned from the airport. Paul finished seventh out of two hundred in the competition—not in the money but close enough for a special certificate of Honorable Mention. "'Know Ye by These Presents,'" he read to her. "Well, you can imagine the rest."

"I'm dying to see you. I really missed you. I love you so much."

"I know. I want to see you, too. Tomorrow," he promised.

Would she ever say these words to any other boy or man? She had nothing to go on but movies and the books she'd read. If her parents traded endearments, they did it when they were alone, never in front of the children.

She and Paul kissed outside of school the next morning, before the first bell rang, but he was busy after that. He was a celebrity, with

tall tales to tell. She let him shine in his glory. This is what it would be like when they were older—Riva behind the scenes, modest, sure of his unswerving love. Maybe a couple of trusted servants to buffer them from the clamoring world. Deep, knowing looks—a raised eyebrow, the slightest inclination of the head. They would hardly need words at all. And Riva would take pride in believing in him when no one else did, like Van Gogh's brother, Theo. They would be completely devoted to each other. Forever. It would take that long for her to finish loving him.

This blood, Riva wrote that night. *This is the lifeblood. This blood belongs to Paul Auerbach. My wonderful, hardworking Paul who will never take me for granted.*

"I won't be going to college after all," Paul said. He gripped the steering wheel with one hand, turning it rapidly from left to right.

"What?"

He repeated himself. His voice was shaking.

"But it's all worked out, you'll get a loan, you might get a scholarship."

"Forget the scholarship. I never counted on the scholarship. That's just a fairy tale you believed in."

"I thought you had a chance."

"Maybe if I do well the first year. But they'd rather give it to an out-of-state student than to me."

"And the loan by itself isn't enough?"

"It might be if it were big enough."

"Well then what's the problem?" Riva asked, her voice rising against her will.

"My savings are gone as of tonight."

"Oh my God. You gave him the money?"

"I had to." He started to cry. "I had to," he said again. "That bastard. I hate him. I wish he'd die."

"I'm so sorry."

"He doesn't care about my life. I'm his son, and he doesn't care shit for me."

"You have to go to college. You have to. Even if it's part-time at first. Even if you have to go at night."

"I'm so tired of fighting for every little thing."

Riva looked around. In the distance, past the train trestle, a few houselights glowed, smears of yellow and white beyond the windshield, blurred in the thick, low-hanging mist. The trees were fringed with little flaglets of leaves that shook in the evening air. They made a rustling sound, like something breathing out there. "You can't give up," she said.

"Yes I can. I can get that job at Hahn's. There's nothing wrong with selling shoes."

She took his head in her hands and kissed his forehead. "You deserve better. You're going to be a great lawyer. I believe in you." Riva's mind was already racing: how would he raise $1,500 in five months when it had taken him three years to save it up the first time? Maybe it was cruel to keep on encouraging him. After all, she had never been poor. Her closet was jammed full of clothes. She'd never ironed a shirt in her life. She didn't even pick up her dirty underpants off the floor if she didn't feel like it. "You'll get the money somehow."

"I don't care anymore," he said dully. He looked askance and nodded to himself. "I'm going to take you home now."

"No! I don't want to go home yet."

"I'm really tired," he said.

"This could be the most important night in your life."

"Just the worst," he said.

"This is the night you have to be very strong. I love you," she told him, pulling him toward her. She was going to make him believe in himself as much as she did. Couldn't he tell how much she loved him? "It would be like a betrayal if you gave up. What about our life together?"

"You should find somebody else."

"Come here," she said. She opened the door and got out of the car. "Let's take a walk." Within a few paces, she had disappeared into the ground fog.

"Riva?"

"I'm over here. Come on. Bring the blanket."

He got out of the car and walked toward her voice.

She kissed him all over after they lay down on the blanket. She traced his face with her fingertips and wrote "I adore you" on his

brow. She could make him forget how bad he felt. She had that power over him.

"God, Riva," he said. "You're driving me crazy I love you so much."

"Do you have . . . protection?" she asked.

"I won't finish inside you."

Paul had met lots of subtle people in San Antonio. That was his word—"subtle." Cool, neat, hip. Sophisticated, though they were only kids. They came from New York City, Santa Barbara and Grosse Pointe, Lake Forest and New Canaan. They went to prep schools like Miss Porter's in Farmington and the Friends School in Shaker Heights and Groton and Andover. It wasn't just that they were rich. Money hadn't spoiled them, Paul said, it had refined them. They could afford to be nice to everybody, because jealousy was practically beyond them. They all had jolly nicknames—Puffer and Ships and Ironlegs for the boys, Beanstalk, Barnum, and Smash for the girls. Naturally, he'd also met kids from public schools; they were bright and well-off, too. The weekend had been a revelation to him. Riva tried her best to keep track of all the people in the anecdotes Paul told—a succession of minor pranks and triumphs over authority, at least half of which hadn't happened in San Antonio at all but had merely been retold there. "They made me feel like one of them," Paul kept saying. "They treated me like one of them."

"You *were* one of them, silly," Riva said. "You won the right to be there just like they did."

"I have to laugh now at the kids here at school, like Duke Weinstein acting so stuck-up because his father is the Pabst Blue Ribbon distributor. Ships Stewart's father owns a steel mill, and Donald, from Chicago, is *the* heir to the Quaker Oats fortune."

Now that Paul had had a taste of real money, his own poverty in relation to the wealth of the kids at Hoover High seemed less extreme. This despite the fact that his financial problems were never greater. He'd been accepted to GW, gotten a small loan, been turned down for the scholarship, and had no way of paying for the first semester. Somehow, though, when he talked about San Antonio, it soothed him. He had seen the effects of great wealth and they were

so pleasant, so ordinary, that he was able to dismiss the present as a temporary state of affairs. He had, in short, learned that he was worthy, that poverty was indeed not a punishment but a caprice of fate. His pride softened and two weeks later, when Riva suggested that he meet Pop Goldring about borrowing the money for college, he agreed.

"What kind of lawyer? Corporate? Tax? Malpractice?" Pop Goldring's voice was calm, like an animal grazing over a vast field. He spoke slowly, one question after another. The Spanish Inquisition, Riva thought. She had tried to prepare Paul for the interview. Now she had to sit quietly, without interfering or interrupting. She didn't want to make Paul look weak. He could answer any question himself, anyway. The worst would be about his family. His face would get red and blotchy and circles would spread under his armpits beneath his gray tweed sport coat. Inside the white collar of his shirt and the thin black suede tie she'd given him, his neck looked as delicate and vulnerable as an antelope's. The skin there was soft and smooth. His Adam's apple reminded her of his cock.

Riva studied the huge painting by her grandfather's Michelangelo. The watercolors were so soft and muted that the harlequins' bodies could have been clouds as easily as flesh. The jesters walked toward her as if borne in a wash of their own music and the sweet heavy breath of the ox.

"You plan to live at home?"

"I have to. If I could afford it, I'd join a fraternity and live at the frat house," Paul was saying.

"Your parents are a bad influence on you," Pop Goldring said. He flicked a gold Ronson lighter, and the end of his cigar glowed briefly while he sucked on it.

Paul said nothing.

"Your father drinks?"

"No, sir."

"Where does all the money go?"

"He gambles, sir."

"You're not a good risk." Pop turned away and pulled open a desk drawer.

Riva stopped breathing. Paul's face flushed with rage or shame or both. He looked down at the floor.

"I couldn't give you the money directly. I'll pay the school. Like I'm going to do for Riva. For the first year. Then, we'll talk again. You'll pay me back when you're established."

"I'll put it in writing, sir." Paul's voice cracked with emotion as he stood and offered her grandfather his hand. "I don't know how to thank you enough, sir."

"I don't need it in writing. I build apartments with five hundred units on a handshake." He pumped Paul's hand, then inhaled on his cigar again. "You'll send me a letter, with the amount and the address."

"Yes, sir."

Riva kissed her grandfather and hugged him and kissed him again. As she turned to go, she eyed the harlequins, watching to see if their gaze followed her across the room. It didn't. She supposed that meant it wasn't a very good painting.

"You've saved my life!" Paul said in the elevator.

"I'm so happy for you. And proud. You made a very good impression."

"You've saved my fucking life." He slipped his hand under her yellow cashmere sweater and inside her bra in one swift move. "My life," he said again.

In Chemistry class, Riva stared out the window at the green curtain of mulberry trees that lined the athletic field and imagined the two of them lying on a soft blanket beneath them. Paul was on top, launching himself into her. Love was a presence, as real and invisible as the elements that expanded and contracted that late spring according to the beautiful, orderly laws of gases. Exotic substances evaporated and then collected again, distilling in the beakers, dripping from the retorts. It looked like magic, and Riva could only fathom it a little at a time, like love or God. She and Paul sat miles apart in the old-fashioned classroom with the floor that sloped like a movie theater. She could see the back of his head, his shoulders attentive through an oxford-cloth shirt. She knew his body intimately now—how the knobs of his spine disappeared between his shoulder blades like an

underground spring and rose up again where the neck connected to the torso; the lobes of his ears, delicate as the rolled edges of silk scarves; the tawny odor of his sweat and semen. They owned each other now. The radio was a boxful of love songs. The days grew warmer, and Paul already looked collegiate in his chino pants, V-neck pullover, and plaid shirt. They never went anywhere on dates anymore. They lived in the car.

On the first Saturday in June, Paul called Riva. He had just returned from the produce market, showered, and changed clothes. He sounded excited. His brother had a friend who had an apartment in downtown D.C., and Paul had arranged for them to use it that night.

"Use it?" Riva repeated.

"Yeah."

"Oh." Riva hesitated. Another technicality, wasn't it, whether they made love in the car or in some stranger's apartment? "Okay, great," she said.

"Do you want to go to the movies first?"

"Sure."

The movie flickered across the screen like the shifting patterns in a kaleidoscope. It felt like a long delay and only made Riva nervous. She remembered stories she'd heard of priests and rabbis being found in the arms of prostitutes after hotel fires. Whatever happened in the car, no one questioned their right to be in it. But an apartment was premeditated. It scared her.

"Here we are," Paul said. He turned the key in the second-story walk-up. They were somewhere on the unfashionable edge of Georgetown. The building was ugly red brick in a fake castle style with turrets and bulging bay windows. "This place gives me the creeps," Riva said.

"You'll feel better once we're inside."

"I hope so."

The furnishings were ordinary, but you could tell a single man lived there from the dark, suit colors and the piles of sports magazines. Paul turned on a table lamp and held out his arms. She went obediently to his embrace. "Come on. I'm going to make you a famous Tequila Sunrise," he said. He walked her to the kitchen where

a bottle of tequila was waiting on the counter. It was the first time they had ever had a drink together.

"You had this in Texas?"

"Right."

"Make mine real sweet," Riva said. "I hate the taste of liquor."

He added an extra measure of grenadine, and she watched the fuchsia color swirl and dissipate into the orange juice. Her legs started to feel numb after a couple of swallows. "It's strong, isn't it?"

"Pretty strong. It's a shot and a half of liquor."

He took their glasses into the living room, turned off the lights, and undressed down to his Jockey shorts. "No steering wheel and no seat back," he said. "What luxury." He came over and kissed her on the neck. But when she began to remove her skirt, he grabbed her wrist. "Leave it on," he said. "Please." He reached up under it and pulled her underpants down and unhooked her bra under her blouse. Then he dragged a bar stool into the middle of the room and sat down on it. "Come over here and sit on my lap," he said.

She sat on his lap sidesaddle, as if he were going to tell her a story. His soft lips nuzzled her ear and jawline. Everywhere his warm breath touched, she ached with longing. "Turn around and face me," he said, and then he was inside her, thrusting, his hands gripping her breasts under her blouse. A wave of nausea washed over her. "Wait," she protested.

"I'm really hot," he said.

"It hurts!" she lied.

He pulled out of her abruptly, still rocking back and forth slightly. She got up and sat on the sofa, her skirt wound tightly around her legs.

"I don't feel very good," she said.

"Maybe it's the booze."

"I don't know." But it wasn't the booze. "It makes me feel bad being here," she blurted.

"I thought you'd like it. It's like being married, in a way."

"It makes me feel cheap."

"I'm sorry."

"I want to go home."

"Come on," he argued. "We just got here. Come on." He sat down next to her and began kissing her neck again, and her eyelids. "Come on. It'll be all right."

But it wasn't all right. "Something's different," she said.

He sighed and sat back against the sofa cushions. "Yes," he said. "For the first time in my life I'm not worried about money. God, I'm so happy not to have to worry about money for five minutes."

He got up and went into the kitchen to fix another drink. When he came back, he stood at the window and stared out. "I just can't lie to you," he said. "You mean too much to me."

He was going to say something she didn't want to hear and she couldn't stop him.

"I met this person in Texas," he began. "Her name is Merle. She's from New York."

Riva pulled on her underpants and fastened her bra while he spoke. If she kept busy, if she could just keep busy, she could hear the words but they wouldn't penetrate, like knives clattering along the surface, not sinking in. Later, when she was alone, she could call up the words and turn them over slowly.

Merle this and that. Merle who looks like you, the same dark hair and friendly eyes. Merle whose father invented contact lenses. Something came over me. Merle who didn't know I was poor. She's written every day. We've been talking on the phone. I feel better now that I've told you. Oh Riva, I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. Do you have to be hurt? I still love you, Riva. It's confusing. I didn't have to tell you.

"Yes you did," Riva said. "Oh yes you did. But you didn't. You made me make you confess. I don't want to hear your shitty confession."

He took her home, holding her hand as he drove, trying to comfort her, apologizing over and over. Making her swear she forgave him. By the time he dropped her off, he'd stopped talking about loving her and had made her promise they'd stay friends.

Mrs. Stern was insistent: she wanted the specific reason that Riva and Paul had broken up. Riva was too humiliated to say she'd been jilted and too loyal to use the loan from Pop Goldring as an excuse. She considered telling her mother the exquisite lie that they had broken up over whether to have sex or not, but a sense of dread and superstition stopped her. Finally, she said that she and Paul had in-

compatible values. When Mrs. Stern asked what that meant, Riva said he laughed at all the wrong parts in the movies and probably wouldn't make a good father.

So this is how the broken heart beats. The same way as the whole heart, only you feel every contraction like a refusal. That was very nice. It was really very nice. *Someday, years from now, I will see Paul, maybe with this Merle, maybe with someone else. And we will greet each other and act very polite and civilized. But I will know the minute I see him, even if it's thirty years from now, I will know from looking in his eyes if he ever forgot me. And that,* she wrote, *is the only time, those are the only circumstances when I would ever consider making love with him again.*

On the Land

Taking Names

I'd never served on a jury before. In fact, I hadn't been downtown for years—ever since they built the Falling Waters Mall. Stan assured me I'd have no trouble spotting the new courthouse. "It'll be the only building with portholes over the entrance," he said, "like a big ship in dry dock." He drove me to the kiss-and-ride, and from there I took a bus.

The woman in the information booth pointed me to an elevator before I got close enough for her to hear my question. Everyone got off at four and streamed into the jury pool room.

I sat down and picked up an old copy of *Life*. "Nine o'clock. Let's get going," a man at the microphone announced. "Anybody here who can't serve this week?" I leaned forward, thinking of Stan alone

at the farm with all the grafted trees that needed repotting. About fifty people stood up, waving their jury duty notices and talking. "Form a line," he ordered over the hubbub. I read about John Hinckley wanting to go home for Christmas until I heard the man's voice again. "Listen for your name," he said. A long scroll of computer printout spilled from his podium. "It's a punishable offense to be absent, so make sure I get you." As he went down the list, one by one people slumped back in their chairs, as if released from a magnet.

"Now you wait. When we need you, we'll call you. No leaving the room. You've got two TVs, books, cards, magazines, checkerboards, puzzles, restrooms, and a coffeepot."

The woman next to me had brought knitting—blue yarn with a silver fleck running through it that matched her tinted hair. Across from us, a group was forming to work a thousand-piece puzzle. "I'm good at finding the borders," I said, diving into the confetti-like mess. The box lid pictured an iceberg drifting at sundown, the colors of sky and sea nearly indistinguishable. Hard on the eyes but a good test of concentration.

A bell rang. "Williams, DeBaro, Feldman, Sanchez—that's Rosario—Gold, Eaugalle, Chesterton, Whelan, Eisenblatt, Samuels, Lattore, Jabotinsky, Wood, and Helms." He read the list rapidly, as if they were all one name. We congregated near the double doors. Then he led us like schoolkids across the marble hall.

The courtroom was beautiful, with dark walnut paneling and molding. I half-expected carved faces where the walls joined the high ceiling. The light was dim, and voices were muffled by thickly upholstered blue chairs.

The judge explained the procedures with great patience. He sounded like Johnny Cash and had a long, sallow face. "The victim was a young child, and some of the evidence is graphic." He looked at his hands forming a steeple on the bench in front of him. "It won't be pleasant," he cautioned, "but it's your duty." Two women behind me spoke up at the same instant. "I'm a grandmother," they said. "I couldn't stand it."

"We need grandmothers," he said. "Are you sure?"

They were both sure.

After we gave our addresses and occupations, two lawyers fired questions at us. Had we read about the case in the papers? Had we been abused as children? Did we know an abused child or abusive

parent? More people were excused. Then we were removed to the jury room while they haggled over us.

"Helms," the bailiff read, then five more names and two alternates. So that was it. I had a case, a duty to perform, then home to Stan and the nursery where five hundred citrus trees were waiting to be repotted. Valencias and Parson Browns. Mineola tangelos and Satsumas. The grafts had taken well and were ready for two-gallon containers and new homes. It always pleased me to think of my trees taking root all over the country in climate zone 10.

Elvis Thornberry, the defendant, entered the room, accompanied by a guard and a washed-out-looking pregnant woman who sat behind him. The D.A. aligned his pad and pencil.

Elvis didn't look like the famous Elvis. He had sandy hair thin as seedlings and stooped shoulders. His chest caved in under a limp white shirt and brown polyester jacket. He was a man you'd never notice unless he held a gun to your head or saved your life.

The D.A. promised to present circumstantial evidence convincing enough to take us beyond a reasonable doubt. The public defender assured us that a crime without a witness was difficult to prove.

At lunch, I asked the knitter what was happening in the jury pool room. "Same as when you left," she told me. "The young ones are plugged into Walkmen. They might as well be on the moon." I turned to dump my sandwich wrapper. "Oh, a big bunch was called for a cocaine case, but most of them got excused. They're afraid to serve," she whispered. "I hear you can get a person's legs broke for under a hundred dollars these days."

"Hmm," I said. I was glad that Elvis Thornberry didn't look like he had those kinds of connections.

"And," she went on, "I played solitaire for nearly an hour without a five of hearts." She spun the counting spool on her knitting needle and stuffed the yarn into her bag.

Elvis, his wife, and their toddler, Elvis, Jr., lived in a truck on the beach for two months before they found a cheap rental in the Palm Breeze Trailer Court. Elvis told the authorities that the refrigerator had fallen on his little boy. But when the police checked, they found no dents in the floor where he said it landed. We studied pictures of

the floor. The refrigerator was banked so deeply in the gummy linoleum that I was pretty sure Elvis had lied.

Next were the photos of Elvis, Jr., not as terrible as I had dreaded because he didn't look dead and there were no outward signs of violence. This, the coroner explained, was because he had been killed with a single blow, a blow named the knee-slam by child abuse experts. The killer had lifted three-year-old Elvis over his head like kindling and smashed the child's abdomen across his upraised knee. All the damage done in one stroke, irrevocable and irreparable. I remembered the citrus counties ravaged by the '84 freeze: 160,000 acres destroyed in Marion, Lake, Orange, Polk, Hillsborough, Osceola, Sumter, Pasco, and Hernando. Only the coastal groves like ours spared.

The prosecution rested. Then, without rising from his chair, the defense rested. Not one witness. During his closing argument, Elvis's lawyer leaned over the jury box banister, pleading that no man should be put behind bars for a lifetime on the basis of his kitchen floor. We retired to reach a verdict.

The first ballot was five guilty, one abstention from a young TV cameraman who didn't understand the difference between Murder Two and Manslaughter. The foreman read the definitions from a sheet the judge had provided.

The next vote was four guilty, two abstentions. The cameraman still didn't get it, he said, and now the woman next to him was confused by the legal jargon, too. We didn't know each other's names so the conversation was blunt. Comments were offered around the table without apology or explanation, like chips in a poker game. "Murder is more brutal, then?" the cameraman asked. "Yes," we said.

The next vote was unanimous for Murder Two. The foreman rang the buzzer, and we returned to the beautiful room. No one was in the gallery, now a place of doom for Elvis Thornberry. The silence was cold and penetrating, like the nights in the nursery before we light the smudge pots when a freeze threatens. Soon there would be fire and the falling and rising of voices and heartbeats.

The judge read the verdict and polled each of us individually, tying our names to the word "guilty" forever. We passed into the grandeur of public record.

Back in the jury pool room, smoke rings hung in the stale air like complicated nooses. The boss man crossed our names off his list and

said we'd get our checks in ten days. "What about the sentencing?" I asked. "The judge takes care of that. You're finished," he said.

At home, I told Stan about the case. He said I should get it off my mind. "The trees," he said. "Think about the trees."

But I kept thinking of Elvis Thornberry and Elvis, Jr. Two weeks later I phoned the judge's chambers. "He got life," his secretary told me. "He was a convicted felon in Kentucky and Tennessee, but they couldn't tell you that."

"So he'll be there for as long as he lives?" I felt relieved.

"Oh no," she said, after putting me on hold. "Legally, he's eligible for parole in seven years, but His Honor recommended no hearings for at least fifteen."

Good, I thought. Maybe by then I'll have forgotten his name and his face. I turned to the latest citrus grower's bulletin which reviews the major threats to citrus: hard freeze, Medfly, canker, *Phytophthora* foot and root rot, orange dog, and tristeza, the only incurable virus. It attacks the bud union, the graft, the scion.

Imaginary Men

Momma is trying on a pair of Sears 440 running shoes. The catalog clerk took her driver's license as collateral, and now she sits in the anteroom to the Sears portrait studio, studying her feet.

"I'd hardly call this powder blue," she says to Diane, her daughter who is in the process of getting a divorce. "More like aquamarine." Momma gets up and walks around in the orthopedically designed sneakers. She stands on one foot, then the other, like a marsh bird. "They're still too narrow," she says, out of breath. "I'll have to re-order the double E's."

A couple wheeling a stroller comes through the heavy brown drape

at the studio entrance. "What a darling baby," Momma coos. Behind the couple is the photographer, a young woman heavily made-up and perfumed, wearing what Diane calls the "working woman's uniform"—a dress, panty hose, and heels. Diane prefers pants, even though she has nice legs.

"I'm sure we got at least one good one," the photographer says, handing the couple a receipt.

"Did you get one with Timmy looking straight ahead?" the young mother asks.

"Well, I think so." The photographer fidgets with her appointment book.

"He's going to have his eyes operated on next month," the father announces. "Didn't you notice he was cross-eyed?"

"I wondered what that was," the photographer admits. "His eyes did move around a lot. He seems so young for surgery."

"The doctor says it's common to operate at nine months," the mother recites. "He won't even have to spend the night."

"It's not a serious operation," the father adds, slipping his arm around his wife. "They do about three a month."

The photographer smiles. "Your pictures will be ready in two weeks."

Momma stuffs the shoes into their box with the accompanying brochure, *Relaxing Adductor Muscles*. "It's as complicated as buying a washing machine," she mutters. The couple, bracketed together at the waist, makes a slow right-hand turn at the cash register and heads toward the exit.

In the parking lot, Momma hooks her arm in Diane's. "I still think Joe ought to have a second chance."

Diane's stomach tightens at the sound of his name. The night four months earlier when Joe confessed is etched into her mind like a TV commercial. Now it plays again.

"I have to talk to you," Joe had said, stroking her arm. She remembers putting her arms around his neck. "Here or in the bedroom?" She nibbled his ear.

"It's not that." He unwrapped her arms. "I'm leaving."

"Do you need something from the store?" Diane glanced at the wipe-clean memo board they used for grocery lists. *Lunch bags. Oranges.*

"No. I mean you. I'm leaving you. I'm in love with Maryanne Snyder."

The warm sensation of anger radiates again through Diane's body as she walks across the parking lot. She thinks about the men she refused over the last nine years. Some were tempting, like the one she met in Norfolk when she went to her cousin's wedding without Joe. If Diane had gone to his hotel room that night she might not be so furious now with Joe. She regrets all—she counts four—of the lost opportunities for romance. And she would never have picked someone Joe knew!

Diane retrieves the car keys from her large pocketbook, but Momma has strayed to a nearby pickup truck—the couple with the baby. Diane hurries over just in time to hear her saying, "Isn't this the baby who's going to have surgery?"

Diane has watched her mother strike up conversations with many strangers over the years. "Here you are," she says. Momma ignores her. Diane is anxious to get home to Gerald, her eight-year-old, who otherwise will stay up to watch "The A-Team."

The couple is happy to show off the baby despite his wandering eyes. "See?" the woman shows Momma, "how they move in and out? Sometimes they're perfectly straight, but other times both eyes turn right in to his nose."

"It's a very common defect." Momma chucks the baby under the chin. "My younger brother had it, and that was fifty-two years ago."

Diane nearly drops her keys. Momma doesn't have a brother.

"He was as cross-eyed as a chicken," Momma says. The couple huddles closer as if they're getting a second medical opinion.

"Did the operation work?" the woman asks. "The doctor said the surgery will make it possible for him to see straight, but it won't automatically fix his eyes."

"My brother never had another problem after his surgery," Momma assures them.

"I'm so relieved to hear that." The mother smooths the baby's rompers over his bottom.

Momma is just hitting her stride. "I remember them saying it was just a weakness in the muscle."

"Actually," the father corrects her, "the doctor said the muscles are too tight."

"Yes, well. My brother *has* worn glasses all of his life. But I'm not sure it's related to the crossed eyes."

"You know," the woman confides, "they say it's safe and all, but it really helps to meet someone who's been through it."

"Don't you waste another minute worrying." Momma turns to go. "My brother had it fifty years ago and it worked and he's just fine."

"Thanks a million," the woman calls out. Diane watches the couple load the stroller into the truck. They're smiling. She waits until she and Momma are out of earshot.

"How could you lie like that?" Diane asks.

"They looked so troubled," Momma says. Diane doesn't say anything. She is thinking how simple life would be if you could just lie. Sometimes she wishes Joe had lied and never told her about Maryanne Snyder.

"Besides, I read all about it in *Redbook*. Everything I said was true to the best of my recollection." She pauses to blow her nose. "Except the part about the brother."

Diane puts Gerald to bed halfway through "The A-Team." Momma answers the telephone. "Alice is coming over," she tells Diane. "She just had a phone call from Joe."

Diane plugs in the coffeemaker because Alice always likes a cup. She loads the day's accumulation into the dishwasher, giving each dish a halfhearted scrub before placing it in the rack. She and Alice have discussed men and life in general since high school. They spend hours on the telephone analyzing the people they know and working on their female consciousness. Momma is what they call "another wasted woman." Diane and Alice define this as anyone born before 1958 or anyone whose female consciousness hasn't been raised. Most of the women they know have had their consciousnesses raised for them by unfaithful husbands, divorce, single-parenting, and humdrum jobs. Alice has been divorced for three years. "It isn't all negative," Alice told her. "I don't have to worry about what to make for dinner anymore. Plus I lost a ton."

Momma answers the door. Alice throws her purse onto a chair and hurries to the kitchen. "Guess who I just had a heart-to-heart with?"

"I give up," Diane says, setting spoons around the table.

"He wants you to take him back."

"I knew it!" Momma says. "What did I tell you, Diane?"

Diane had heard that Maryanne dumped Joe after two months and that he's living alone in a trailer on the edge of town. She had driven by a few times during her lunch hour. She'd felt twinges of sadness at the sight of his laundry stiffening on the line and the dented mailbox with the broken flap hanging down like the tongue of a thirsty dog. But she isn't willing to be anybody's second choice. And she doesn't like the idea of him slinking back with his tail between his legs. That wasn't the Joe she had married.

"I'm not taking sides." Alice lights a cigarette. "Just reporting the news."

"This isn't a natural disaster," Diane says. "I don't need Peter Jennings. He could call me himself."

"There's a lot to be said for hanging on to old problems instead of trading them for new ones." Momma stands behind Diane and strokes her hair. "You still love Joe, don't you?"

Diane thinks about it. "Love's easy. It's the living together that's hard."

"He wants to move back and go for counseling. Can you believe it?" Alice asks Momma.

"Couldn't you just talk to him?" Momma rests both hands lightly on Diane's shoulders.

"Sure," Diane whispers. She and Joe have been perfectly civilized every time they've been together since he left. The problem is that afterward something strange, beyond her control, happens, usually when she's getting ready for bed. She imagines he's watching her as she moves through the quiet upstairs rooms. She pretends he's small enough to squeeze under the bed or thin enough to hide behind the door. In the hallway she invents a hidden camera like the one at the Sun Bank. Sometimes she finds herself pointing her toe in an alluring way as she peels off her hose or stroking her neck too long as she applies moondrop lotion, almost as if her hands had become Joe's.

"He's basically a good man, you know." Momma pours more coffee.

"He sounds genuinely miserable," Alice adds, "not that I'm defending him."

"I'm sure the experience has changed him," Momma says.

Alice speaks into her upraised cup. "He said to tell you he'll be by tomorrow at 5:30."

"Have you ever thought of joining the diplomatic corps?" Diane asks Alice.

Momma calls Diane at work the next day to check on her. Diane promises she'll listen to Joe. She remembers all the comfort and advice Momma gave her when she was growing up—what to wear on dates, how to handle her first job interview—and wonders now if Momma got all that from ladies' magazines, too.

Joe, always punctual, rings the doorbell at 5:30. Considerate, Diane thinks. She knows he still has a house key, and he knows she never bothered to change the locks, even though the legal clinic recommended it. Joe brings a grocery bag full of goodies for her and Gerald—an econo-pak of Juicy Fruit gum, three cantaloupes for her perpetual diet, and a couple of frozen pizzas.

"Gerald here?" he asks, neatly folding the bag.

"No, he's sleeping at Billy's tonight." Diane grips the countertop as she leans against it.

"Mind if I make myself a cup of coffee?"

Diane stares at the refrigerator as he putters at the sink. A butterfly magnet holds a picture of suffragettes marching down Park Avenue. Above it is a photo of a mule standing in a kitchen full of overturned garbage with the caption, Some Days Nothing Goes Right. A gift from Momma.

Joe sits down at the table and stirs powdered creamer into his coffee. "I'd like to come back," he says. "Do you want a cup? I should have asked . . ." His spoon clinks against the saucer.

"How do I know there won't be another Maryanne?"

He thinks about it for a long time, rotating the cup in its saucer with one beefy finger. This unsettles Diane, who is used to the old Joe who had a quick answer for every question. Finally, he says, "I can only tell you that I'm not looking for another Maryanne. Before," he adds, "I was looking."

Diane slumps into the opposite chair, her hair falling forward onto her face. "Jesus," she says.

"I'm only telling the truth."

"Well, it isn't a very nice truth, is it? You lied to me before, but now you say you don't intend to lie again. How can I believe anything you say?" Suddenly she's crying, but her voice is angry. He hands her a tissue.

"I can't answer that. I've had the shit knocked out of me, too, you know."

She nods.

"How about a couple of hands of gin? It might make you feel better."

"I'm confused," Diane says, retrieving the cards from a drawer. "You deal."

Diane knows that Joe hates cards. She can count the number of times they've played. The first was on their honeymoon cruise to Jamaica. It rained for two days straight. She remembers Joe saying he wasn't good at any game where he had to sit still. Then, when her father died three years ago, Joe played cards with the relatives from Baltimore who hung around after the funeral to fulfill the seven-day requirement on their Super Saver flights. She remembers best their gin tournament in the hospital after Gerald was born, slightly jaundiced and premature. They'd play to five hundred, then walk down the hall to peer at Gerald, whose treatment was to lie in a special cubicle under ultraviolet light, wearing only a blindfold and a diaper. "Look at that one," a tactless visitor said one day. "Must be a blue baby." And Joe had answered loudly, "No, no. He's just getting a head start on his tan."

Now Joe shuffles the cards solemnly, then counts off "she loves me, she loves me not" as he deals. Diane knows that the knock card will be "she loves me," but she doesn't comment. They play for more than an hour, Diane winning nearly every hand.

"I'm going home for a week to my folks," he tells her.

"Everybody okay there?"

"Yeah. I just want to talk to them. My counselor agreed it was a good idea."

"Your counselor?"

"Yeah. I'm seeing a counselor twice a week. I think she's helping me. I'd like you to come with me sometime."

"I'll think about it." Diane knocks with three points. Joe's hand is loaded again with face cards.

At seven o'clock Joe tucks the end flaps over the cards and puts on his jacket. "Will you tell Gerald goodbye for me?" He pauses at the doorway like he used to when they were dating. Diane feels the old ache she felt then. "I'm sorry that I hurt you," he says. "I wish I could undo it." Tears magnify his eyes.

Diane would like to comfort him. But she was the one who cried at the movies while Joe put his arm around her. Suddenly she feels awful about the way she's treating him, yet, at the same time, put off by his tears. She can't forgive the old Joe or warm up to the new one. But just to be on the safe side, she undresses that night in the dark.

Momma takes Gerald on Sunday because Diane has finally agreed to go with Alice to the Trinity Singles meeting and picnic.

"You look great, Alice," Diane says as she gets into the Toyota.

"Didn't we decide not to comment on each other's looks?" Alice reminds her. "Unless one of us has spinach on her teeth or something."

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Diane finds it hard to remember all their resolutions. The primary one is to talk about their work, just the way men do, even if it means being a bore. Diane practices on the way to the Trinity church. She tells Alice about the new software program for inventorying paper goods. "It's supposed to save the city about $5,000 a year in overstock assets alone," she concludes.

Diane knows she's supposed to care about her career, but despite her new title as executive assistant, Purchasing, and her new computer terminal, she can't generate much enthusiasm. Between her job and Gerald and her dissolving marriage she feels like a juggler frozen in midstroke, forever waiting to catch the third ball. Alice, on the other hand, has mapped out a strategy to net herself an elementary school principalship within ten years.

The Trinity Singles meeting is boring. The men busily scan the women. Diane senses many eyes roaming her body. She recrosses her legs and tucks strands of hair into her French knot. Alice is giving her the scoop on the members she's dated. "Why do you keep coming back if they're all such creeps?" Diane asks.

"Uh oh," Alice whispers. "Clam up."

A man of about forty-five wearing a silver dollar belt buckle and yellow jeans sits down next to Diane. "Name's Harding," he says, extending his hand to her.

"You look familiar." Diane cocks her head. "Do you work at city hall, too?"

"Everybody says I look familiar. I'm the guy that does the waterbed commercial on TV. You know, the one for the Waterbed Ranch."

Diane remembers instantly. In it, Harding is sitting on the edge of a waterbed surrounded by three women in nightgowns. "Want something new in your bedroom?" he leers at the camera.

"You new in town?" he asks. "Or just newly divorced?"

"Separated."

"So," he says, leaning back, "you've seen me on TV?"

"I guess you're famous."

"So what did you think of it? The commercial?"

"Oh, it's fine," Diane lies, "but I'd like to see one with men in their pj's."

"Hey, I volunteer," Harding says seductively.

The meeting adjourns to nearby Morning Glory Park. The men light barbecue pits, and the women spread blankets under the trees. A volleyball game begins. Harding sits beside Diane, telling the story of his life. His voice is southern and soothing. The sky is so blue she can hardly look at it. It reminds her of the sky painted on the background of a cereal box—the one with the bowl of granola set on a checkered cloth in a field of wildflowers.

"The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B," Harding suddenly sings. "That's my real love," he explains, "music of the '40s."

"Do you want to take a walk?" Diane longs for the cool shade of the forest at the edge of the picnic area.

They follow the hiking path, a mile-and-a-half loop through the park grounds. The terrain changes from sandy pines to overarching hardwood trees. Harding walks briskly, talking most of the time. "Resurrection ferns!" she interrupts, running over to a low limb of live oak where the supple, shiny fronds have uncurled from the rain.

"I bet you have a real green thumb." Harding doesn't move from the path. "Even though my daddy was a farmer, I never could grow

anything." He scuffs at the loose soil. "But ask me anything about the Andrews Sisters."

"What?"

"Go ahead. Ask me anything."

"I don't know anything about them. Besides," she feels the moss along a branch, "I don't care."

"Oh."

Diane, surprised by her own honesty, notices that Harding is finally silent. "Look!" She points to the electric fence that demarcates the county prison from the park. Beyond it, the windowless white concrete building generates a glare in the full sun. As they get closer, Diane makes out men in gray prison suits walking and smoking in the compound. "Let's go back," she urges Harding.

"They can't hurt you from over there." He goes right up to the fence and stares at the prisoners.

"Yeah, but I bet they hurt a lot of people on their way in." Diane imagines Joe there for a second, convicted of mental cruelty or infidelity or whatever it is that used to be against the law between two married people. Irreconcilable differences is like a traffic ticket, she thinks.

"Hey little lady." Harding's voice is conspiratorial. "Want to smoke a joint?"

Over the next three days Harding calls twice to chat, most of the time reviewing why his two marriages failed. Momma calls every day, and Joe phones every evening from Georgia. By Thursday, Diane is actually waiting by the phone for his call. She knows this is regressive—she's read enough articles confirming that it's a waste of time for women to wait for men.

"I found my high school yearbook," Joe tells Diane on Friday. "I used to wear my hair greased. It looked wacky. I was sure a different person then," he muses. "Diane?"

"Yeah?"

"I really love you."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Diane forces herself to say.

The next night he tells her three times that he loves her, but now

there is a happier ring to his voice. "I've figured it out," he says. "I think I've figured it out."

To this Diane says nothing, even though she's pretty sure she loves him, too. Still, there's something in the way, though Diane can't quite identify what it is. She agrees to meet him on Sunday evening on the neutral ground of Harrison's Cafeteria in the mall.

Sunday is Family Night at Harrison's, and the place is packed. The big, intact families with grandparents, parents, and children cluster in noisy groups. A few of the unescorted women have their hair in rollers under bright bandannas, as if they are already preparing for next Saturday night.

The line snakes around in front of a mirrored wall where Diane and Joe hesitantly study their reflections as they wait. Diane thinks Joe looks thinner and older. She thinks, too, that they still look as if they belong together. It's partly the way the top of her head comes right up to his ears, the stair-step silhouette they make standing together. But now they stand apart, as if they don't know each other very well. Diane has the same eerie feeling she gets at night—that Joe is secretly watching her and that she wants him to. He stares into the eyes of her mirror image. "Diane," he says to her reflection, "do you miss me at all?"

"Of course I miss you." She touches his sleeve.

"I've learned a lot about myself," he says, handing her a brown plastic tray.

"I'm glad."

"No, you don't understand. Now I want to learn about you. I want to know everything about you. I don't even know what size shoe you wear," he says incredulously.

"It's all right," she says. Her heart thumps a little at the prospect of Joe wanting to know her so intimately, so individually.

"Salad, ma'am?" the server asks in a bored voice. Diane becomes aware of the long buffet of food. She surveys the assortment of desserts—bright red deep-dish cherry cobbler, tall chocolate layer cake, key lime pie heaped with whipped topping.

"It's too bad I know what this stuff tastes like," she tells Joe. He

squints back a question mark at her. "The desserts. All the food here," she explains. "It looks delicious, but it's a . . . lie. It tastes like . . . nothing." Her voice rises in anger. "It fools your eyes."

"Yeah," Joe drawls. "There are people like that, too."

Diane passes over the entrées and heaps her plate with corn bread, butter, and fried okra. They take a corner booth in the brightly lit lime-colored room.

A moment later, Harding's bejeweled hand is on Diane's shoulder, and his silver dollar belt buckle gleams at the corner of her eye. "I've been trying to reach you," Harding says, ignoring Joe. "I got a great new Benny Goodman recording I wanted you to hear—"

"Harding," Diane interrupts, "this is Joe."

"Nice to meet you. You can come along, too, Joe. I'm talking about a smooooth sound. How about after dinner?"

"I don't know." Diane holds her buttered corn bread in midair.

"And," Harding continues, "I'm making another commercial this week. I told them your idea about the pajamas, and they want to meet you. You might even get to sit on the bed."

"We're trying to have a conversation here. Do you mind?" Joe points a fried drumstick at Harding, who gets the message, tips his cowboy hat, and retreats, promising to call Diane at a more convenient time.

"Do you like that guy?" Joe asks.

"He's all right."

"Since when do you like Benny Goodman?" Joe pauses. "Is that how I've acted for the last nine years? I mean, he just assumed you wanted to hear all about him and his record."

Diane puts her hand over Joe's. "I think you *were* like that for nine years, but I didn't notice it most of the time. Now I'd notice it though, you know?"

"Yeah. I guess I owe you nine years of listening. No—not owe. I want to hear you out."

"About the pajamas—"

"You don't have to explain anything."

"I know." Diane drains the last of her ice water from the glass and watches Joe pick at his food. She remembers the countless times Joe heard her moaning in and out of sleep with menstrual cramps. He would take her in his arms and stroke her face until she fell asleep.

At least he had always understood pain. Now, she thinks, he might be trying to understand friendship, even joy. "Let's get out of here," she blurts. "We have to pick up Gerald from Momma's."

Diane makes popcorn while Joe plays the short version of Monopoly with Gerald. Then they all watch TV, sitting on the floor eating popcorn out of a big wooden bowl. After a while Gerald goes to bed. Joe shuts off the TV, sits down, and takes Diane's hand.

"Will you come with me tomorrow for my counseling?"

"Okay."

Joe removes Gerald's baby book from its shelf under the coffee table and starts looking at the pictures. "How can I expect you to take me back?" He points to Gerald at two in a bedraggled diaper.

"What do you mean?"

"I look at Gerald now and I look at this snapshot of him, and all I can think is, how did I treat Diane then? I mean, I don't think it was just Maryanne."

"Please don't mention her name anymore."

"I'm sorry. I just don't seem to know how to do it." Joe leans back and studies the ceiling.

"What?"

"Love someone the right way."

Diane watches Joe flip the album pages backward. Gerald gets smaller and smaller until finally he's a bulge at Diane's middle in the photo taken a week before he was born. Joe touches the picture lightly with his forefinger. For the first time Diane notices deep lines in Joe's face.

Diane leans back against the couch and closes her eyes. Joe begins stroking her forearm. Her body goes slack. She drifts into the half-sleep she often experienced between night feedings when Gerald was an infant. Words begin to form unexpectedly in her head, pulling her back to consciousness like the instinct that brought her sharply awake when the baby fretted even slightly. "There's something I want to tell you, Joe." Her voice is grave but relaxed. Joe's expression is identical to Gerald's when she interrupts him playing with crayons or airplane kits.

"Remember when I went to my cousin's wedding in Norfolk two years ago? You stayed home with Gerald?"

"Mm hmm."

Diane's head is a jumble of thoughts—the New Woman, equality, divorce, sex—but she speaks easily, as if reciting a familiar bedtime story. Images of Momma flit through her mind: Momma dancing at the wedding reception; Momma talking about her cross-eyed brother in the mall parking lot; Momma hip-deep in glossy magazines, each one rolled up like a diploma.

Diane describes the man she met at the wedding—a friend of the groom—and how lonely she felt watching the bridal pair all evening. Joe doesn't move a muscle. Swallowing hard, she tells how the man invited her to his hotel room. "I knew why I was going there," she admits. Joe looks stricken, though he still doesn't move. Diane sees the man fold back the orange floral bedspread, then pull the thickly lined drapes closed with a long plastic wand. He hangs the Do Not Disturb sign on the door. "What I noticed about him first," she says, convinced herself, "was his hands."

Stony Limits

When I wheeled through the door of Room 12A at the Heloise Gumm High School for Exceptional Children, the first thing I saw was a shiny red football helmet looming over a blond wooden desk. Well, I thought, at least the dress code is lenient. The last school I attended was pretty strict: no denims or T-shirts, no high heels, no more makeup than Jackie Kennedy wore.

Mrs. Page motioned me toward the front of the room. "Class," she began officially, "this is our new student, Maggie Freer. I'm sure that you'll all make her feel at home." I hate being reduced to third person, so I stared at my little toe which was wiggling. It's the only part of me from the waist down that moves. When I'm nervous it gets going on its own.

Mrs. Page asked all the kids to state their name and handicap. "It saves a lot of time and questions later," she explained.

"I had polio when I was ten," I said when my turn came. "Six months before the vaccine came out." There was a little awed hush in the room. This was familiar to me—I call it the Prestige of Polio. When it comes to wheelchair disabilities, it's the top of the heap. Maybe because a U.S. president had it. I don't know. But for six years now people have always been impressed when I mention my disease.

The football helmet was called Julio, and there was a kid with real bad cerebral palsy named Carl. And I was wrong about the dress code: Julio had hydrocephalus and wore the helmet day and night for protection. What would it take to get him to remove it for me?

Mrs. Page was teaching Geography. She pulled a glossy map of the world down in front of the chalkboard. Lots of pink, yellow, green, and blue blotches. I noticed that Thailand was still called Siam. The bell rang, but no one left. They wheeled their chairs back from the desks and huddled, chatting, in small groups. Only Julio stood, tall and lean, without a chair. Then, in about ten minutes, the bell rang again and Mrs. Page began English. I had gone to regular schools all my life, and I missed being carried along with the crush of students changing classes at a regular school—the commotion, the sly remarks and quick digs.

"*Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy," Mrs. Page started, "of doomed love, of a love which tries to go against tradition and the weight of social custom." I detected a faint snicker behind me. "But there are many other important messages in this play, as in all of Shakespeare." She quoted: "'He that is strucken blind cannot forget the precious treasure of his eyesight lost,'" then paused respectfully. "But mainly," she went on, "we could sum it up with these words: 'Alas that love, so gentle in his view, should be so tyrannous and rough in proof . . . violent delights have violent ends.'" Having read the play aloud with my dad many times after my spinal fusion, I quoted to myself the apt, "She speaks, yet she says nothing," while I doodled a cartoon of Julio on the inside of my notebook.

At lunch the kids were real friendly. First everybody in chairs went through the line, then Julio, then the born-deaf kids from the second floor who talked rapidly with their hands in miniature karate chops. The only sign language I knew was the international screw-you fin-

ger, so I smiled a lot at them but didn't try to join in. I showed Julio my sketch of him, thinking he'd be flattered.

"Someday I won't need this," he said, adjusting his chin strap. "Otherwise, I'm completely normal."

"That's good."

"What about you?" he asked, looking at my small legs.

"This is it," I answered.

"Yeah, well, at least you're not in a potty chair like some of them."

"I'll remember that next time I say my prayers."

"You wanna take a walk?" He didn't hurry to rephrase his question, which was a good sign. I was tired of people adjusting their vocabularies to accommodate my wheels.

We headed out the door onto the playground—a dismal paved area surrounded by very tall fences. Across the alley was a body shop and an envelope warehouse. I remembered the photograph on the school brochure. It showed the front with its wide, spanking-white double doors and closely cropped shrubs. Julio twined his fingers in the chain link and was silent. I felt like a parked car with all the glare and concrete. My wheels were hot to the touch, and my foot pedals were starting to burn. Then we saw Carl motioning us and returned to the lunchroom.

"She's going to announce it after lunch," Carl said, fighting for each word.

"You sure?" Julio asked. I watched Carl struggle to maintain control of his movements. He nodded, then rested against his chairback.

"What?" I asked.

"Another field trip," Julio said. He tore open a pack of Tom's Peanut Butter Crackers, dropped the wrapper, and crushed it under his foot. The cellophane unfolded spastically, just like Carl.

"I saw a cow in person once," Carl managed to say.

"Oh yeah," Julio said, "we've had some stellar field trips."

"Now I'm going to get to see God," Carl continued.

"Like one time they loaded all of us into a bus," Julio crunched down on the whole bundle of crackers at once. "You know how *long* that takes? And then they drove us over to the rich end of town to—get this—see the azaleas in bloom." At that moment his front teeth were blooming with orange flecks of cracker and peanut butter.

"And music," Carl said, touching my hand.

"Yeah," Julio explained for him. "We go to the symphony four

times a year. They have to take out the whole first row of seats for us."

"I like music," I said. "It makes me feel like I'm flying."

"Me too," Julio conceded. "The music part is great. It's the way they talk to us that gets me. You know, like we're retarded, too."

"*Bolero* was good," Carl said. "Have you heard *Bolero*?"

The deaf kids were returning their trays through the cafeteria pass-through. They were a rough-and-tumble group—punching each other on the arm, banging the trays around. It never occurred to me that deaf people would be so noisy. "What about them?" I asked. "Do they go to the concerts?"

"Course not," Julio answered.

The deaf kids lined up at the bottom of the stairs. It was a steep metal staircase with one landing and rivetlike pockmarks all over it, like something salvaged from a battleship. The noise was tremendous as they stampeded up. Julio pointed out their teacher, Miss Simons, who brought up the end of the line—a powerful-looking woman with meaty arms and legs and a long chestnut-colored ponytail. She looked about forty but bounded up the steps energetically, her arms extended to catch all of them if the tide turned.

After lunch we had a rest period in the physical therapy room. Everyone got out of their chairs and lay down on thick leatherette mats. Mrs. Page brought me an upholstered cube and placed it at the end of my mat. I got into Fowler's antigravity position—my knees crooked as if I were seated in a chair that had been tilted back onto the floor. Mrs. Page put on a recording of *Swan Lake*, and my mind began to drift.

The next thing I knew a little dog was licking my face, a toy poodle with pink skin and eyes streaked like marbles.

"Oh my poor, darling, sweet thing," a voice behind me said. I twisted my head around to see two heavy brown walking shoes and thick support hose. Then a hand brushed my face. "Lamar! How rude of you." She scooped the dog up, then touched my face again. "You precious little thing," she crooned. I realized, then, that she was talking not to the dog but to me.

"Who are you?" I asked, raising up on both elbows and reaching for my chair parked alongside.

"Let me help you, dear," she said, going for my armpits.

"No!"

Mrs. Page lunged between us. "Maggie, this is Mrs. *Gumm.*" Suddenly I made the connection—she was Heloise Gumm, the benefactor and founder of the school.

"Pleased to meet you." I hoisted myself into my chair.

We arranged ourselves in rows for Mrs. Gumm. Then the deaf kids torpedoed through the doorway, laughing and poking each other.

Mrs. Gumm beamed. "My dear silent angels," she said. They ignored her. Miss Simons settled them in and joined her at the front to translate into sign language.

"My dear children," said Mrs. Gumm. "It's all been arranged for two weeks from Friday. A big field trip." She looked to Miss Simons for help, then mimicked the sign for "big." "Pilgrims and tourists from all over the country come to Withlahatchee Springs, Florida. The radioactive waters are said to be healing."

Carl, seated next to me, raised his hand jerkily.

"Yes?" Mrs. Gumm noticed.

"Are we spending the night?"

"No, dear. But we'll have lunch and dinner on the road, and the park has refreshment stands. Won't that be fun?"

I quickly scrawled a note to Carl: OH GOD, JUNK FOOD AT LAST. He smiled.

"Where was I?" Mrs. Gumm asked Lamar, whose head peeked out from her arm. "Yes. Christ of the Orange Grove. A magnificent statue. A holy shrine without the great expense and danger of traveling to the Holy Land. A modern wonder of the world."

I looked over at Miss Simons, trying to verify what I'd heard. She jabbed the palm of her left hand with her right index finger, then punched a similar "hole" in the right hand. Then she tapped her way up one arm, like someone playing "this little piggy." She kept repeating these gestures. A fat tear slid down Carl's cheek. Taking my pen hand in his own, he made me circle the word "GOD" on my notepad.

Mrs. Gumm visited our classroom every morning to give an inspirational message. "I was without shoes," she began on Wednesday in an ominous tone, "and wanting the pity of the world until I saw a

man without feet." I knew it was supposed to make me feel better, but all I could see the rest of that day were stumps.

After her pep talk, she went upstairs to her silent angels. Rumor had it that the deaf room was a scientific wonder, with state-of-the-art earphones and oscilloscopes. Kids said it was brightly painted and wallpapered and had shag carpeting. Amanda Frank's mother had told her there were all kinds of posters—polar bears with "real" fur and photographs of castles that Mrs. Gumm had visited on her yearly European vacations. I itched to see it. Could it really be so much nicer than our shabby room with its green chalkboard overhung with the cursive alphabet? Mrs. Page often brought flowers from home for her desk, but otherwise the room was a dull beige designed to hide dirt for years.

Thursday at lunch I convinced Julio to eat with the deaf kids. Carl tagged along. We waved hello as we pulled up to the table where they were bent over their macaroni casseroles and milk. A few returned the wave, then ignored us.

"I told you," Julio said, grabbing hold of Carl's chair handles to return him to our side of the lunchroom.

"Wait," I said, throwing on the brake lever of Carl's chair. He lurched slightly forward.

"They don't want us," Julio said, his foot tapping in annoyance.

I looked at the ten or so faces at the table. Most of them seemed relaxed as sleepers but with open eyes. They sat much closer together than hearing people and leaned and rubbed against each other. I decided to go for it and put my arm against the thin arm of a girl with reddish hair. She turned to acknowledge me and kept on drinking her milk. I felt a slight pressure back from her warm, smooth flesh. Then, as if someone had lowered a curtain, she turned away and began gesturing to the boy on her right.

"They don't like us," Carl said.

"No. They just like each other better," I said. Julio's face brightened. He moved his hands from Carl's chair to my shoulders.

"I like you," he said, and began to massage my neck. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carl blush furiously, then move his wavering hand to touch Julio's leg. We froze for a moment. Then Julio released his gentle grip and pushed Carl to the wheelchair side of the cafeteria.

"The Christ is seven stories tall," Carl said, his face returned to its usual pale color.

"All I want to know is do they sell cotton candy," I told him.

"I heard the Christ is so white. When you touch him your hands come away all silvery. And beautiful. Like moonlight."

"Or chalk," Julio said.

"They have a big Bible," Carl continued. "I heard the pages are made of steel."

"I heard they have lots of natural springs, and Mrs. Gumm wants us all to get baptized." Julio fiddled with the straw in his milk.

"Oh no!" I lamented. In the two years I spent at Warm Springs, clergymen of every faith had visited me, not to mention the evangelists I attracted on weekend family outings who tried to talk me into attending tent revivals.

"On the other hand, maybe they have rides," Julio offered.

"Oh sure," I said, "like the Tunnel of Sodom and Gomorrah."

Julio cracked up.

"I could get cured," Carl said, staring out the window at the body shop where blue fire flared from an acetylene torch.

Back in the PT room, Mrs. Page arranged us on our mats, put on Beethoven at low level, and left the room to join Miss Simons and the rest of the staff in the faculty lounge. Beethoven always reminds me of someone having a temper tantrum, so for the first time I stayed awake. I looked at the other kids lying on the floor, some with knees bent and legs elevated like mine, others on their sides, and some curled up like unborn babies. Julio's red helmet stood out like a Christmas ornament three mats away. He was reading *Battle Cry*. It looked like a steamy sex novel from the cover, which showed a couple kissing, the man's uniformed body pressed hard against the woman.

"Hey, Julio," I whispered. "Are you getting ready for *Romeo and Juliet*?" We were going to read parts of it aloud in class for the next few days. Julio shushed me and kept reading. A moment later he said, "I'll turn down the pages with good parts for you."

"Thanks." Just then I heard thumping from the ceiling. Nothing so loud as to startle and not that creepy groaning that makes you think the roof will collapse. This sounded like people batting tom-toms.

"What is that?"

Julio came over and sat down beside me. "I don't know. Maybe it's some kind of vibration therapy. Or dancing."

"Have you ever been upstairs?"

"No. But they do it just about every day." He suspended the book in front of my eyes. "Read this," he instructed.

"So what?" I said, after speeding through it.

"I thought only babies sucked women's tits," he admitted.

"Well that just shows how much you know," I said, trying to sound cool.

Mrs. Page had turned off the classroom lights and lowered the window shades to simulate night. She was posted by the switch to bring the dreaded dawn on cue to Romeo and Juliet. Amanda was reading the part of Juliet, and Julio was Romeo. "It was the nightingale," Amanda insisted, trying to get Romeo to stick around even though he'd been banished.

"It was the lark," Julio argued. I waited for my lines, but it took forever. Besides, Juliet's nurse didn't have a lot to say in this scene. "Yon light is not daylight . . . It is some meteor that the sun exhales," Amanda said. She sounded like someone reading the ingredients on a cereal box. But Julio was really getting into his role. "Let me be put to death," he screamed, clutching his chest. "Come death and welcome! Juliet wills it so." This startled Amanda, but she continued to read flatly. "Now be gone," she told him with equal emphasis on each word. Mrs. Page flipped the light switch. Julio looked at the ceiling as if he were seeing it for the first time. "More light and light. More dark and dark our woes!" he wailed. I quickly wheeled over to the couple. "Madame!" I reprimanded Juliet. "The day is broke, be wary, look about." Julio planted a wet one on Amanda's hand and retreated to the back of the room. By then Amanda was very interested in her part, and her "Oh think'st thou we shall ever meet again?" was passionate.

From the doorway Julio's voice boomed in an astounding stage whisper that gave me goose bumps. "I doubt it not," he reassured Amanda, "and all these woes shall serve for sweet discourses in our time to come." Amanda just sat there, a lovesick expression on her face.

"Cut!" Mrs. Page ordered, returning to her desk. "That was good. Would anyone like to talk about the meaning of this scene? I mean, how we might apply it in our own lives?"

"Can we rehearse it again?" Amanda blurted.

"We won't have time today, I'm afraid," Mrs. Page said.

Carl was thoughtful. "You just know they aren't going to live happily ever after," he said. "I don't know how, but you do."

"That's true," Mrs. Page agreed.

"But you want them to so bad, like wanting to believe in miracles."

Four days before our trip Mrs. Gumm delivered an orientation lecture to the whole school. I took plenty of notes, figuring that a studious, attentive attitude might come in handy if I had to bargain for taffy apples and chili dogs.

"Gethsemane Sinkhole," she intoned. "Even the name is magical." She paused while Miss Simons signed for the deaf kids. Julio passed me *Battle Cry* with a juicy passage set off by blue-ink brackets. I read it as I continued to take notes about our destination. It was a strange combination of facts and word pictures: Harold J. Wilson whose money had built the Christ and whose features it supposedly bore. . . . *A dressing gown, sheer, white—it flowed like a billow to the floor.* . . . From a distance the outstretched arms (sixty-five feet across) give the appearance of a mammoth cross surrounded by 20,000 orange trees. . . . *Across the room each heard the other's deep breath.* . . . *He could see the nipples of her breasts through the film of silk net.* . . . Three automobiles can be suspended from either wrist without affecting the statue. Free juice samples. . . . *Their bodies seemed to melt together; she sank her fingernails into his flesh. "Oh God, God, God," she said.* Seventy feet tall. White cement.

"Bring your cameras," Mrs. Gumm suggested, "and some mad money. The Christ Only Art Gallery has lovely crucifixes." She pulled a large crocheted handkerchief from her purse and stretched it taut against her black dress. The familiar gossipy groupings of *The Last Supper* emerged in incredible detail. "Handmade," she crowed, pivoting so that everyone could see the sacred scene displayed on her chest.

On my notepad I wrote Julio a message: I NEED TO TALK TO YOU.

Rest hour was the obvious time to get a look at the deaf room. Julio and I sneaked out of PT together. The other kids were asleep as usual and the teachers safely out of earshot in their lounge.

"This is perfect timing," I reassured Julio, as we contemplated the steep staircase to the second floor.

"I'm not worried about getting caught." He shoved his shirttails into his trousers with abrupt pecking motions. "Maybe I should bring you up in your chair?"

"The chair would make an awful racket against the metal."

He kicked the bottom tread, and a slight ringing filled the stairwell. "You're right," he said.

"I'm strong," I told him. "I can pull myself up by my arms. Come on, Julio, I'm dying to see that room."

"Me too. Mrs. Gumm's 'heaven on earth' for her little angels! And we can see what the noise is, too."

"Yeah." Actually, I hadn't thought about the thumping since that first day I heard it, but now I noticed again random thuds right over my head. I slid onto the second step. "Only seventeen more to go," I said cheerfully.

"I can help you," Julio offered, as I began my slow ascent. "Tell me what to do."

I have been called "fiercely independent" so many times that I practically answer to it as my name. I looked at Julio's pale cheeks against the red of his helmet and his hands outstretched vaguely in my direction. "Stand on each stair as I climb. That way I won't get scared looking at the spaces between the steps."

He stood above me, backward, on the stairway, his arms extended straight from the shoulder to grip the iron railings on either side. It was comforting to see his legs firmly planted in front of me instead of the floor receding below as I hoisted myself along. His black trousers were neatly cuffed and his sweatsocks nice and clean. Soon I began to use his ankles to grab onto as I climbed.

I stopped at the landing to catch my breath. "Let me pull you the

rest of the way," he whispered. "We can practice here first. I'll drag you along a little bit and you can see how you like it."

In my mind a big neon sign began flashing BREASTS BREASTS HANDS HANDS. I knew that for him to get a good grip he'd have to touch me there, but I told myself it would be like a doctor doing it. "Okay," I muttered. Very gently he put his arms around me and, locking his hands together, slowly pulled me six inches closer to the steps. "Try to relax and just let it happen," he urged. I recognized this as the line that the soldier in *Battle Cry* used to seduce his girlfriend but said nothing.

I couldn't completely relax as he pulled me or my bottom would have been bruised blue as a berry. His helmet frequently grazed my cheek, and more than ever I wished he'd take it off. I knew the bones of his skull hadn't joined together, but I was sure I wouldn't be shocked by the sight of his head.

Finally we reached the top of the stairs, outside Room 22. Julio straightened up, turned the doorknob slowly, opened the door a crack, and peeked in with one eye. "Oh!" he gasped, and closed the door.

"What is it?"

"Oh boy," he said, his face a deep pink, the color your hand turns when you shine a flashlight through it.

"I can't reach the doorknob, Julio. Open the door," I pleaded.

Wordlessly he turned the knob, pulled the door ajar, then flattened himself against the wall. I squirmed to the door and Julio goosenecked around me. We looked in. My throat closed and my eyes popped open like umbrellas. There they were, the silent angels, partly undressed, some of them doing it. Julio slumped down beside me. I eased the door shut. We sat there for what seemed like an eternity. Finally he said, "I don't feel sorry for them anymore."

"Right," I said.

Julio took my hand in slow motion and placed it inside his helmet against his cheek, kissing it as it passed his mouth. I felt all my blood flow into that hand, as if the rest of me had gone to sleep. My fingertips tingled. "Oh Julio," I said, moved beyond the point of trying to sound original, "that feels so nice."

We snuggled closer. I squinted my eyes shut and kissed him on the mouth. The air around me felt thick as cotton batting, and for the first time in my life all I could do was feel pleasure, a sensation of floating. After a while, he unbuttoned my blouse and very gently

placed his hand over my heart. I felt the blood throbbing in his neck with my fingers. Then suddenly, I felt his body stiffen. He yanked his hand from my blouse, squeezed my shoulder, and cried out, "Maggie!" From the corner of my eye I saw the bronze legs of Mrs. Gumm.

"What is going on here?"

I buttoned my blouse.

"How dare you! How dare you do this in MY school." Julio kept holding my hand on his thigh. Mrs. Gumm leaned into my face. "Maybe they allowed such goings-on where you came from, but not here. I won't have it," she hissed. "I won't have any tramps in my school."

"Open the door," I said.

"Girls like you have no—what door?" Mrs. Gumm was confused.

"Open the door," Julio said quietly. "Please, just open the door."

As if moving through someone else's nightmare, Mrs. Gumm complied. Though we couldn't see the kids from where we sat, we had a clear view of Mrs. Gumm's face as she beheld her angels caught in the act. Her mouth opened slowly, forming the shape a mouth makes before it howls in pain. "MISS SIMONS!" she yelled over her shoulder. "Come here immediately!" Then she froze. The deaf kids must have noticed her in the doorway, because I heard a scurrying inside like kitchen mice at night. Miss Simons came clanging up the steps. Mrs. Gumm turned to me again. "However you got up here, you get back down," she ordered. Then the two women strode into the room and slammed the door shut.

A special assembly was called that afternoon right before school let out. By then, of course, everybody knew what had happened. I regretted having left my wheelchair in such plain view. If I had asked Julio to fold it up and hide it behind the stairs, Mrs. Gumm might never have discovered us or the deaf kids. Other than that, I felt no regret whatsoever. Julio had already told Carl he was madly in love with me, and Carl had already told me that Julio had told him.

The buses waited in the parking lot like big yellow slickers waiting for rain. Mrs. Gumm and Miss Simons joined forces at the front of the room. "I have always thought of the deaf," Mrs. Gumm began,

"as children who are seen but not heard by anyone . . . except God." Was she going to cry? I looked at the deaf kids. They were as relaxed as usual. "His real sheep," she went on. "And I am shocked and appalled." She sniffed. "I don't know how these perversities began, but they will not be tolerated." The deaf girl with reddish hair nudged my shoulder and smiled. Carl, sitting on my left, was as expressionless as a juror.

"If I cannot trust my children here in school, I cannot take responsibility for them out there," her arm swept up, "in the real world." Carl looked at his wristwatch. Julio circled something in his English book and passed it to me: *Rom: For stony limits cannot hold love out.*

"Therefore I have canceled our field trip," Mrs. Gumm announced. There was a low groan from the room. "You are not deserving of it, particularly considering the nature of your—" she searched for a word, "waywardness." Miss Simons's rendition seemed much more to the point: she jammed her finger in and out of a fisted hand.

Carl's voice cracked. "Not all of us were bad," he said, holding back tears.

"I cannot single anyone out for favors," Mrs. Gumm answered, making me hate her at last. I'M SORRY I wrote to Carl. Julio underlined it in blue and passed it to him, giving my hand a quick squeeze. Carl read it and pushed the notepad to the floor. I wanted to tell him it wasn't the end of the world, that maybe it was better in some mysterious way that he wasn't going to see Christ of the Orange Grove. But when I turned to tell him, the bell rang and he rolled past me through the door.

The Problem with Yosi

Naomi's eyes swept the crowd in the kibbutz meeting hall to make sure everyone was listening. Her head moved deliberately, like a gun turret searching out a moving target.

"Then, he reached over and touched my breast," she said.

A unanimous "oy" rose from the members.

"What does Zalman say?" a woman asked.

The kibbutz doctor, seated beside Naomi at the table on the dais, leaned forward on his arms. "Other than his weight, he's in excellent health for a man of thirty-two. He's got some appetite."

The crowd mumbled. Naomi stood to get their attention, her silvery hair and freckled face shining in a beam from the overhead lamp. "What about a psychiatrist?" she asked. "Maybe we should

send him down to Haifa to see Dr. Morganstern. She helped little Dafna that time. Remember?" she prodded them. "When Dafna pulled her eyebrows out?"

"Yes," the doctor said, "but that was what we call a neurotic compulsion. Yosi isn't sick. He's just lonely."

"No one ever wanted to marry him," a man called out. "I remember when he tried. Seemed like he asked nearly everyone."

"Last night on the path he touched my breast," Naomi repeated. "This is not a good omen. Something must be done."

Heads nodded agreement. The members—the *chaverim*—began to brainstorm, leaning forward and back in their folding chairs. "Order!" the leader, Lev, cried. "Let's take a break and have our tea." The *chaverim* aligned themselves at the back of the room near the samovar, their voices swelling and quickening. The name "Yosi" moved up and down the line like a password.

In the cow shed, Yosi was settling the milk cows for the night and cleaning the stalls. Sharon was helping him.

"You are liking the smell of the hay?" he asked, handing down a bale from the loft.

"Yes," she answered in her careful, American-accented Hebrew. "I like the smell of the hay." They had agreed to have bilingual conversations so that each could practice the other one's language. "You like the cows, don't you?" Sharon led the oldest dairy cow, Tsiporet, into her stall.

"Oh, yes. I'm liking them very much."

"Better than Ton-and-a-Half?"

"No, not better," he said. "Just different. Like two different animals, like a cat and a dog."

"But they're all the same, cows—"

"No," Yosi interrupted. "No, the girls are cows. The boy cow is . . . is . . . I don't know the word in English, is *shor*."

"A bull. *Shor* is the Hebrew?"

"*Shor*, yes. He is a bull. He is different."

"Is he mean?" she asked, leading the last cow in from the outdoor pen.

"Oh no. He's a good bull. He always does his job."

"I know." Sharon lined up the water pails to be disinfected. She had seen Ton-and-a-Half do his job. He was a prize bull from America whose sperm was used all over Israel to improve the breeding stock. Yosi was the one who collected the specimen each week. Two months before, she had seen the bull pumping into the warm receptacle built into the "breeding wall." It was her second day on the kibbutz. Yosi had run back and forth, leading the "teaser" away just in time to turn the bull's attention to the surrogate opening. This had been Yosi's job for years, in addition to caring for the ten dairy cows the members kept for their own supply of sweet milk and cream.

"Ton-and-a-Half is very happy. So he's not mean. I think he knows what I'm doing. He doesn't mind. He never gets the heifer. Once in a while I bring him a real cow like Tsiporet to make fresh her milk."

Sharon scrubbed and hosed out the buckets. "How did you get your job?"

"I've always been a *bakar*," he laughed. "Like Roy Rogers, like Hopalong."

"A cowboy?" Sharon studied the face set on the thick neck. A fringe of wispy blond hair glowed halolike around his bald head, giving him an expression of perpetual amazement. "You don't look like any cowboy I've ever seen," she said.

Yosi lowered his gaze to the floor as if he'd dropped something of value.

"Oh, but I think all that's missing, really, is the hat," Sharon added.

The meeting resumed. "Order!" Lev shouted, pounding the table with his hand. "Eli?"

A burly redhead rose. "Let's try to arrange a *shiduch* for him. My mother knows a matchmaker in Tel Aviv—"

"Yosi doesn't want to live in the city," Naomi objected. "A match with a city girl? They don't like the kibbutz life. They like their fancy clothes and their typewriters and their lipstick." Though Naomi had brought the complaint against Yosi, she had only his best interests at heart, she explained.

"How serious is it, Naomi?" Miriam asked.

"He put his hand on my breast."

"Yes, but you're old enough to be his mother. Do you think it could go farther than that? Do you think," she hesitated, "he might force himself on someone? Become violent?"

"Violent?" Naomi swatted the word away with her hand. "We're talking about Yosi. He's not a criminal. But it's so unpleasant having to push him away, treating him like a child. Yosi? I don't think he has violence in him. Still, we must do something. We can't have him hiding in the bushes waiting to touch women in the darkness."

"I think he was staring at me when I came out of the shower house the other day," another woman offered.

"So what's the harm in looking?" Lev joked. The women in the room groaned in unison.

"You want him looking at your wife, maybe?" It was Miriam.

"Pardon me," Lev said earnestly. "All right. Let's be practical. Who has an idea? Don't be shy, *chevrai.*"

The room seemed to inflate like a balloon as they sighed deeply and pondered the question. Finally, Shimon spoke. "I was just remembering what my father did when I was seventeen. I mean, what he did to educate me about women."

The members waited as he groped for words, their eyes bright with anticipation. "He arranged for me a meeting in Tel Aviv."

"What does this have to do with Yosi?" Lev asked.

"A moment," Shimon continued. "He found a prostitute there, not an ordinary prostitute—"

"Tell me," Naomi chuckled, "what Israeli prostitute is an ordinary prostitute?"

"Order," Lev said calmly.

"She was very high-class. Superior in every way—gentle, kind—"

"And how did your father manage to find such a righteous whore?" Miriam asked.

The *chaverim* laughed. "A good qvestun!" shouted the old Russian, Samuel, from the last row.

"I don't know," Shimon confessed, his face red. "Anyway, it's not important—"

"To *you*, mebbe," Samuel countered. "But to your mother?"

"Order!" Lev repeated. "I think Shimon has an idea here."

"Thank you," Shimon said. "If Yosi is lonely and awkward with

women, why not get him a prostitute—a very nice one, of course. A prostitute of his own, so to speak."

"Tel Aviv is too far away. I never noticed any in Haifa," Miriam worried. "I don't think there are any."

"You, mebbe, didn't notice," Samuel said. "You mebbe didn't notice World War I, but I assure you it happened."

Dr. Zalman took the floor, twisting the band of his wristwatch into a pretzel. "This idea sounds practical to me. And if it doesn't work, we'll know the problem goes deeper."

Again the *chaverim* buzzed and turned in their chairs, discussing the pros and cons. "Do I hear a motion?" Lev asked.

Shimon stood quickly to claim his idea. "I so move: that the kibbutz send Yosi to an appropriate prostitute—"

"How often?" someone asked. More buzzing. Shimon looked out over the faces in the room, watching their lips move, catching the emphatic phrase. "Once a week," he concluded.

"Everyone in agreement?" Lev polled them. Every hand went up. "Done! And who will tell him?"

"Let the doctor tell him," Naomi advised. "Say . . . that his hormones are building up and that it's healthy for a man to have sex on a regular basis. True?"

"True," the doctor agreed.

"And you, Samuel, you know-it-all. You find the prostitute."

"Mit pleasure."

Yosi studied the woman's calling card.

Leah Star (Strovosky)
18 Michael
Haifa, Israel

A bright purple star exploded in the upper right-hand corner. The magenta letters were raised and seemed to flow like liquid under his calloused thumb as he touched them over and over.

Number 18 was the upstairs rear of a small apartment building overhung with bougainvillea, the orange blossoms bright against the

white concrete. A small sign above the mailbox bore the same star as the calling card. In small script next to it were the words *Specialist in deep muscle massage.*

He had hardly pressed the buzzer when the door opened and a dark young woman took his hand, saying, "I'm so glad you could come."

"Thank you," he mumbled. His legs felt as if they were dissolving at the knees.

"Over here. Let's sit. I have made a small salad and we'll drink dry hock wine. You like hock, don't you?"

"Yes." He picked up a pillow decorated with metallic Yemenite embroidery and clutched it to his stomach.

"That was made by little deaf girls," she told him.

He looked around the room. "What was?"

"The pillow. The one in your lap. Would you like to eat now?"

"Yes." He was suddenly very hungry.

As he picked up his fork a large gray cat leapt onto the table. The utensil clattered to the floor.

"Oh Melech!" she chastised the cat. She removed him and set him gently on the floor, then came and stood behind Yosi as he leaned to retrieve the fork.

"Wait," she said, placing her hands on his shoulders. He froze. "You are very tense." Her fingers began to play his neck tendons like a keyboard. He let his head droop forward onto his chest.

"That feels good," he whispered.

She picked up the fork, letting her breasts graze his back as she leaned down. Then, with her arms around his neck, she wiped the fork with a napkin and pierced a tomato wedge.

"Open, please. Make big the tunnel for the choo-choo train." The fingers of her left hand stroked his lips. His mouth opened as if by reflex. She fed him the salad one piece at a time.

"That was delicious," he said, after she had wiped his mouth with the palm of her hand.

"Now it is my turn," she said, pretending to lift him from the chair.

"Your turn?" His eyes darted around the room.

"You feed me salad now," she explained. They traded places, and he imitated her perfectly. When he got to the last slice of cucumber he let the fork fall on purpose. She smiled, as if she knew what would

happen next. The hard surface of his pants pressed against her arm as he straightened up and fed her the last morsel.

"And then what happened?" Sharon asked. She was standing in the barn doorway, a pail in one hand, the other hand on her waist.

"I'm embarrassed," Yosi admitted. "I know I promised, but . . ."

"What?"

"She is wonderful, my little Star. I am learning from her so much."

"Learning? Tell me."

He began to whistle and pull on Tsiporet's udder rhythmically. The cow's eyes looked waywardly at both of them as the fresh milk streamed into the bucket.

In the following weeks Yosi received letters every Sunday addressed in purple ink from Star. "Next time you come, bring me pictures from your childhood," the first letter requested. Another time she sent him green tea from Japan—a thin tissue-paper sack placed inside a note: "Steep this four minutes in boiling water," it instructed. "Next week kelp."

Yosi took a steamy shower every Thursday morning, shaved and readied himself like a bridegroom for his weekly visit with Leah. He had lost a few pounds, and his hair was slicked down now, leaving only a saucer-sized bald spot. Her insistence on touching his face convinced him that he was not as ugly as he had thought, that there was something exotic about his small gray eyes and fleshy ears.

Only Sharon knew what went on during his visits, and even she did not know everything. Nevertheless, she learned a great deal: the fourth week, Yosi had shaved Leah's legs for her; the sixth week he had licked honey from her breasts. She had given him a manicure and explained how the muscles in his arms worked. One Thursday morning, as Yosi left the dining hall in a cloud of hair tonic and cologne, Samuel had joked, "Look at him! A regular Mr. Hollyvood!"

As Yosi pried the cow's mouth open, Sharon forced a large pill down her gullet. "You are not bored," he asked, "working with the cows?"

"No. Do you get bored with them?"

"They are like sisters," he said simply, replacing the lid on the bottle of capsules. "We must watch the next few days for the worms," he reminded her.

"Yosi, do you ever get bored with Star?"

He grabbed a shovel from its hook on the barn wall. "I am like Ton-and-a-Half, you know? Besides," he said, stabbing the shovel under a fresh pile of manure, "I love her."

Sharon carried a chair under each arm from the storage room to the main hall. "Where is everyone?" she asked Naomi, setting them down with a thud and a sigh.

"Outside, kibitzing."

"Looks like they're having their own meeting out there," Sharon observed.

"Yes." Naomi sat down at the end of an incomplete row. "It's about Yosi."

"But Yosi is in town. It's Thursday—"

"I know."

"Oh, I see." Sharon frowned.

"They're just jealous, of course. But they want to quit sending him to the prostitute. They say maybe he's rehabilitated by now, ready for a real girl."

The rising inflection of Naomi's voice made Sharon suddenly realize that this was a question.

"A real girl?"

"You know him well. He talks to you."

"You're not thinking of me with Yosi?"

Naomi patted Sharon's arm. "No, I don't mean you and Yosi. I meant he confides in you. Maybe he's told you something? Has he got his eye on someone here at the kibbutz?"

"I don't think so."

"I've known Yosi since he was a baby." Naomi wiped her neck

with a handkerchief. "I only want what's best for him." She stared into Sharon's eyes, her forehead grooved with concern. "I don't want you to betray any confidences, exactly. Just tell me," she whispered loudly, "what's going on with him? What goes through his mind?"

"How good Leah is to him."

"The whore?"

"I don't think you ought to call her that."

"Aha!" Naomi exclaimed. "You've met her then?"

"Of course not. But Yosi's told me—"

"What?"

Sharon scrutinized Naomi. The freckles on her forehead, run together from the summer sun, suggested the shape of a land mass on a map. Asia, perhaps. "He loves her."

"I'm so glad for him." Naomi threw her arms around Sharon. Then her teeth bit into her lower lip, and she shook her head doubtfully. "We have a problem."

"We do?" Sharon followed Naomi's eyes to the doorway where a crowd of men had assembled. She could see their knobby legs as they shifted from one foot to the other and scuffed at the ground.

"The best defense is attack." Naomi held Sharon by the shoulders. "Are you willing to help?"

"Yes."

"Then here is what we will do." Naomi's eyebrows arched as she pulled Sharon closer. She unfolded a chair. The sound of its legs scraping the floor smothered her words as the hall began to fill.

Lev took up the usual business: first, a report on the grapefruit crop, a discussion of the new picking schedule. The allocation of money for a phonograph for the children's house was next. The poultry committee complained again about the unreliability of the itinerant chicken sexer and recommended employing one from nearby Kibbutz Shemesh in exchange for violin lessons with Samuel.

"Anything further?" Lev asked.

Shimon stood. "I wish to say I think it's enough, this sending Yosi to the prostitute. It's time for him to find someone on his own." The room remained quiet, so he continued. "I know practice makes perfect, but it isn't like he's going to make a career of it. We're not paying

for him to become a concert violinist." The crowd fractured with laughter. Naomi's finger drummed on her ample thigh.

"Now?" Sharon asked her.

"Not yet."

"We never intended it as a permanent solution," Shimon went on.

"You can't cut a man's water off just like that!" Samuel objected, snapping his fingers for emphasis.

"We could wean him gradually . . . say, three more weeks," Shimon replied.

"That sounds reasonable," Doctor Zalman agreed. The *chaverim* buzzed briefly, an intermittent and unenthusiastic buzz, like the sound of a fly dying.

"Do I have a motion?" Lev asked.

"Now!" squeaked Naomi.

"*Rak rega echad*!" Sharon bellowed. "One minute please!" The *chaverim* were stunned first by the voice, then by the translation.

"Our newest member has the floor." Lev's voice was solemn.

"Thank you," Sharon said. Silence descended on the members like a sheet thrown over a bird cage. "The other night, when I was coming from the barn, he put his hand on my breast." Now the silence filled the room in heaps and drifts, engulfing her words. "And my leg," she added, "high up."

"Oh no," Miriam sighed.

"This sheds a different light," Doctor Zalman said, rubbing the side of his face as incredulity gave way to thought. Sharon glanced at Naomi, who was intently tracing the lines on her palm with a thumbnail.

"We could be the first kibbutz with a maniac on our hands," someone yelled.

"He could be working up to something bigger," the doctor said. "What did you do?"

"I told him," she cleared her throat with a low rumble, "that he must not do these things, because I don't feel romantic about him. I told him it was a serious matter. He was very ashamed." Naomi's plan was brilliant, but Sharon didn't quite know how much to embellish the story. She kept talking. "Actually, I felt he was trying to tell me something—"

"Exactly!" Naomi was on her feet. "Doctor, wouldn't you agree there is a pattern to his lapses?"

"A pattern?" the doctor echoed.

"First it was me," Naomi continued. "And who am I? Almost his mother, may she rest in peace. That's who I am. And now Sharon. And who is she?"

They looked at her blankly. Then, as if one candle after another were being lit, the room perceptibly brightened.

"Like a sister, perhaps?" Shimon ventured.

"Right. You see, he only does it to people he loves and trusts, people who would forgive him."

"Still—" Miriam objected.

"No. Listen, what does it mean?" Naomi raised her arms toward the ceiling. "He's sending us a message, *chevrai*—"

"Of course!" Samuel interrupted. "It's like the handwriting on the wall. But this time," his index finger wagged at them, "the handwriting is on, if you'll forgive me, the breast!"

"I know what the handwriting says." Naomi folded her arms and smiled broadly. An unspoken challenge radiated from her stout figure.

The buzz in the room was deafening, the sound of an airplane engine warming up.

"Would one of you prophets be so kind as to translate it then?" Lev asked, clapping his hands for order.

Naomi turned to stare at Shimon seated several rows behind her. He stood up slowly. "I, too, read the writing." He took a deep breath. "It says—" he watched Naomi as she wiggled two fingers alongside her ear, "it says that we should send him twice a week."

"And?" Lev prompted.

"I so move," Shimon said hurriedly, "that the kibbutz send Yosi to his appropriate prostitute twice a week—"

"Indefinitely," Naomi added.

A biblical "for eternity" from Sharon was muted by the enthusiastic clucking which filled the room.

The vote was again unanimous. At tea afterward, they congratulated themselves on the wisdom of their solution. Solomon himself could not have done better. In the barn, Tsiporet pulled hay from her rack and chewed it slowly as she waited for Yosi's hands.

Companion Planting

At Christmas, while I visited my new grandson in North Carolina, I wrote to Alice every day on the prettiest postcards I could find—Bat Cave, Blowing Rock covered with bluish snow. I stopped twice on the road home, once to buy her shelled pecans and once for a poinsettia plant. When I crossed the Florida line I called her. "You'll be a sight for sore eyes," she groaned. "Can you come over right away, Cleland?"

In spite of all that had happened in the last few months, when I heard her voice I missed that blond hair blazing in the sunshine and that nice smile of hers. A good-looking woman, even at fifty-five. "Anything wrong?" I asked.

"Just a surprise," she said. Then she blew me some kisses over the phone and hung up.

Surprise. That could mean trouble. It was the same word Alice had used when she stopped by the feedstore last April to tell me her niece Jackie was moving to Florida. "I figure she can fit her little single-wide right between your trailer and my A-frame, temporarily," Alice had said excitedly. "I've got it all worked out in my mind."

I didn't doubt it. When Alice had something worked out in her mind, it might as well be standing and breathing and talking in front of you. She explained that Jackie was a certified PE instructor in California and that she'd lost her job and her fiancé the same week. "She calls it 'bad karma,'" Alice had said.

I told her any kin of hers was kin of mine. It was almost true—two weeks before I'd bought her a diamond solitaire at Thurgood's. We hadn't set a date yet, but Alice, being a Roman Catholic, put a lot of stock in engagements. It was the third ring I'd given to a woman. You might say I'm an old hand at it.

Now the rows of pines fanned out as I sped down the dirt road to Alice's place. I passed the beef steer in his small pasture—a cleared area with a bathtub and a bale of hay. His ears stood up and followed me like radar dishes. He was nearly big enough to slaughter.

The setter, her whole body wagging, met me at the path. I heard music throbbing from Jackie's trailer. The words of the song were garbled, like people screaming into the wind. I knocked on the door of Alice's A-frame. No answer. I walked back to the barnyard. One of the milk goats baaed at me over the fence rail, her udders hard and full. The place had the feel of something gone wrong—a stillness, like when you find the cattle loose in the sugarcane, bloated and woozy from overeating.

I heard banging from the barn, then Alice's voice. "Damn you!" she hollered. The new foal bolted through the dutch doors and galloped off toward the mares. Alice appeared, wrapping a blue halter around her arm like a bullwhip. "Glory be," she said, and waved to me. From Jackie's trailer the pitch changed, and a woman belted out the song "What's Love Got to Do with It?"

"Listen to that racket, will you?" Alice took both my hands. "I really missed you."

"Me too. What's going on around here?" I nodded toward the trailer.

"Jackie's driving me crazy."

"She's taken up rock and roll music?"

"Worse than that." Alice opened the door to her A-frame. "She's taken up with a man."

"I don't believe it."

She opened the refrigerator and took out two beers. We sipped, then kissed, our mouths cold and wet.

We had to knock hard on Jackie's trailer door. Finally she appeared, wearing a housedress covered with parrots and flowers.

"Welcome back," she said, clapping me hard on the shoulder. "Come on in and join the party." I looked into the dark living room. A man was sitting on the sofa, his boots up on the coffee table.

"Who's this?" I asked. The man stood and walked toward me, moving a big chaw of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

"Name's Hudson," he said.

"Cleland, meet my new fiancé," Jackie said.

"How do," he said. We shook hands. He was real thin, this Hudson, with long, slicked-back hair. He was wearing spurs, a tight denim jacket, and jeans. His voice was quiet and polite.

"Flip the tape over, will you, honey?" Jackie hooked a finger in one of his belt loops and pulled. I took a slug of my Bud and coughed as I whispered to Alice, "How long?"

"She's been catting around with him since the day before Christmas," she whispered back.

"Hudson's got a booth at the Waldo flea market," Jackie said.

"I sell collectibles." Hudson inserted the cassette. "And smoked turkeys and hams for the holidays."

"That's how they met," said Alice. "We had smoked turkey for Christmas supper."

"A real good meal," Hudson told Alice. "I appreciate the way you all been treating me." He looked me in the eyes as if to ask, Are you gonna make trouble for me? "Alice showed me the beautiful ring you give her. Hope I can buy Jackie one like it someday." He reached his skinny arm up and around Jackie's shoulders.

Alice set her beer down on the table. "Jackie, I told you this morning we need to talk."

Willie Nelson began singing "Always on My Mind." Jackie joined in.

"Jackie," Alice began again. "I've got to talk to you about the chores."

"That's our song," Jackie said, closing her eyes. Hudson pushed her chin sideways with his fist in a mock punch.

"Why don't you sing it, then, while you milk the goats or clean the hog pens?" Alice was getting riled, but Jackie just slouched down into the sofa cushions. Alice stamped her foot. "Jackie! You're not listening. Did you hear what I said? Even the cabbage is going to seed. It doesn't make sense after all the work we put in."

"I guess I'm just a fool in love," Jackie said, lighting a cigarette Hudson had rolled for her.

"I guess I'm the fool!" Alice snapped.

Jackie had arrived in late April, bringing her trailer and an old cat named Harmony. She was a tall, broad-built woman, flat as a board front and back, with short, frizzy red hair. The first thing she said when she got out of her car was, "Looks a little bit like California." Then she threw herself on Alice and cried about her ruined romance and her unemployment. "I'm swearing off men," she said. "No matter how good a shape you're in, your heart can still be broken."

At first things picked up for her. She got a job right off teaching PE part-time at Archway High. She hooked up her trailer between Alice and me and minded her own business. But only two weeks after starting, she lost her job in an argument over coed football. "Florida sure is behind the times," Jackie told us, waving her pink slip like a flag on the Fourth of July.

That night Alice and I were lying in bed jay-naked. Alice said, "What am I going to do with her? She's so damn independent. I told her this wasn't California, that people don't change their ways so quick here."

"I have a cousin who moved to California to raise cantaloupes," I said. "He's not so independent."

"It's not the same thing," Alice explained. "See, Jackie never lived anywhere but California."

I kissed Alice, but she couldn't keep her mind off Jackie.

"She's thirty-nine years old and got nothing going for herself." Alice smoothed back the hair from my forehead. I poked at the little dimple she has below her waist. "I told Jackie she could stay here permanently, Cleland, if she wants to."

I felt myself being wrapped around her little finger. But it was Alice's property, and the bed was warm and she smelled so good that I didn't care. Then Alice rose up on one elbow and commenced to pull the hair on my chest with gentle tugs. All my women have done that, even my first wife, who died in childbirth at the age of twenty. Alice told me Jackie had a plan for them to become totally self-sufficient, to live off the land. It wouldn't affect her pension, either. They'd buy livestock and farm the place, not just a few laying hens like she had now.

"How're you gonna do that with most of your twenty acres already planted in pines?" I asked.

"Jackie got a bunch of books from the library. Young women today are resourceful," Alice said. I buried my head between her breasts and rooted around a little. "It'll work out, you'll see," she said. "You can get us a discount at the feedstore. That'll help some."

For the next few weeks when I came home from work, I found Alice and Jackie digging up the backyard and nailing wood slats together. Jackie showed me diagrams of their garden, explained that she'd take the chicken lime and toss it right into the compost heap. Everything was going to be organized and energy efficient. Intensive gardening, she said. Nothing wasted. The garden would be grouped into what Jackie called happy combinations of crops by companion planting.

"*What* planting?" I asked.

"Companion planting—putting crops together so they strengthen each other. Beneficial pairing," she said. "Marigolds smell bad to most bugs. Garlic repels them, too. Sunflowers make nice shade for bush beans." She went on down the list. According to Jackie, every pest from tomato hornworms to aphids could be avoided if the right companions were planted.

Alice lapped up every word of it. I'm a Georgia boy. I've worked in cane fields and cornfields and soybean fields, but I'd never heard of "plant partners" or seen crops laid out in circles. Still, I wanted to show the women I was behind them one hundred percent. So I bought them a young steer.

"How cute!" Jackie said when I coaxed him out of the truck. She ran into her trailer and returned with a bottle of Coca-Cola. Then, sprinkling a few drops of it on the steer, she said, "I christen thee Sir Loin." The animal licked the soda off his muzzle and blew out through his nose.

"He ought to fill your freezer without too much waste," I said.

Jackie stood there, running her finger around the rim of the bottle. She looked at Alice and scraped her feet in the sand. "You'll have to feed him," she told me. "If he's going to be butchered, I'm sure neither of us could bear to get to know him personally."

"That's right," Alice said. "I draw the line at chickens."

The first time Jackie saw Alice and me leaving for square dancing I thought her eyes would fall out. "Petticoats!" she screamed. Then she positioned Alice in the middle of the living room and asked her to twirl—first slow, like a figure on a music box, then so fast that Alice's skirt blew up to a bell shape. "That's really quaint," Jackie said, clapping her hands. Alice pointed the toe of her shiny black shoe.

I hooked my fingers in her green satin cummerbund that matched my shirt. "You look like a prize at the county fair and good enough to eat." I pulled her to me as we stepped into the cool night air.

"She looks like an antique," Jackie said, closing the door behind us.

By the end of May the women had moved the chickens to their new coops and built all the animal pens. They bought two milk goats and five shoats. They took in a stray for a watchdog—a twitchy red setter who wagged her tail at everybody—and gave each animal a name.

Jackie got a part-time job at Mrs. Yancy's thoroughbred farm. She was on duty nights with the pregnant mares. All her salary went for calf manna, hay, growing mash, laying mash, goat chow, and minerals to balance the soil. The backyard looked like moles had been set loose in it. Piles of black muck, dolomite, and perlite were added to the sandy soil, a shovelful at a time. All my life I thought loving a

woman meant taking care of her. Now it seemed to mean sitting back and watching her tote a bucket of manure. I did enjoy watching Alice work. No matter how serious she was, when she carried a hoe her hips swung back and forth in the same old way that made my heart flop around in my chest.

"Liberace owned a piano-shaped diamond," Jackie told me. I was helping her set collars made from tuna cans around the spinach seedlings to keep off cutworms.

"I never cared for all that glitter myself."

"John Travolta's got a weight problem," she went on.

When Jackie wasn't talking about gardening, she talked about Hollywood stars. Her favorite TV show was "Entertainment Tonight."

"My daddy used to sprinkle vinegar down the spinach rows," I said.

"Not good for the soil pH." She adjusted another tuna can.

Just then, Alice came out of the A-frame carrying the Heavy Hands that Jackie had loaned her to build up her biceps and pecs. She reminded me of a cheerleader with red dumbbells instead of pompoms. "Don't you get enough of a workout tending your farm?" I asked her.

"That's not the same as a regular program of exercise." She wiped her forehead on her sleeve.

It was another one of Jackie's ideas. Every morning when I left for the feedstore, Jackie was outside her trailer, doing chin-ups from a bar over the door. No amount of working out, though, changed the shape of her behind, which was flat as the bottom of a skillet. The seat of her jeans was always a couple of shades lighter than the legs.

It was at Mrs. Yancy's that Jackie heard about a half-blind quarter-horse that was going to be sold for dog food. "I've got to save the poor thing," Jackie told us. We were having supper in the A-frame: bean sprouts grown under the kitchen sink, meatless meatloaf, and acorn squash. Jackie's cooking. "I can get her for nothing," she said.

"This place already looks like the petting zoo at Busch Gardens," I said, buttering a stony biscuit left over from breakfast.

"It would be nice for Amanda to have company," Alice mused.

Amanda was her Appaloosa, in foal to the palomino down the road. "Jackie and I could ride together every afternoon."

So they paid $25 to trailer the mare over and another $150 to the vet. "Isn't this putting a pinch in your pension?" I asked Alice the next week. "It's not practical to spend so much time and money on livestock."

"Maybe Catholics feel different than Baptists about animals," Alice said. She was milking one of the goats. I watched her hands pulling on the udders and wished Jackie would go back to California.

"I'm a believer," I said. "That's what counts."

"God intended us to care for His dumb creatures. Roman Catholics take these things more seriously."

Maybe she was right. I'd been going to church since I was six years old but couldn't remember a single Baptist sermon that mentioned a horse, cow, pig, or goat.

"It's in the Bible," she said, scratching the nanny's face.

"Everything's in the Bible if you look hard enough."

When Labor Day rolled around, I couldn't get Alice to go to the Baptist Singles beach party. She said she had to pickle cukes and tomatoes over the long weekend and she couldn't leave home anyhow, because Amanda was due to foal. "We're gonna have a whole pantry full of homegrown crops." She was washing green tomatoes.

Through the kitchen window I could see Jackie pushing a wheelbarrow full of mulch along one of the spokelike paths through the circular garden. The big African marigolds on the outer rim made the whole thing look like it had caught fire.

"It's worth all the work," Alice said, inspecting another tomato as she rolled it across the drainboard into the sink. "No insecticides. Everything natural."

"Seems like you got time for everything natural but me." As soon as I said the words I wanted to take them back, but there they were, lined up like another crop waiting to be picked over by Alice.

"I'm not sure I catch your drift." She pulled the sink stopper and wiped her hands on a towel.

The last time I'd heard those words was right before my second

wife, Leota, threw her V-neck sweater in my face. "I don't catch your drift," she'd said. I'd asked her to stay home more with our son, Ellis. If she had, maybe Ellis wouldn't have turned out so rotten and ended up serving time. Leota's last words on the subject, right before the divorce, were, "Children grow up in spite of their parents, not because of them. It's all in the genes, nothing to be done about it." I always wondered how come if Ellis was half mine and half hers, it didn't break her heart when he went bad.

"Look at that," Alice said suddenly, pointing out the window. The wheelbarrow was stuck on a hose. Jackie spit into her palms, bent her knees like a weightlifter, and cleaned and jerked the wheelbarrow over the hump. "She sure has upper body strength," Alice said. Then she turned back to me. "Just be patient, Cleland, things will be back to normal soon." She kissed me juicily. It was hard to stay mad at Alice. If there's one thing I've learned from my years with women, it's that where patience leaves off, your hormones take up the slack.

Amanda's foal came two days later. Sturdy, all right, but real pale. The first week, half of Archway paraded through the paddock. Against my advice, Alice turned down a quick $500 for him. Then those china blue eyes got lighter and lighter. "Oh boy," the stud owner said, "you've got yourself an albino."

That didn't sour the women on him. They rubbed sunscreen on his muzzle and said it didn't matter that they couldn't register him. Jackie wanted to sell him to a circus that ran an ad in *Saddle Bred* calling for blue-eyed white horses. But, as I pointed out, he was dun-colored. The $500 beauty was a $50 misfit.

"You can't keep him," I told Alice. He had gained forty pounds in the first three weeks of life. "I love you, Alice, but I can't feature us working to pay for animals that don't bring a return."

"We just don't see eye to eye like we used to," she told me, slipping a bright blue halter over the foal. The diamond ring sparkled in a bar of sunlight coming through the barn door. "I think we ought to reconsider our engagement."

"Because of a horse?" I swatted at my knees with my feed cap.

She took hold of my arm. "I think we need some time apart."

I could hardly believe my ears. Being apart from people I love has never made me feel anything but sad.

"You think all this farming and husbandry is a waste of time, don't you?" She put her hand on her hip.

"Not exactly. I think it'd be a waste of my time. Problem is I want to spend my time with you, like we used to."

"Well I want to be more independent." She leaned her whole body against the foal to budge him toward the stall.

"You are independent. You were independent when I met you."

"I was doing woman's work though."

"I'm gonna move my trailer back to my property for a while," I told her.

"We can keep on courting," she said, "like before—square dancing, the movies. All right?"

It always surprises me that when I'm feeling the worst I act the nicest. "I'm gonna miss making love to you." I could feel my neck turn red.

Her eyes flashed. "No you aren't. I don't plan to let you off that easy."

What's a man to do? My first wife, Ina, died before she grew up enough to talk so free. When I think of her I remember a thin young girl who sat for hours on end with her hands folded flat as road maps in her lap.

I moved my trailer three miles the other side of Archway and kept busy at the feedstore. It was deer season and rainy. We sold out of everything—ammo, camouflage duds, rifles.

Alice let her hair go gray and quit polishing her fingernails. She said she didn't have to be stylish around her animals, that she was getting in touch with her real self. It might as well have been Jackie speaking to me from under the pink-striped sheets.

We went square dancing every Tuesday. And every Sunday after church there was dinner with Jackie. I don't hold with being rude to women, but Jackie pushed pretty hard.

"We're doing fine without a man around the house," she said one cold November afternoon, serving up her vegetarian chili.

"If I'd never tasted chili with meat, I guess I wouldn't miss it," I said, spooning the red gunk over my rice.

"I've been in love," she said. "I know just what I'm missing."

Alice didn't say anything—just drank her goat's milk and stared at us.

When I left for North Carolina to see my new grandson two weeks later, Alice didn't even notice I hadn't invited her to come along.

Now, standing in Jackie's dim little trailer, I felt bad for Alice. I looked at her blue jeans with straw stuck to them. Her hair was a two-tone mess, gray around her face where it had grown out and blond at the ends. It was like seeing both my wives at once—the one no more than a child, the other a gadabout who kept closing doors in my face.

Alice was shaking her head and sighing. "Yep. I let you change my whole life. I've been blind as a bat."

Hudson smiled and nodded. "You know, Jackie changed my whole life, too. This woman's charm runs deeper than the Chattahoochee River."

"Boy, oh boy!" Alice let out a breath.

"Well, honey," I reminded Alice, "you wanted to be more independent."

"That's not the same as never having a minute to myself because Miss Physical Fitness here won't keep her half of the bargain. I didn't set out to change my way of living and my looks." She plucked at her torn western shirt and fought back tears.

Jackie snuggled into Hudson's shoulder and sniffed. "I'm sorry, Alice. I thought you wanted a new life as much as I did. I never twisted your arm." Hudson handed her a big plaid handkerchief. "I've got better things to do right now than rake hog pens."

"Oh, I get it." Alice was shouting. "You don't give a damn about intensive gardening, do you? It was just something to do till this cowboy came along."

Hudson opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"I'm living in harmony with nature, all right, all by myself!"

"Listen," Jackie said, "I'm real grateful for everything you did for me."

"That's the truth." Hudson leaned forward. "She's told me how grateful—"

"Oh shut up!" Alice said. "I don't care what she told you or what you think."

"But you have to," Jackie said. "We're partners now, Hudson and me. And you've still got Cleland."

"You jilted me," Alice said to Jackie. "I've been jilted."

"Me too," I said. Alice turned to me, moving as slow as a housefly on a cold day. We both looked at Jackie.

"It's your karma," Jackie said.

Alice smacked her own thigh hard enough to sting. "Is that what you call slopping pigs and mucking out stalls? Karma? I call it work. Work you wanted to do. Those animals and crops out there were your idea."

Jackie blew her nose; Hudson patted her like he was burping a big baby. Alice's chest was heaving up and down, but she looked spunkier than ever. "I could wring your neck," she said.

"She's right about one thing," I told her. "You've still got me."

Alice stared at me like she was trying to remember something real hard. Then she took my face in her two hands. "I'm a real lucky woman."

I put my arms around her.

"Don't you go thinking I'm beaten because of her. I still plan to live off the land, partly. And keep the animals tip-top."

"I know it," I told her. "We're adults. I guess we can work it out."

She said she was sure we could now that she realized how much work was involved. We looked over at Jackie and Hudson entangled on the couch, his blue denim and her bright print housedress heaped together like a pile of laundry.

"Isn't puppy love sickening?" Alice said.

Hudson and I sat across from each other, smoking and staring at the ceiling, while the women divided up the farm animals and equipment. Jackie halfheartedly agreed to help get in the cold weather crops before she and Hudson moved on. "We can sell the new coops at the flea market," she told Alice. "You can have my subscription to *Organic Gardening*."

"What am I going to do with three horses?" Alice asked.

"Mrs. Yancy can help us find buyers for them."

"Just for your half-blind mare," Alice said. "I'll keep Amanda like

before." She turned around and stared at me as I swallowed some beer. "And the foal?"

"Oh, all right," I said. "He'll make a good pleasure horse, at least in the winter." I knew I was agreeing to more than a blue-eyed white horse that needed sunglasses, just like when the truck salesman asked, "Would you like it in red or green?" and I spent $7,000 on a color. In my head I started figuring an asking price for my lot and trailer and pictured my old rocker in the A-frame.

"The garden was a success," Alice told us. "But it's too big for one person. I'll have to make a smaller circle next planting season." She tried to catch my eye, but I looked away. "Maybe half a circle." She tapped a pencil on the table. "I'm gonna try nasturtiums next to the blueberries. And black salsify for the carrots."

"There's a companion for every plant," Jackie said.

The two women talked a while longer. Then Alice came and knelt by me, talking under her breath. "She wants us to hold on to Sir Loin till she and Hudson get settled. They're going to keep him. As a pet."

"That's fine."

I pulled Alice onto my lap. I couldn't rightly imagine Jackie and Hudson settled anywhere but in each other's memory, but I smiled at the thought of that big steer eating his way through our life, getting fatter, sleeker, safe as a sacred cow.

Disappeared

"Look at my life," Fontane said. She clutched her robe together below her neck. Fontane was a thin, lithe woman with springy black curls that lay close to her scalp. Even in grief she was beautiful, like a piece of sculpture in the rain. "It's as if I'm being punished for killing people in another life."

"I know, I know." Leila Pinkerton sprinkled sweetener into a glass of iced tea. "There's no explaining it."

"Why would the Lord give me two children if He was going to take them away?"

"I'm sure Hiram is all right," Leila said, hoping Fontane wouldn't get angry at the ease with which hope poured from her mouth. Leila had never had children herself and was well past the age for it. "I just

know it in here." She pointed to her heart. "It's only been three days. He could have amnesia, he could have gotten lost." She stopped before saying that he could have run away. What would he be running away from?

Leila Pinkerton and Fontane Whitley were as close to friendship as they could get, given that Leila was white, Fontane was black, and they lived in a world full of people who claimed to know what that meant. They came together in crisis, like an emergency room team. At other times, a formality neither of them had created restrained them, driving them back into their separate shells. They trusted each other hesitantly, the way you trust a relative you've heard bad things about since childhood but who has always treated you with the utmost kindness.

Fontane began weeping again. Leila put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "Did you search his room?"

Fontane's eyes caught fire. "Do you think I'm an idiot? We tore the house apart, hoping for a note."

"I'm sorry. I know you did. I thought you did."

"If this is some prank of his, I'm going to kill him when he gets home." She laughed at herself; then she began to cry again.

"There was nothing missing from his room?"

"Not that I noticed." Fontane stirred and sat upright.

"Like a favorite book or toy, his sneakers?"

"I don't think so." But as she said it, Fontane stood and began walking up the stairs, and Leila followed.

Leila had never seen Hiram's room, and it wasn't at all the way she would have pictured it. It was futuristic, like the inside of a spaceship. "Handsome," she said, looking around. One wall, covered with black corkboard, had posters from the video store thumbtacked all over it, and four intricate circuit boards hanging from hooks. Shelves spray-painted silver held books and magazines jammed in at all angles, including a few titles Leila had given Hiram. She believed reading kept the mind sharp, and she liked to turn a phrase herself. She'd rearrange a thought or observation in her head until she got it just right, as if she intended to write it down, though she never did. Her favorite author was Mark Twain.

"I fought the beer sign." Fontane pointed over Hiram's desk to a Miller High Life neon sign with a whale spouting a bright-blue plume of water. "That was a birthday gift from Dayton." Dayton

was Hiram's father. He had refused to marry Fontane when she got pregnant at seventeen and had left town two months after Hiram was born.

Leila felt Hiram's absence more here than she had downstairs. Stuffed animals, model planes, an afghan draped across the foot of the bed: without their owner, the objects seemed forlorn. She remembered sorting through her husband's clothes after he died. She had felt sad and then had fallen into a rage. Colonel Pinkerton's ties and shirts were uncooperative messengers, not the measure of the man but a pile of anonymous hand-me-downs. It reminded her of what happened when Claude Rains removed his suit and unwound the bandages from his hands and face. There was nothing left but his cigarette and the desperation in his voice.

"Is it O.K. if I look in here?" Leila's hand hovered at the pull of the center desk drawer.

Fontane began to rummage through the bureau. "Yes, oh yes," she said. "You can look anywhere at all."

Hiram Whitley, aged twelve, had been missing officially since Monday. On the noon news that day, Hiram had been described as a slender black boy, five feet two inches tall, last seen at home on Sunday morning wearing a T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Leila, who lived next door to the Whitleys, was no alarmist. Having no children herself, she had nothing to relate Hiram's disappearance to but her own childhood, so long ago. In those days, instead of sassing, children often ran away from home or vanished into the woods for a day. She'd never known of one who hadn't come back. She imagined that Hiram was off hunting squirrels with the BB gun his father, Dayton, had given him, or exploring the bat caves formed by the interstate crossing Bellamy Creek.

But Fontane and Evan Whitley, Hiram's stepfather, were more modern, and, Leila supposed, more realistic. They were half out of their minds with worry. No doubt they were thinking of the little girl who was kidnapped last year from a department store in Palm Beach and then murdered. The killer was never found. That had happened three hundred and fifty miles to the south, in the glittery, crime-ridden part of Florida, which seemed a crazed foreign country com-

pared to Bellamy County. Bellamy County had hummed along for more than a hundred years on lumber mills, tobacco, cattle, and truck farms. The town of Waccasassa was a transparent place, like a piece of old glass with impurities in it. Its inhabitants had long ago accommodated themselves to its flaws. They had their troubles, like people everywhere. There were bar fights and convenience-store robberies, but Leila had never heard of a child being snatched and murdered in Bellamy County.

"Have you got any notion at all where Hiram might be?" Fontane had asked her on Sunday afternoon, when she first discovered Hiram was missing. Hiram had made himself scarce right after breakfast, Fontane said, probably to avoid his stepfather's weekly attempt to persuade him to go to church.

"The last I saw him was yesterday, when he did the yard for me," Leila said. It had been overcast and windy on Saturday, and the whole time Hiram was cutting her grass, she had worried about lightning, staring through the window as the mower slowly peeled narrow swaths of lawn from dark to pale green. "I'm sure he'll turn up by supper."

"I tried to call Dayton, but wouldn't you know it, his phone's been disconnected," Fontane said. According to Fontane, she and Dayton had been on good terms only for the amount of time it took to conceive Hiram.

After Fontane left, Leila got in her old white Valiant and drove over to Vern's Kwik Stop, where kids often hung out to play video games and read comic books. Then she tried the middle-school playground. She stopped for a glass of iced decaf at Sinrod Drugs, swiveling slowly on her counter stool as she tried to put herself—a plump, sixty-eight-year-old white woman—in Hiram's place, tried to divine his whereabouts.

Leila had run away once, but she was nearly an adult at the time. It was during the war, and the Colonel was being sent to an island in the Pacific that was so small it wasn't on the big globe at her teachers' college. They spent his last weekend pass in a motel room in Myrtle Beach. Her parents didn't approve of the Colonel. Too impulsive, they said. Reckless. White trash was what they meant. He had a thick north-Georgia drawl, and he was big and raw-boned and had crooked front teeth. She loved him, she remembered, she loved him so much that just seeing the golden hairs bristling on his arms made her feel

safe. And then, after forty-three years, he had disappeared into the earth as if he had never existed.

By Monday, the Whitleys were frantic. Mr. Whitley stayed home from the lumber mill where he was a foreman to be with Fontane. It was especially trying for them, coming so soon after the death of their six-year-old, Beckah, who had succumbed the year before to leukemia. AN ANGEL CAME TO EARTH AND TOOK THE FLOWER AWAY, Beckah's headstone said. The cemetery was at the end of two miles of washboard road. Beckah's first-grade teacher and Leila were the only white people at the funeral. Leila remembered the smell of freshly turned clay, and Mr. and Mrs. Whitley standing in front of the small coffin. Hiram had patted his mother's arm and tried to act like a grownup man, but Mr. Whitley dropped to his knees and began rocking back and forth, sobbing, "Lord, O Lord, you took her away." Fontane knelt down and wrapped herself around her husband. Hiram had stood behind them, suddenly tall and alone.

Leila believed that Fontane had married Evan Whitley out of spite, to get even with Dayton for leaving her. Evan was upstanding and proper. Once, at a Fourth of July street party, Leila had asked him to call her by her first name instead of Mrs. Pinkerton. He had raised his index finger to his eye and rubbed it and blinked repeatedly, as if a gnat were trapped in his lashes.

Dayton, on the other hand, was the kind of colorful, lying, energetic man whom adults saw right through and children adored. Hiram adored him. When Dayton visited, he was extravagantly attentive. Then no one heard a word from him for six months. He drove a hot rod with airbrushed flames licking the fenders and the rear end hiked up like a scorpion's tail. He never had money, though he always had some kind of recent good time he could tell you about. For Dayton, charm was a means of locomotion, like a swift pair of legs.

When Hiram was five or six, Dayton started bringing his women around. Leila had overheard some nasty arguments. Last Easter, Mr. Whitley had ejected Dayton from the house and stood screaming at him until he drove away, and Leila could understand why. She didn't care for Dayton's values or his women, with their black leather shorts and tube tops and tall boots. "They're all nurses, according to him,"

Fontane had told her. Leila responded with a questioning look. "That's how he introduces every one of those trashy women. He says, 'Have you met Sharanda, my scrub nurse friend?'" Fontane had burst out laughing. "He must think I have the brains of a bowling ball." But, for all his flaws, Leila could see that Dayton had a little fire in his soul and that the same light flickered in Hiram.

The Atlanta police had gone to Dayton's last known address on Monday. He wasn't there. His employer said he hadn't given notice, just quit showing up. The Bellamy County police stopped by to question Fontane that afternoon. Was it possible that Dayton had kidnapped Hiram? Fontane was sure he hadn't. "He's never even invited Hiram to come home with him for a weekend," she reported to Leila later. "Hiram is just a toy he plays with when he wants to show off for one of his girlfriends."

The neighborhood where Leila and the Whitleys lived had been built at the turn of the century for the new middle class—for meek, polite women like Leila's mother and grandmother, women who held the line between public and private life and feared shame. All the houses backed onto service alleys, as if the household functions—garbage pickup, stove-wood delivery—had to be handled as discreetly and invisibly as bodily functions. When Leila was growing up, everything about family life was thought to be proper and just, and you weren't allowed to talk about anything personal. Nowadays, nothing was right anywhere in society. Just tune in "Donahue" or "Oprah": people confessed everything, absolutely everything, in public. The sound of the daytime talk shows was one gigantic lamentation. Were there shameful secrets in Hiram's family? Late Monday, the police had questioned Leila privately, asking whether she'd noted any tension between family members, any bruises on anybody. She told them she was certain there was no violent behavior among the Whitleys. When Hiram misbehaved, he got a "time-out," not a slap.

Fontane was not trained to be meek, but to be scrappy and vigilant. She was born to adversity, while Leila was born to the smugness typical of Southern white people of a certain class. She and Fontane had never discussed it, would never discuss it. Fontane, the solitary dancer on the music box, with long legs like exclamation points. What

must it be like for Fontane to climb into her bed tonight, Leila wondered. Mr. Whitley would pat her, turn over, and fall asleep. The house would be utterly quiet. All Fontane would hear would be the sound of her own breathing, the goddam regularity of it, and a prayer repeating in her head: Please, God, let Hiram be breathing, too. Eventually her eyes would grow accustomed to the dark. Visual purple—Leila remembered that phrase from somewhere. The room would take shape, the empty hallway beyond it like a bend in a river that leads nowhere.

Leila had worked or lived next door to Fontane for seven years—two when the building was only a store and five more since Leila had moved into it. Colonel Pinkerton's Treasure Trove was a cracker cottage with Victorian touches—gingerbread trim on the eaves and porch gallery, a fancy iron fence. Inside, it was set up like a model house, the used furniture and collectibles for sale displayed in rooms organized around color themes. Leila had a knack for arrangement and for color. The attic playroom was a cartoonish blue and yellow. The kitchen bustled with green glass Depression-era mixing bowls, red-handled eggbeaters, and gingham.

At first, Fontane Whitley kept her distance. But when the Colonel died, six years ago, it was Fontane who noticed that something was wrong with Leila. Fontane liked old things; she regularly checked the new arrivals after a truck had been unloaded. She collected hand-embroidered pillowcases and anything made of copper. One day, Fontane parked Beckah, who was sleeping in her stroller, next to Leila's desk. The adding machine was plugged in and she was paying bills. Leila remembered staring at the small red "on" light. The baby dozed; the red light burned steadily. It was like a tiny traffic signal that made her want to stop doing everything. Time passed—she did not know how much time—and the baby's eyes were open. She was grabbing at a string of plastic keys suspended above her, drool running from the corner of her mouth. Her feet kicked and her eyes watered as she reached for the toy with her whole body. Once in a while she touched one of the keys, and it clicked against its neighbor. Otherwise, the store was quiet as a folded quilt.

"Leila, honey, you're not talking today. Something's wrong with

you, you're not saying a word." The voice was Fontane's. "Can't you say something?" The silence had brought Fontane hurrying down from the third floor to the front room. Usually she could hear Leila's voice, uncurling tentatively at first, then climbing, as she chattered at Beckah. "You're not even talking to the baby?"

Leila looked at Beckah and then at Fontane and burst into tears, but still she couldn't talk. The red light burned. The baby slept, then played. The Colonel had been dead for six months.

The doctor said Leila's depression was "profound"—as if, she thought, he were describing a symphony or a speech. He prescribed an antidepressant drug that gave her a great deal of energy after just a few weeks. She felt happiest in the store, each room of it like a bright nest she had woven for herself. The colors and textures suddenly brought shivers of delight, almost as if she could taste them, as if they satisfied some physical appetite. The doctor said not to worry about this odd joy; it was just her aptitude for pleasure coming back. But it was the reason she had decided to sell the house outside of town where she had lived with the Colonel and move into the store.

The police visited the Whitleys three times on Tuesday. They brought a specialist from the Missing Children's Registry, who asked detailed questions about Hiram's playmates and habits and interviewed children in the neighborhood. The church auxiliary sent covered dishes. The Whitleys' phone rang continuously with calls from well-wishers, friends, psychics, and the parents of other children who had disappeared. Two camera vans stayed parked on the street.

By Tuesday afternoon, Fontane was under a doctor's care for her nerves. She took small yellow pills every four hours and received visitors from the striped sofa in her front room. Mr. Whitley had gone back to work, but not before posting pictures of Hiram all over the county: "Missing Reward," the fluorescent-green paper said above Hiram's seventh-grade picture. Newspapers in Valdosta, Tallahassee, and Jacksonville carried the story on the front page.

Leila brought lunch for Fontane that afternoon—a platter of chicken salad with sliced cucumbers and a pitcher of Crystal Light lemonade. The Reverend Dozier Jones was there, holding Fontane's limp arm as they prayed together in front of a silent TV screen where

well-dressed white people moved through spacious rooms. Fontane had taken to watching a lot of TV since Beckah got sick. She still hadn't gone back to work. Mr. Whitley said she would never have to if she didn't want to.

"Ma'am," the Reverend said, rising to his feet, as Leila leaned down to place the food on the coffee table.

"You remember my neighbor, Leila Summer Pinkerton," Fontane said.

"What a pity we keep meeting under such trying circumstances," the Reverend said. For a second, Leila imagined his voice emanating from the afternoon soap unfolding in miniature behind him.

"Lemonade?" she asked.

Leila hardly watched television anymore. Her favorite programs in thirty-five years were the Milton Berle Show and the Bicentennial Minutes. She wished they would re-run Uncle Miltie—there was nothing funnier than a man dressed as a woman, pitched forward in high heels like a gawky bird.

After Beckah died, Hiram developed an interest in movies like *Frankenstein* and *The Shining* and *Alien*. His weekends were filled with gelatinous creatures, mummies trailing gauze, and body snatchers shaped like giant snow peas. Leila was happy to let Hiram use the Colonel's VCR. He talked a mile a minute while he watched movies. Leila had difficulty keeping up with him; her attention would settle on the film or be sidetracked by a bird at the feeder in the yard. Hiram talked mostly about school. Fontane bragged to anyone who would listen that Hiram was in the gifted program, and sometimes, in front of company, she had him recite the names of all the presidents.

After lunch, the Reverend followed Leila into the kitchen and stood running his finger along the Formica counter while she washed the dishes. "I'm certain we all appreciate your thoughtfulness to Mr. and Mrs. Whitley in this time of trouble," he said. His "t"s were little firecrackers going off in the middle of words. It was probably the way he preached, drawing the words out, making them sizzle and hiss.

"Don't you remember me from the shop?" Leila turned to face him. Sometimes she couldn't bear the way her black neighbors deferred to her, exchanging nothing more than pleasantries and homilies. She wanted to grab them and shake them and scream *It's me.* She often imagined the awkwardness dissolving: a door suddenly coming unstuck in a room full of people, every face furrowed at first

with alarm, then softening as though a baby with wings had fluttered through the open doorway.

"The Colonel was a fine man, a fine man." The Reverend stayed behind his mask.

Mabidda thirty, I got thirty, mabidda thirty, who'll say thirty-five, bidda thirty-five where? The Colonel used to stand at his auctioneer's podium, the walnut gavel in his hand, a cowboy hat on his head. His voice was a bullwhip, gathering the crowd in, circling, snapping in the air. Whenever Leila thought of him now, she had to remind herself of his bad traits as well as the good ones. That way she missed him less. He was too stuck on himself to adopt a child. Afraid he'd get a defective one. Being from north Georgia, he wasn't open-minded, and, if the truth be told, in the beginning he did business with his black neighbors only because there was money to be made off them.

"He was just a human being, " Leila said. "You don't have to sweet-talk me."

The Reverend looked shocked. "I know he's with Jesus," he said, "the Colonel. And I hope you've taken Jesus. I've taken Him into my heart, and I am ready to go to Him whenever I'm called."

Leila picked up a knife in the sink and imagined brandishing it in his direction. *How about right now? Are you ready to go this minute?* Instead, she scrubbed the blade with a sponge until clear water danced off it. The Reverend waited as if for an "amen" from Leila, still unwilling to acknowledge her candor. "I'm in no big hurry myself," she finally said. She knew he'd find the remark too playful, but wouldn't take issue with it. A moment later, he left, promising to return the next day, urging Fontane to call him any time.

The sheriff organized a search party. At dawn on Wednesday, deputies and citizens began combing Waccasassa and its environs. It made Leila sick to her stomach when she saw volunteer fire fighters going through the dumpster behind Video World. Soon Hiram's face would appear like a reverse cameo on milk cartons, and children throughout the state would compare his birth date to their own over bowls of breakfast cereal.

Leila would have liked to join the search, but her legs and back were not what they once were. She knew the local terrain well—from

the sand-hill pines near the northern county line to the swampy sweet-gum woods that fringed the Waccasassa River at the western border. Bellamy County was full of creeks, dry creek beds, quarries, and dense forests, all of which now seemed threatening. It was still possible that Hiram had run off and gotten lost; Leila believed that. When he was in elementary school, he had gone camping with Mr. Whitley and his Boy Scout troop. He knew, presumably, the basics of survival: how to light a fire, find fresh water, and sleep in safety from the snakes, bobcats, and wild hogs that Leila knew roamed Bellamy County. Still, as the days passed, the vision of him that occupied her mind changed. On Sunday, he tromped in slow motion through a field like someone in a shampoo commercial, the wild phlox and rye grass waving him on. That night, he slept in the crotch of one of the huge live oaks that lined the old Bellamy plantation road to the black cemetery. By Tuesday, his clothes were ragged and his hair was starting to mat. She saw him smeared with mud to the elbows and knees, bent over a brook, catching crawdads. By Wednesday, every imaginary glimpse of him was terrifying; he was becoming wild, a feral child. He had taken on an existence in which ferocity alone could save him. Finally, it was impossible to picture him at all—he had regressed too far from the boy she knew. Hiram had become a complete mystery. And another mystery had been revealed: Leila loved him. She felt the love deep in her body and all the way out to its edges—in her teeth and nails, skin and bones she wanted him back.

The search teams quit at sundown, having netted two garbage bags full of what looked like shreds of clothes, newsprint, and beer cans, all of it described as potential evidence.

Now, with Fontane's approval, Leila pawed through crayons and rulers and Magic Markers and gum wrappers and balled-up homework assignments. The disorder of Hiram's desk felt vital as it touched her hands, like the boy himself. "Nothing," she said when she was done. She walked to the closet and opened the two louvered bifold doors. Fontane nodded her agreement. "Help me," Leila said. "You know where things belong."

The two of them bent into the dark of the closet. Fontane was a good housekeeper. At home, when Leila opened a closet or looked

under a bed, dust bunnies drifted in the small updrafts. Leila recognized a lavender-and-black plaid shirt and remembered a wisp of conversation, Hiram's head framed by hickory leaves. The shirt seemed ghostlike.

"Oh, my God," Fontane said. She had been squatting. Now she sat back on the floor. "My God, my God."

"What is it?"

Fontane pointed to the flamingo-colored high-tops lined up neatly at the back of the closet. "I put his sneakers there myself. They were alongside the bed on Sunday. But where are his dress shoes? Do you see his dress shoes? Black leather wing tips?"

The two of them pulled out everything on the closet floor. While Fontane pushed through the clothes on hangers Leila dumped the contents of a toy box on the bedroom rug. Legos, blocks, a small, deflated football, an old T-shirt. "I don't see them anywhere," she said.

"His good black pants," Fontane said. Her voice was shrill with excitement. "His dress clothes are gone. They're gone!" Fontane grabbed Leila around the waist and jumped up and down, holding on to her. Then she raced down the steps and into the yard, to the toolshed. Leila watched from the window as Fontane removed the padlock, ducked inside, and returned weeping and thanking God. "The BB gun's gone!" she shouted. By the time Leila made her way downstairs, Fontane was on the phone with her husband, her voice wobbly with excitement, then rushing out in a torrent. Leila hugged Fontane and sat next to her as she made one call after another.

That night Leila lay in bed thinking about the last time Dayton had visited. He had brought Hiram the BB gun against Fontane and Evan's wishes. Worse, he had taken the boy out to the Bellamy plantation road for target practice. It was a Sunday morning, and Fontane was furious and humiliated when she discovered that the gunfire that punctuated the Reverend's sermon was from Dayton's shotgun. He and Hiram were shooting mistletoe out of the live oaks. Several parishioners had seen the two of them resting in the culvert, their guns propped against a tree.

On Friday afternoon, Leila donned her tattered straw hat and pink cotton gardening gloves. She knelt on the soft rubber mat she had

bought to save her kneecaps and began weeding the herbs. Fontane was arguing with her husband. Leila could hear their voices rising and falling through the open kitchen window.

The sun beat down through the torn weave of Leila's hat, dappling her hands and the ground. Then Fontane was standing beside her. "Any news?" Leila asked.

"The police keep telling me it's easier to find two fugitives than one. They don't know Dayton."

Los Angeles, Detroit, Leila thought, that's where Dayton would take Hiram, some crowded place where people disappeared into each other.

"Evan's idea of finding Dayton is to pray." Fontane reached beside the parsley and pulled out a big tuft of wood sorrel and another of spurge. "If I could kill Dayton, I would," she said.

"I bet Hiram will come back on his own. At the end of the summer, when the novelty wears off." But Leila knew that a runaway could be running *toward* something as well as away from something. She had wondered about that: which would be lonelier for Hiram—to settle into the quiet that Evan Whitley cast around his family like a heavy net or to listen to the laughter of Dayton and his women behind locked doors? And what if Dayton settled down? What if he suddenly learned about Crockpots and oral thermometers and encyclopedias? Fontane would become bitter, and then, for all her cynicism, pious. Leila could picture her in lace-collared dresses, offering up her love for her two lost children on the unyielding altar of the Zion church. In any case, even if he came home, Hiram would be changed. There would be a different light in his eyes—a satisfied shine, or, more likely, a sullen glint.

Leila took Fontane's hand and squeezed it hard and pressed it against her forehead, the way a magician touches and presses and smells the article of a stranger to surmise the past or the future.

On the Boil

From an airplane, the Suwannee River resembles a tree more than a body of water, a gigantic tree with all its roots exposed, intricate as the tunnels and chambers of an ant farm. When the sun hits it a certain way, the river water glistens like sap, and the tree seems to be growing right before your eyes, branching out until it empties into the Gulf where whitecaps flurry like blossoms.

Everyone has heard of the Suwannee, though almost nobody has seen it, including Stephen Foster, who wrote the famous song. He picked the name out of an atlas after his brother complained that "Way down upon da Pedee River" didn't sound musical enough. I'm an expert on the Suwannee. I've drunk the water, eaten the fish, picked my way through the poison ivy and stinging nettles, and

danced away from its snakes. I love it the same way a person comes to love her own body or a close relative—not with a sense of choice but with a sense of destiny.

That's the way it is with Dory, too. Something grand, like destiny, between us, despite our differences. I've grown sick of explanations: more than anything else, love feels to me like a kind of being lost. Maybe that's why at first Dory and I spent so much of our time together camping in remote areas. In the wilderness, you expect to feel a little lost; you can tell yourself that the second thoughts you have at night in your tent come from the vastness of the place, not from a hollowness in yourself.

After we knew each other well, we started going to state parks. The public land was tamer, and we noticed each other more there. We spent the first warm Saturday in May at Manatee Springs. The park was crowded. We snorkeled around the boil and watched spelunkers diving into the craggy grottoes. I lay in a patch of sun while Dory worked his foxhound, BJ, letting her out on a twenty-five-foot lead, then hauling her in and rewarding her with dog snacks. Afterward, he tied BJ to a tree and went to buy lunch at the concession stand. He walked in a determined way, but slightly hunched over. If I hadn't known him, I'd have said he looked shifty from the back, as if he was trying to disappear, like a pickpocket in a crowd.

Dory bit into his hot dog and pointed toward a stand of big trees on the opposite bank. "See those cypresses over there? They're as old as the Bible."

"They remind me of an old sci-fi movie where the stones in a certain valley had recorded the past like video cameras. A scientist played back a hunk of rock and saw dinosaurs and all." What I didn't say was that I'd seen the movie before Dory was even born.

He slipped his hand down the back of my bathing suit. "You and me could live right here in a houseboat. Cook with Sterno, fish for our dinner," he whispered. "I'd love you all night long."

"Quit it." Sometimes I get so sick of the word "love" that I wish Baptists had convents. But, of course, if you spend all your energy denying a thing, it's nearly the same as believing in it.

"That attitude is going to make you miserable someday." He gazed straight at me. "I mean it, Lavell." He threw the stump of his hot dog to BJ and spilled the dregs of his soft drink at my feet.

He stopped formally proposing in March when I promised I'd give

him an answer in a month. But when April came, warm and rainy, I still hadn't decided. That's when he got the tattoo on his shoulder: "Marry me, Lavell," on a placard like one of those gas station signs that sticks up over the interstate, except Cupid was holding the pole.

"Don't get into one of your moods," I told him.

Once in a while he fell into a deep quiet and refused to talk for hours. He called it "down time." He usually went home because I told him it agitated me to sit in a room with another human being and still feel alone.

"BJ's having a miserable day," he said. The dog had tangled herself around the tree and stood softly whining, one foot lifted as if it were broken. "Marry me," he said, forcing a smile, "shut me up forever."

Dory worked construction, but he was studying welding at the county trade school at night. He said welders could pick their jobs, work half a year, cruise the Caribbean the other half. "The world is made of metal," he kept telling me, "and it's forever coming apart at the welds."

His mother died when he was six, the same age I was when my father left home for good. My mother never bothered to get a divorce—she knew she was finished with men. She took up gardening. When I think of my childhood, the memories are set against her bent-over back framed by shiny green vine tomatoes, bushy orange and pink cosmos. Mama and I worked quietly together in the yard, stringing up pole beans, cradling the glossy eggplants like newborns as we cultivated around the plants. I like growing things, even if they don't always turn out. When I look at garden rows, I see pure goodwill, the weeds cleared, each little plant set out like a promise. Mama and I gardened even in fall and winter—pruning, mulching with cypress chips, putting the stamp of patience and expectation on the ground, telling ourselves we would be there three months, six months, down the road.

Dory's father was a postal worker in Lake City, so it was natural for Dory to take up stamp collecting. But his real passion was fox hunting. It's against the law to kill a fox, so the men just let the dogs roam in the preserve while they sat on the tailgate drinking beer,

picking out their dogs' voices. They talked pedigree and cold nose trailing and told tall tales all night. I don't believe you could interest people in this sport once they're grown. They have to be bred to it, like the dogs.

Dory had ten hounds, with numbers dyed in their fur: Preacher, Luther, Belle, Digger, Highball, Tad, Willie, Frypan, Minute, and the new bitch, BJ, the high-spirited one nobody could catch. He took on training BJ when her owner, Uncle Jones, the bigwig at the Dixie County Hunt Club, threatened to shoot her. She had stayed in the swamp alone for three weeks, chasing deer from dew to sunset, living off the carcass of a buck Uncle Jones had shot but couldn't get to. For three weeks he came calling for her in his pickup. Once he spotted her running alongside the highway, her white hide flickering through the dark green of the scrub. Dory was determined to break her of running. She lived in a tall pen at my place (with Frypan for company) so he could spend more time working with her.

I flipped on the television while I waited for Dory to get home from school. I practiced different ways of crossing my legs so the cellulite in my thighs would be less noticeable.

"Entertainment Tonight" was celebrating Barbie doll's thirtieth anniversary as if she were a real person. They held her so close to the camera she looked life-sized. They showed her getting a spiral perm, dirt-biking with Ken at Big Sur. Barbie relaxed in a tiny hot tub while Ken barbecued at a matchbook-sized hibachi. She had changed a lot since 1960—not just her clothes and hairdos but her life-style. She used to be formally engaged to Ken, but now, even though the announcer didn't say so, it was clear they were living together.

Dory came up the path to my trailer, singing "Bridge over Troubled Water," which he called "Our Song." He could get romantic over nearly anything. I have a big blood mole right between my shoulder blades. My mother said when I was born she was afraid to bathe me, that the red bubble looked as if it would burst at the touch of a washcloth. Dory said it was my heart showing through to the other side, that I was a bighearted woman. According to him, every-

thing about me was perfect. I wasn't fooled. No woman is perfect. Even Loni Anderson didn't make the big time till she bleached her hair blond.

"Mail for you." He handed me an envelope as big as a grocery bag. "It wouldn't fit in the box."

The front was plastered with "Love" stamps, but there was no postmark. On the greeting card inside, a bee all covered with fuzz, like a stuffed animal, said, "For you I'd go a million miles. . . . Just because you're my honey." It was signed, "Name the day, Love, Dorrance Shore." He always signed his full name on notes to me, as if they were legal papers.

"That's adorable." I kissed him so hard I felt his teeth through his lips. Then, all of a sudden, I started to get mad. Wherever I turned there was this boy begging me to marry him. I fully expected to see our names spray-painted on the overpass some day, a big question mark instead of a heart wound around them. "You know, you're just too nice all the time," I said. "It's not natural. It's weird."

His Adam's apple jumped up and down like a cat in a sack. "Nobody in high school thought I was so nice."

"You had a girlfriend."

"Didn't I ask you not to bring her up, Lavell? Sue Ellen's got nothing to do with us."

About two months after we started going together, Dory had disappeared for a week. By the time he phoned, I'd worked myself up into a lather, worrying over his safety, convincing myself I didn't love him. He told me he'd gone to visit his old girlfriend, Sue Ellen, but wouldn't explain except to say she was having a "confidential, personal crisis."

"Do you realize I've never seen you lose your temper?" I pressed. "I keep hearing about romances that go sour after the honeymoon."

"Quit trying to pick a fight with me, Lavell. You're going to have to marry me to see if I turn into Frankenstein."

"Why can't we leave things just as they are? We've got the best of both worlds." It was true. At thirty-eight, I was set in my ways. If I felt like being alone, he stayed at his place for the night. I had the sexual revolution, plus I knew that in the morning my panty hose would be hanging on the shower rod where I put them and not thrown to the floor in a damp heap.

I went to the Springs the next week to think. I walked the trail from the point to the deep turquoise lagoon of the boil and imagined women lifting their hooped dresses along the muddy path. When I saw the tiny gowns they wore, it made me feel like the Jolly Green Giant. No diet or exercise program in the world is going to make me shorter, which, in a way, is a relief. If you've got to have a flaw, it's best if it's something you can't correct.

Dory had found the invitation to my high school reunion on the kitchen counter the day before. His mouth was wide open, like a two-year-old's, as he read it. "We're going, right?"

"Give me that." I put the invitation back in its envelope.

"Why'd you do that?"

"I don't want it to be the topic of conversation."

"Okay, but I'll tell you right now, if I could go to my twentieth reunion, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

When the number "twentieth" came out of his nineteen-year-old mouth, it had burned into my heart like a hot spark.

Now, on my way back to the parking lot from the boil, I saw the park ranger putting up a display of Indian pottery. Pencil renderings showed how a whole piece of pottery must have looked and matched clay fragments that hung alongside on leather straps. Some were checkered, and some had fine lines like bird footprints. The ranger said gophers had dug up the shards not twenty feet from the display. "Are we standing on sacred ground?" I asked.

"We're standing over the kitchen." He locked the glass case.

I looked out through the trees and tried to imagine them growing over my trailer, rooted around the microwave and sink a thousand years from now.

Dory began bringing BJ into the house. He claimed that if he could tame her spirit just enough, she'd be the best dog in Dixie County. Then he'd breed her. You had to have one running fool somewhere in the pedigree to make a good hound. He'd play around with her in the living room before taking her for extended romps on longer and

longer leashes. Sometimes he had to reel her in ear-over-ass because she'd lift her head, open her mouth to scent, and then take off, running to the end of her rope, refusing his commands, whistles, and shouts to return. In May, he began working her tied to the back bumper of the truck.

"Isn't that dangerous?" I asked. I'd heard stories of hunters running over their own dogs. It was a common accident, especially at the end of the day when the men were tired and the dogs were eager to be put up in their boxes on the trucks.

"The last place BJ wants to be is with me." He scratched behind her red-and-white ears. She turned her head away, closed her eyes, and panted. "She's like one of those convicts at Raiford or Cross City, just waiting for an opportunity."

Dory and I spent that whole evening in bed. We made love, took a shower, had a snack, and made love again. He knew the names for all the parts of my body and liked to talk about them while we were making love. It was like receiving one Academy Award after another. Best nipples: Lavell Beacham. Labia majora: Lavell Beacham. Areolas, and so on. Even when we were just lying there, he kept on touching me, drawing pictures and diagrams on my belly and back. If I felt talkative, he'd listen all night long.

A few days later Dory saw my new purple dress and knew something was up. "I guess you've decided to go?"

I was rummaging in the freezer for ground beef. That winter, Dory had shot a buck, dressed it, and wedged the long hind legs into my side-by-side. Every time I opened the door, a pair of lean silver legs leapt across packages of green beans and blackberries. "I'm thinking about it. You want to chop some onions for the burgers?"

"No. They always make me cry." He walked to the bedroom. I followed and sat down next to him on the bed.

I didn't want to be cruel. I was afraid that if I asked Dory to go I'd have such a terrible time explaining who he was that I'd never want to see him again. I'd always felt self-conscious in high school and had never really found a niche for myself. Too tall to be a cheerleader or a prom queen. Not smart enough to be a brain. I finished on the Business Ed track. I was a crack typist before word processors swept

the country. Almost nothing I studied prepared me for the survey work I do now. The best thing that happened to me in high school was going steady with Fred Packett for two years. We broke up when he left to study business administration at college. The last I heard he took a job with a plywood manufacturer in Mobile.

"All right. I do want you to go with me."

He threw his arms around me. "You can say we're engaged."

"I don't have to say anything!"

After dinner, he produced a gift and a card that read "For Your Graduation," to which he'd added the word "reunion." I unfolded the tissue paper and pulled out a white shawl with rhinestones knitted into the pattern.

"I thought it was beautiful," he said, watching my face.

"Yes." I held it outstretched in front of me, a tacky triangle that threw off light like a disco globe.

"I was going to give it to you whether you invited me or not."

From age eighteen to thirty I felt proud and sassy when I printed the word "single" on applications for Visa, homestead exemption, Avon. Then the years began to zip past. It's true that as you get older, time speeds up: when you're ten, a year is equal to one-tenth of your life. By the time you're fifty, it's one-fiftieth, so naturally it goes by five times faster. Suddenly, I was pressing forty. Christmas came round so often I felt like I was constantly buying gifts or packing up decorations.

As for dog years, I couldn't say. BJ was three. She had two hunting seasons to shape up or Uncle Jones would put a bullet in her head instead of retiring her. BJ was making progress. She finally understood that she was attached to Dory by a rope, now almost one hundred feet long. He never took her off it. The idea was to trick her into thinking the rope would always be there, that his voice was the rope, that the horn of his truck was the rope. One night, at the beginning of June, she began howling, piteously at first, then with the full belling of a hound on the scent of an animal. It was three o'clock in the morning. Dory went out and beat her with rolled-up newspapers. "She must have whiffed something real big. BJ wouldn't waste herself like that," he said.

I'd never seen anything in our trailer park but rabbits, muskrats, and possums. Roadkill casserole, not fit for a hound to fiddle with. Besides, Frypan, her kennel mate, had remained silent. "Maybe she's howling to come inside the house," I said, though BJ never seemed to notice our company much. She wouldn't even look you in the eye. She wouldn't even let you that far into her dogsoul.

I had thought a lot about what to call Dory at the reunion—my roommate? boyfriend? fiancé? Finally, I settled on "friend." It left room for interpretation and gave me a fresh perspective on him. Perspective—that's what I love about going up in the one-engine mapping plane. I feel insignificant and important at the same time. I'm responsible for sighting landmarks while the aerial photographer lines up the shots and clicks away. Between us, we piece together the landscape like blocks in a quilt. From 6,000 feet the woods seem as stiff and artificial as those toilet-brush Christmas trees.

Fred Packett, my old beau, was glad-handing people at the door when Dory and I arrived at the reunion. His eyes were the dark green of magnolia leaves. I did a double take. They had been gray behind horn-rimmed glasses all through school. His hair was combed forward, but a small spot like an egg in a nest showed through on top. "It's real good to see you, Lavell." His arms felt meaty and familiar through his sport jacket. A gardenia leaked sweetness from his lapel.

I introduced him to Dory. "I'm divorced," Fred said, by way of a reply. "From a real nice woman in Mobile. No kids. She didn't want any."

"That's too bad," I said. Dory nodded in agreement.

Fred guided us toward the punch bowl. A big banner saying "Welcome Back Wildcats 1970" hung above the refreshment table.

Fred was as friendly as a long-lost relative, and before I knew it we were talking and laughing. Dory stood silently next to me, holding my elbow. "You're a lucky fellow," Fred told him, squeezing me into his shoulder.

While Fred and I danced, he told me about his divorce. He'd been married for twelve years. He and his wife went to Mexico at the end to try to patch things up. "Vacations are a true test of marriage," he

said. "When you're in a foreign country you end up liking the person you're with a lot more or a lot less. We ended up practically hating each other."

"I've never been to a foreign country."

"You're not missing much." He grimaced. "All Lola wanted to do was visit ruins." He gulped down a cup of wine cooler. I told him how I'd worked my way up from clerk to assistant director of Maps and Surveys at the Farm Bureau.

I'd never seen Dory drink anything but beer, but he downed six glasses of champagne during dinner. He sat in a stupor, staring at the back of my neck, while the class president read our statistics. Three class members unaccounted for. Sixty-four college diplomas and eighty-two children. Three grandchildren. We bowed our heads as he read the names of the deceased—one girl dead of cancer and two more in car wrecks; three boys killed in Vietnam. We stumbled through the school fight song, and even though I never cared much for sports, I got teary-eyed thinking of all of us back then, so young and stupid and hopeful.

A bunch of us hit the ladies' room after the presentations. When I returned to the ballroom, I didn't see Dory anywhere. Fred, looking morose, was leaning against a column wrapped with orange and black crepe paper. He caught my eye and motioned me over. "What do you think about this business with Sue Ellen?" he asked.

"Where's Dory?"

"He went outside to get a little air. Actually, I think he felt like throwing up."

I found Dory on the balcony, leaning on the railing. He smelled sour and looked disheveled. He put a limp arm around my waist.

"Tell me about the week you went away."

"Sue Ellen and I—" Tears collected in his voice, but he swallowed them down. "She had a baby. My baby."

Sometimes people talk and nothing gets said, and other times, using the same two-cent words, they say something so big it feels like an avalanche. When my daddy left us, all he said, according to Mama, was "I'm not coming back, Norma."

"She wouldn't get an abortion. I don't love her, Lavell. I was sure I did at the beginning. At first, I was as happy with her as I am with you. Then one day the feeling just vanished. It was horrible."

"Oh God." I pulled away.

"You don't understand." He reached for me, but I hurried back inside.

I don't believe in astrology, crystals, or liquid diets. My mother, though she went to church, was not a religious woman. She spent her free time bowling and canning. She was a kind of Benjamin Franklin of the kitchen, always entering recipe contests. I suspect she didn't win because she used quantities of fresh sage, lemon balm, basil—herbs and spices that people can't buy except dried-up like mummies in those little bottles in the supermarket. Mama would cringe to see what Dory and I eat: frozen pizzas and quiches, canned corn, instant mashed potatoes—the food Dory grew up on. Broken-home food. Loneliness food.

Fred opened the sunroof of his car, and warm air fragrant with night-blooming jasmine blew through my hair. We passed Six-Pack Creek, named for all the beer the boys drank and peed into the water those hot summer afternoons we tubed down it. I didn't want Dory finding me. I'd grabbed Fred by the arm and asked him to drive me anywhere but home. He'd looked confused but eagerly agreed.

After we parked the car, we squeezed under the gate to the recreation area. We sat on the seawall and watched the moonlight reflecting across the current. Mosquitoes whined around my ears.

"I'll always remember this place," Fred whispered, as if testing to see if I wanted to talk. "We had some good times here."

"Yeah." In high school Fred and I went to the river to make out. It had taken months before I let him touch me below the neck. I'd never slept with him.

"Everything's so different now, except the river," Fred said. "The river's the same."

"Oh no it's not."

"Polluted, huh?" He lit a cigarillo.

"I don't know about pollution. I just know it's always changing a little. You know, Indians used to cook their food right here."

"That so?"

"Who knows what people a thousand years from now will find of us."

"You've grown real philosophical, Lavell." He took the rhinestone-studded shawl off my shoulders, walked to a live oak tree, and draped it over a low limb. Then he spread his coat jacket on the ground. "Let's study the stars a while."

Cobwebs floated across my face as I knelt down. We lay back on the jacket and breathed deeply. "I'm up for plant manager," Fred said.

Suppose Dory couldn't tell the difference between teenage love and mature love? He might be falling in or out of love all his life. Or worse yet, suppose there was no difference between the two kinds of love? Mama always said that women were after love and men were after sex and they spent their whole lives angry at each other for an unavoidable confusion. I glanced from the star-studded sky to the shawl nearby, the rhinestones blinking in the tree. "What would they make of that shawl a thousand years from now?"

"They'd put it in a museum, I guess."

"That's the thing about time. Junk, I mean even real garbage can become valuable. Something you never thought about could be important."

"I know you're real upset, Lavell." He pulled me down by the neck and kissed me hard on the mouth.

I felt my face redden and the veins in my neck stand up. "That's really crude, Fred, especially if you know I'm upset."

Fred twisted away from me and flung his arms over his head. "You gotta overlook it if I'm awkward. Divorce really messes you up."

"I wonder if the Indians had it."

"What?"

"Divorce."

"Marriage is an unnatural institution," Fred sniffed.

"It must be terrible to fall out of love," I said. I wasn't thinking about Fred but about Dory. I'd never fallen out of love. I'd had a broken heart a few times. I'd fallen into love so hard that even the sight of shoes like my boyfriend's in a store window or a car like his in traffic made me giddy, as if they had eyes to watch me. But usually I lost interest by degrees so that the end was never a shock and I could hardly remember that crazy feeling. Now I tried to imagine worshipping a person one week, and the next week finding him ordinary,

completely unmagical, his possessions ordinary—sagging topsiders, a beat-up Ford Escort.

"I don't regret marrying Lola," Fred said. "That's the funny part. I don't think I've learned a single thing from twelve years of marriage."

I caught sight of a blue heron lifting off from a cypress tree. The river was warming up, getting ready for another day. I picked up the shawl and bunched it in my arms. We started back to the car. Cypress knees stuck up on either side of the boardwalk in their usual ragged fashion, competing for space. Like seedlings, with no one to thin them. Though it wasn't yet dawn, I could feel the light just below the horizon like a humming in my bones.

Fred dropped me off at 5 A.M. I was relieved that Dory's truck wasn't in the driveway, but he had left a note on the kitchen table: "I'm SORRY. Love you so much. Taking BJ to the trials. See you tonight. XXXX" I drew a hot bubble bath and soaked. Gray light turning to pale pink filtered into the room through the rippled glass of the small east window. I added more hot water, and the room filled with steam. Dory's face floated in the mist, along with a squalling infant and a sad-faced woman holding a phone to her ear. It was bad enough trying to decide whether to marry Dory when I was just worried about the age difference. If I could have ten good years, just ten, I had thought, it would be worth it. I'd keep on working, keep parts of my life to myself, like a cash reserve in the bank, something to fall back on when he finally left.

I decided not to go to bed at all. It was a Saturday morning, a fine Saturday morning in June. The oak tree overhanging the dog pen was tipped with tender, waxy new leaves. I dragged a webbed lounge chair from the carport into the backyard to nap instead. Dory had left the gates of the dog runs ajar and hadn't picked up the food pans from the night before. The kennel looked peculiarly sad and mysterious without BJ or Frypan in it, like the scene of a kidnapping.

I remembered that Dory hadn't planned to take BJ out until Sunday, the second day of the hunt being held east of Horseshoe Beach, in the Waccasassa swamp. Maybe he was just afraid to face me. I was

glad he wasn't around now. I got enraged just thinking about the begging tone he'd have in his voice when he asked me to forgive him.

My neighbor's daughter came into her yard and waved hello. Emmy was fifteen and dressed crazily. She wore iridescent exercise tights, a long T-shirt, and a black leather belt cinched around her hips to school. Other times she dressed in clashing plaid pants and blouses, with men's white shoelaces braided through her hair. I didn't know what clothes meant anymore. All the fashions seemed designed to confuse you about a person's values and financial status. When I was growing up, I was taught that clothes told the world what you thought of yourself.

"Your dogs was crying all night long," Emmy called out to me. "My dad was fit to be tied."

"I was out all night."

"That's what Daddy said."

On Saturday, the judges spotted BJ first behind the fox three times. But at the end of the day, when the pack gathered, their tongues hanging out like sodden rags, she was missing. Dory had remained until after dark, calling, honking the horn, playing the radio full blast.

We spent Sunday searching for her. We set aside our differences like parents do when a child is in danger. Dory wore his Wellingtons, and I drove the truck from point to point. People don't realize this end of the Suwannee, being so close to the Gulf, has tides. The water was high in the swamps and in the river basin. By nightfall, we were both hoarse from calling. Uncle Jones was waiting by my trailer when we got back. "It's in her blood," he said, without getting out of his truck. "She's more wild than domestic."

Dory said he didn't think it was wildness, because the feral dogs he'd seen always looked scared, as if they'd trade their terrain in a minute for a feed bowl and a warm place to sleep. BJ was another story. BJ had a job to do—chase all the foxes and deer in the world, though she would likely never have been able to bring one down on her own. "I guess you were right about her. It was real bad that she got along so fine that time she was gone for three weeks," Dory said.

"Yeah," Uncle adjusted his cap. "She'd have been better off if she'd

broken her leg or got cut up real bad, instead of finding that carcass to eat."

We went looking for her every day that week after work. Once Dory thought he saw a spotted red-and-white dog slip through a patch of shadow not far from the road, but he was never sure.

A week later, Uncle phoned to say BJ had shown up in his backyard but that she was doing poorly. He suggested Dory come over to see her. It was hours before Dory returned to the trailer. His face looked hard. "She ran herself to death. Busted her heart. She came back to die, was all."

Sometimes, when I'm lying here alone at night and can't sleep, I think of what it must have been like for her out there, among the trees and stars and all the animals of the kingdom. I imagine that on nights when the deer and foxes stayed hidden, she chased ripples on the water, birds, finally, maybe, even the moon. I know what it would feel like to run that hard, the pulse in your head so loud that it drowns out any name you might once have answered to.

Other Iowa Short Fiction Award and John Simmons Short Fiction Award Winners

1991
The Ant Generator,
Elizabeth Harris
Judge: Marilynne Robinson

1991
Traps, Sondra Spatt Olsen
Judge: Marilynne Robinson

1990
A Hole in the Language,
Marly Swick
Judge: Jayne Anne Phillips

1989
Lent: The Slow Fast,
Starkey Flythe, Jr.
Judge: Gail Godwin

1989
Line of Fall, Miles Wilson
Judge: Gail Godwin

1988
The Long White,
Sharon Dilworth
Judge: Robert Stone

1988
The Venus Tree,
Michael Pritchett
Judge: Robert Stone

1987
Fruit of the Month, Abby Frucht
Judge: Alison Lurie

1987
Star Game, Lucia Nevai
Judge: Alison Lurie

1986
Eminent Domain, Dan O'Brien
Judge: Iowa Writers' Workshop

1986
Resurrectionists, Russell Working
Judge: Tobias Wolff

1985
Dancing in the Movies,
Robert Boswell
Judge: Tim O'Brien

1984
Old Wives' Tales,
Susan M. Dodd
Judge: Frederick Busch

1983
Heart Failure, Ivy Goodman
Judge: Alice Adams

1982
Shiny Objects, Dianne Benedict
Judge: Raymond Carver

1981
The Phototropic Woman,
Annabel Thomas
Judge: Doris Grumbach

1980
Impossible Appetites, James Fetler
Judge: Francine du Plessix Gray

1979
Fly Away Home, Mary Hedin
Judge: John Gardner

1978
A Nest of Hooks, Lon Otto
Judge: Stanley Elkin

1977
The Women in the Mirror,
Pat Carr
Judge: Leonard Michaels

1976
The Black Velvet Girl,
C. E. Poverman
Judge: Donald Barthelme

1975
Harry Belten and the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto,
Barry Targan
Judge: George P. Garrett

1974
After the First Death There Is No Other, Natalie L. M. Petesch
Judge: William H. Gass

1973
The Itinerary of Beggars,
H. E. Francis
Judge: John Hawkes

1972
The Burning and Other Stories,
Jack Cady
Judge: Joyce Carol Oates

1971
Old Morals, Small Continents, Darker Times,
Philip F. O'Connor
Judge: George P. Elliott

1970
The Beach Umbrella,
Cyrus Colter
Judges: Vance Bourjaily and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Enid Shomer's stories and poems have appeared in such magazines and anthologies as the *New Yorker,* the *Paris Review, Poetry,* and *New Directions in Prose & Poetry.* The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Florida Arts Council, she is the author of two books of poetry: *Stalking the Florida Panther* and *This Close to the Earth.*

The Iowa Short Fiction Award and the John Simmons Short Fiction Award

The Iowa Short Fiction Award has been conducted annually by the Iowa Writers' Workshop since 1969. In 1988 the University of Iowa Press instituted the John Simmons Short Fiction Award—named after the first director of the Press—to complement the ongoing award series; this competition is also conducted by the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Serious critical consideration is guaranteed by such judges as Frederick Busch, Alison Lurie, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Marilynne Robinson. For a list of titles, winners, and judges, please turn to the end of this book.

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SHORT FICTION

IMAGINARY MEN

"Enid Shomer's fine stories are engaging and heartfelt and true. Her characters are complicated and sensitive, and yet they are snappy, sassy, and sure as they bravely venture through the messed-up modern world we all recognize as home. The style of these Florida stories is as refreshing as Florida citrus and twice as good for you—for their surprise and humor and depth."—Bobbie Ann Mason

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"The first time I ever heard Enid Shomer's poetry, I was profoundly impressed with her honesty, the clarity of her vision, her eye for detail, and the deceptive simplicity with which she crafts her work. With *Imaginary Men* she expands her range, using the same clear voice, the same attention to the particular to express the whole. These short stories are like an emotional barometer measuring subtle changes in the world's interior weather."—Sue Grafton

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"These are astonishing stories, salty, bittersweet, and deep. Enid Shomer extends her range beyond poetry and narrative to display as well the gifts of a fine actress, with a dazzling range of voices, each resonant and revealing, each unique."—Janet Burroway

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