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Broken Open

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BROKEN OPEN

by

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ABSTRACT

Broken Open is a collection of short stories, four of which deal with culpability and the unexpected transformations that occur when blame, either unintended or deliberately invoked, is exposed and finally understood. The remaining two stories concern relationships that turn out to be gifts, as well as painful learning experiences.

In “Other Living Creatures,” one family contends with post traumatic stress disorder as another implodes following the death of a young soldier in Vietnam. “Hunters” deals with the unconscious motivations that leave a father resentful and unable to forge a relationship with his son. In “Bardenbrook,” an accidental death is the impetus for blame and, finally, forgiveness. Rage acts as a catalyst in “The Summoning,” the story of a lesbian couple’s struggle to accept the reality of breast cancer shortly before one of the partners undertakes a transformative journey as her death approaches.

The two remaining stories in *Broken Open* deal with the protagonists finding their voices. In “Sunday Wars,” a girl begins to think for herself, and in “Beyond the Parking Lot,” a woman comes to terms with the restraints, self-imposed and otherwise, that have held her captive for most of her life.

Each character in *Broken Open* struggles, perseveres, grows and, ultimately, flourishes. Despite sorrow, pain, and unexpected loss, being broken open leads them, as it does us all, if we let it, to the richest places within.

These stories are dedicated
in loving memory
of my mother, Patricia Tostevin Kistler

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OTHER LIVING CREATURES

Brenda watches Mack bring the snow blower to a bucking stop in the middle of the driveway, sees him wave his arms at the sycamores that line their lot in Olean, New York, herky-jerky motions meant to ward off, intimidate, she's not sure which, hears him yell, "Go ahead, you little fucks!" and the despair, dark and so familiar, grabs her throat, her belly, Oh God, and he had been doing so much better. Really, really better this time.

She's tired of spying on him, tired and guilty, and she wants to rest, but the war has set him off again, and now she won't sleep wondering if she'll jerk awake again with Mack naked and kneeling beside her, one hand on top of her head, pressing down, the other clamped around her throat, ready to twist up and sideways, break her neck with one deft motion, snap it like a pretzel stick, neat and clean and nearly soundless.

He always wakes when she screams, looks down, eyes glittering, confused, disbelieving, and says, "Oh, God, Bren, oh, shit, I could have killed you, oh, baby, I'm so sorry, sorry, oh, God," and then he shakes and shakes while she herds their two shock-eyed sons back down the hallway, "It's okay, Tommy, Daddy just had a nightmare, Bernie help your little brother back into bed, go on now, everything's fine," and she cradles him until a gray dawn creeps over the window sill and he falls into a pale version of sleep. She knows he's fractured, his mind is jagged, it's broken glass, he'll shove it away, fight to forget, won't talk about it. She knows, too, that she'll lie beside him at night, no locked doors between them. She'll never leave.

For months he's been glued to the TV, he can't stop watching, and it's killing him one news report at a time. Saigon, Hanoi, Vietnam's everywhere, Walter Cronkite and the body

count every night with their tuna casserole and peas. And it's January. Seventeen years ago this month he dug his first foxhole in South Korea while she cleaned other people's homes in Olean, New York, just eighteen years old, in love, shy, impatient, pregnant, unprepared for the ruined man who came home. She's still in love.

Mack leaves the snow blower in the middle of the driveway, she can see it's not even half cleared, and disappears around the side of the house. She'll ask Bernie to put it back in the shed when he comes home from school. She closes the porch door, leans against it and shuts her eyes.

Mack hears the ring of plate on plate and the jangle of silverware as Brenda fills the dishwasher. It's almost six thirty, time for news. He gets up, flips on the TV and settles back in his Lazy Boy, the newspaper open on his lap.

He hears her call, "Hey, Mack? Let's not watch the news tonight, hon. Why don't you put on a record?" A minute later she joins him in the living room, a striped blue dishtowel draped over her left shoulder, stands close, he loves how her hand is warm on his shoulder, and she says, "Turn it off, please, honey," but Walter Cronkite's voice is weaving in and out of his head, Khe Sanh, fighting so bad the choppers can't land long enough to collect the wounded and get them onto stretchers.

He closes his eyes and it's 1952. He sees bodies, American, Korean, it doesn't matter, they're crumpled, thrashing, screaming for water, morphine. Their faces are bloated, some are just masks of faces. A slick meat locker smell, raw, red, wet, is everywhere.

He sees the two North Korean soldiers he killed back then, both with two shots, but he knows they aren't really dead, they're crouching out behind his line of sycamores. Mack knows

they're out there, guns cocked, he sees them when he snow blows the driveway in the winter or mows the lawn in the summer. They're patient, those two, they know he isn't going anywhere, and they're young, just kids for Christ's sake, just like he was when he shot them, and their eyes are dead from so much killing. And he's dead, too. Alive and dead, both.

"Oh, Mack," Brenda says, and he floats back into the living room. She's watching the TV with the dishtowel pressed against her mouth. "They just mowed our guys down," she says, and Mack sees the wheat field he cut with his father in East Eaton, New York the summer he turned twelve, the grain tall and golden and glowing one minute, stubble under the thresher's blades the next.

"Mack, this is bad. David's not in Khe Sahn, is he? We've got to call Bill and Lucia."

The wheat field sways in his head but he knows he has to answer, stay focused, so he says, "David's okay, he's near Laos." Hearing his own voice helps, and he floats back into his Lazy Boy.

"I'm turning the news off and I'm calling Bill," Brenda says. Her voice is firm, decided. She switches off the set and in the sudden silence the wheat field disappears.

Yes, David is near Laos. Or was, last they heard. David, Bill and Lucia's only kid, joined up two years ago, in 1966, before Vietnam was a word everyone knew. Their nephew was lucky, though, he'd made it, was due home for good in three weeks. Bill and Lucia had the party all planned, steaks and kegs ordered, they'd spent a bundle, even had a new, howling red '68 Mustang in the garage, gassed up and ready to go.

Bill is Brenda's only brother and they do okay, they're pretty tight. She's friends with Lucia, too. It makes it easy for both families to spend two weeks in the same cabin up on Moosehead Lake every August. The women talk the whole time, Mack and Bill fish, watch

baseball, and the kids run wild, live on blueberries and hand-hauled lobster from make-shift traps, get eaten by black flies and sucked dry by mosquitoes and hate to come home when it's over.

Mack and Bill, that's another story. Mack knew Bill pushed David into signing up, hell, everyone knew it. Bill laid it on thick, said the Marines are a good outfit, David. Travel, screw around some before you come home and settle down. Mack thought about saying whoa, slow down David, wars get messy, he almost said it, but he knew if he did Bill would come down hard like he always did when they were talking about David, he'd say back off, Mack. Not your kid. Do what you want with your own, tell Bernie he can chicken-shit it to Canada when his draft number comes up if he wants, but leave my kid the hell alone. David wants to go, I'm letting him go. It'll grow the kid up. So Mack said nothing, bit his tongue, okay, Bill. He let it go.

But there was no way in hell his own boy, Bernie, was going near this stinking mistake of a war, no matter how much Bernie said he wanted to kick some Cong ass. High school talk, a seventeen-year-old bragging. Yeah, Bernie would register for the draft when he turned eighteen in a few months, he had to, but he'd graduate, get a job, grow up, quit that macho shit.

And Tommy, shoot, he was still a squirt, just turned seven, didn't know what war meant, just what it was. An accidental kid, but he and Brenda hadn't regretted it, not once. Things were getting better with him, too, he didn't look at Mack with such round, scared eyes all the time anymore, that hadn't happened for a while. Well, it happened yesterday when he told Tommy to bring in the snow blower, and stop with the questions, just put it in the shed, damn it, but it had been the first time in a long time.

Brenda comes back into the living room. "Bill's not home," she says. "They would have called by now if something happened, wouldn't they? Where is Laos, anyway?"

"I don't know," Mack says. "Somewhere. South, maybe. I don't know."

"It's northwest, Dad," a voice behind them says. "We're doing it in school."

Mack's on his feet so fast his newspaper scatters like sheets of paper rain. Bernie's in the doorway, so tall he takes up most of it, and Mack thinks Jesus, I wish he'd get rid of that Flack jacket. Bernie picked it up at the Army-Navy store, the real deal, said all the kids were wearing them. He wears it all the time and Mack has to stop himself from throwing it in the trash whenever he sees it hanging on the back of a chair. And when did Bernie get so big? When did this kid go from tall and skinny one minute to doorway-sized the next? He looks like my mother, Mack thinks. It's something about his mouth, it's full like hers. Bernie has Brenda's eyes, his grandmother's mouth. Mack's own mouth is scared dry, he can't handle being surprised, and he swallows, let it go, everything's fine, and sits back down.

"Bernie! Don't do that!" Brenda says. "It's okay, Mack. Bernie, when did you get home?"

"Just now. It's getting bad. Roads are real icy." He takes off the jacket, tosses it onto the couch. "Bet we don't have school tomorrow."

"Better do your homework anyway," Brenda says. "You never know." Then she says, "Boy, I sure wish David was back. I hate this war."

"Yeah," says Mack.

"Man, I'd like to kick some Cong ass," Bernie says for the millionth time, and Mack thinks if he hears Bernie say it one more time he'll ground the kid for a week.

"Well, you're not going. So just forget it," Mack says. "No joke."

"Who's joking?"

"I said forget it."

"Okay, okay. Jeez, Dad." Bernie takes a step back, eyes suddenly guarded, and Mack forces a laugh, "I just want you safe, is all." He feels Brenda's hand warm on his arm. Calm down, it says, everything's okay, let it go, Mack, and he does.

"Bernie, have you eaten?" she asks. "There's leftovers."

"You didn't have that tuna stuff again, with those noodles?" Bernie asks and when Brenda says yes, Mack sees him roll his eyes.

It's snowing the next day, flakes soft and fat and piling up faster than Mack can snow blow and Bernie can shovel. No school. Well shit, Mack says, and they give up and are tossing snowballs at Tommy when Brenda comes out on the back porch and tells them to quit, she has news and stop it, Tommy, he throws that snowball at her and he's in trouble. Come inside. Mack sees how pale she is, how the freckles stand out on the bridge of her nose and knows it's not good. She looks about twelve, scared and sick at the same time. Her father, maybe. He's already had two strokes.

"It's David," she says. "He was doing patrol in Khe Sanh. He got hit. He didn't make it."

Tommy's mouth opens, but nothing comes out. Bernie says, "I'm gonna get those bastards and you can't stop me. Not this time."

Mack's ears ring and he sees the first Korean soldier he killed all those years ago, the kid's stuffing intestines back into the hole where his stomach had been, they're fat white sausages, he has a confused look on his moon-round face, his eyes are unfocused, the blood darkening as it flows over his busy fingers. Mack's head rattles, it's a dry, seed-filled gourd, and

he scans the line of sycamores, sees nothing, no, wait, there's a whisper of something, they're still there, both of them, and he looks down at his own stomach, not sure what he'll find.

"Mack, Billy's real worried, he says Lucia won't come out of the bedroom," Brenda says. "He wants us to come up there. I told him we'd leave as soon as we could."

Mack drags his thoughts back. "What?" he says.

"We have to get up there," Brenda says. "We have to hurry."

'Up there' is Portland, Maine, a ten, maybe eleven hour drive in good weather, going seventy all the way. He's glad it's still snowing. It'll keep his mind on the clanking tire chains and off the dead soldiers beyond the tree line.

Brenda's suspended in a tunnel of dark lit only by headlights that shine on one narrow, snowy sweep of road at a time, and she watches, transfixed, as Kamikaze snowflakes dive at the windshield, swirl around the car, and dissolve into blackness. Death and the storm have muffled everything, left the world swaddled in endless, disjointed nothingness. The boys are mute in the backseat, no hitting, no kicking, no squabbling, no threats to pull over until they settle down and that goes for you, too, Bernie, she says, I don't care if you *are* seventeen, you're not too old to swat.

By the time they pull into Bill and Lucia's driveway she is numb from fatigue, from sitting, from not talking about David. It is after midnight and both boys are asleep on opposite ends of the back seat, two down sleeping bags puffed around them. An open bag of Fritos is clutched in Tommy's hand and Brenda frees it, offers it to Mack, who shakes his head no. He switches off the engine.

"You okay?" he says.

"I don't know," Brenda says. "I wish I could cry. It makes me feel guilty, not crying. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing," he says.

Bill meets them at the door. He hasn't shaved, is distant and polite. Brenda wraps her arms around him, rubs the back of his neck, says, "Billy, it's gonna be okay," but he says, "Jesus, Bren, stop. It's not going to be okay."

She takes a step back, hurt, embarrassed, confused.

The boys stare, wide awake now, and instantly wary in the newly charged air.

"You guys hungry?' Bill asks.

"Just bed," Mack says.

"Boys upstairs across from David's room, you guys on the fold-out in the living room," Bill says.

Brenda and Mack exchange looks. They've always slept in David's room.

"The downstairs bathroom's on the fritz so use the upstairs one," Bill says. "And hold the toilet handle down. Damn place's falling apart. I'm gonna drive around for a while."

They pick up their suitcases and carry them into the living room, dump them next to the large television console. Bill and Lucia's house is muggy in the summer and damp and chilly in the winter, and Brenda says, "Shoot, look, there's only one blanket on this thing. I should have brought extra."

She spreads their coats on the open, sagging couch and smiles at Mack when he says, "Well, we're not gonna be able to sleep on this crapola thing anyway, so we may as well be cold, too."

She takes his hand, kisses his open palm, it's their first real contact since Bill's phone call. She leans into him and he puts his arms around her waist, kisses her hair.

"Mack, I can't believe David is –" but he stops her, shhh, shhh, kisses her temples, her eyelids, her throat, then her mouth, hard, and her sap flows and then they're not making love, they're fucking blindly, all cock and throb, she's trembling beneath him, she can't control her breathing or rhythm, her blouse is bunched under her arms and the buttons dig into her, it's urgent, it's pure, it's savage and she comes, and then a split second later it's Mack, he's jolting, coming hard, and then she is winded, lying on her back in the cold room, staring into darkness, Mack breathing heavily beside her, his fingers twisted in her hair.

Sometime later she sits up, suddenly awake. Mack is snoring gently beside her, one leg sticking from beneath her opened coat. She has to pee and grabs Mack's coat that is draped over her, and heads for the stairs. On the way she glances out the kitchen window and sees that Bill's car is still gone. He'll be drunk by now, drunk and stoic, taking it on the chin. The snow has stopped and the moonlight shines silver, the stars a crisp, startling white. It is haunting and lovely and unbearably sad, and she wishes again she could cry.

It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit upstairs hallway, and she uses the chair railing to guide her. She opens the door across from David's room and sees two motionless bodies under a heap of blankets. The boys' breathing is deep and even.

A strip of light shines under the master bedroom door. Brenda taps lightly with the tips of her fingers and opens the door a crack.

"Lucia?" she whispers.

The shape under the covers shifts.

"We're here," Brenda says. "We thought you were asleep." She sits on the edge of the bed and strokes Lucia's head, weaves her fingers through the thick blonde braid. She has always loved Lucia's hair, this double-fisted rope the color of beach sand.

Lucia twitches her braid away and suddenly she's sitting up, eyes livid, challenging, beyond caring, it's like Mack when he's trapped in his almost-awake night terrors, so far outside himself he can't come back without her help. But Lucia's not Mack, she's aware and awake and looks so devastated that Brenda doesn't know what to say, so she says nothing, just reaches for the braid again and begins to stroke it.

"I wish I could bring him back," Brenda says. "Oh, Lucia, I so wish I could."

"Go away."

"Lucia, I know how terrible it is, please tell me how to help."

"Don't you listen?"

"Lucia, what's wrong?"

"Get out!"

Her face is frightening, blotched and puffy. Brenda stands, sways for an uncertain moment, takes a step backward, stumbles over the tissue-filled wicker basket next to the bed and feels a swift jab. Her calf hurts and blood is trickling down her leg. She runs to the bathroom, sags onto the closed toilet lid and waits for her heart to stop pounding.

The rhythmic chug of a coffee percolator wakes Mack. The boys are hiss-whispering, probably squabbling over who gets the comics first, and it sounds like someone is mixing something in a metal bowl and clinking the edge with the spoon. He needs coffee, needs to pee,

wants to go home. He gets up, smells Brenda on him and considers taking a shower, thinks no, coffee first. He throws on sweat pants, socks, and his old plaid bathrobe and goes into the kitchen.

Bill is pouring scrambled eggs into a frying pan. Brenda is at the table, staring fixedly into her mug, and the boys are elbowing each other away from the paper spread in front of them.

"Hey, guys. How ya doing?" he asks, and Brenda shrugs.

"Hey, Bill, your coffee pot sounds like an outboard needing a tune up," he says, anything to lighten the mood, and Bill tries to smile but doesn't quite make it. His eyes are bloodshot and even from across the room he smells like smoke and flat beer.

"So where's Lucia?" Mack asks.

Brenda gives him a not-now look and he shoots a question mark at her, what did I say, what's wrong?

"What?" he says when she doesn't answer, and she rolls her eyes at him, you blew it, Mack, and he's confused. What did he miss?

"She's upstairs," Bill says. There's something wrong with his voice. "She's packing. Said she wanted to spend some time with her mom for a while. Week or two."

"Why don't you tell them the truth, asshole?"

Lucia is standing in the doorway. A navy blue pea coat hangs on her thin frame and a bright, lime green scarf is looped twice around her neck. Small beads of ice cling to the hem of her bell bottoms and her boots have left snowy tracks in the hallway behind her. She has a snow scraper in one pink mittened hand. Her sandy-blonde hair hangs loose to her waist and Mack has a memory.

Coming home from the Olean plant one day last summer, Lucia in a yellow bikini top and cut offs, she's tanned, perfect breasts, flat belly, eyes large and soft, and Mack thinks you lucky bastard, Bill. She's bending over the ironing board while Brenda irons her long hair. There's an open magazine, two juice glasses, and an empty bottle of Blue Nun on the table and the women are laughing, Lucia harder than Brenda, and Brenda is making long sweeping motions with the iron, the iron is skating on Lucia's slippery blonde hair, and she's saying, "Hold still, Lucia, it says not to do it for more than five seconds or it'll burn." She stumbles over the words.

Lucia looks up at Mack, her head still on the ironing board, grins sideways and says, "Hi, Mack-a-doodle-do, want some wine?"

She only visits them alone when she and Bill are fighting and Brenda tells him they're fighting a lot these days. He looks at Lucia's taut belly, high, tight breasts, thinks oh, man, you asshole, Bill, you have it made in the shade, shoves the thought away.

"No, thanks," he says. He walks over, kisses Brenda, "Hi, baby," he says.

Lucia points to the empty wine bottle. "Oops," she says, "It's all gone, anyway. All gone," and she laughs.

She's not laughing now. She reaches into the pocket of her pea coat and pulls out a crumpled yellow paper. Mack recognizes the death notice. They always leave one behind, even though they deliver the news in person. It makes it more real, they say.

"Go ahead, tell them why I don't ever want to see you again, you bastard," she says.

Bernie and Tommy are staring at Lucia, open mouthed, comics forgotten. Mack remembers the time she popped Tommy's butt last summer for howling 'crap-damn-hell' over and over when he lost the fish on his line up at Moosehead Lake.

“I hate you, Bill,” Lucia says, then she yells it, twice more, her voice louder each time, and the wheat field in Mack’s head begins to sway, it was slashed to stubble.

“What’s happening here, Lucia?” he asks. He can’t listen to fighting, especially not to yelling, he can’t stand the yelling, and he breathes ‘let it go,’ over and over in his head.

“He killed David,” Lucia says.

She lowers her voice in an imitation of Bill’s. ‘Go ahead, David, you’ll travel the world and girls just *love* a man in a uniform. What he should have said is, ‘Go ahead, David, get some nookie, and oh, yeah, you’ll get shot all to hell!’ ”

Her voice reminds him of fraying rope, and with each ‘David’ the rope unravels further. Mack hears Brenda say, “Oh, Lucia, no, no, he never meant for David to die,” and when Lucia gives a high, screaming laugh he covers both ears with his hands.

“God, you guys make me want to puke.” Her voice is hard and brittle, but it’s not shaking. “I heard you last night, you know. I heard this weird noise and I got up to see what it was, and there you guys were, half-naked and rutting on my couch. Just right out there. Is that what you do, you screw like drunk teenagers and don’t even care where you are? Way to go, Bren, great way to honor David’s memory. You, too, Mack.”

Bernie’s staring into his cereal bowl, his ears suddenly bright red. Tommy, his cereal spoon still clutched in his hand, starts to cry. “Stop it,” he sobs, “Stop it, stop it, stop it,” and Mack thinks, no, crap-damn-hell, Tommy, crap-damn-hell.

Brenda looks stunned, as though she’s been slapped hard with an open hand, but Lucia’s face is hate-filled. “I hope you feel guilty every day for the rest of your life,” she says to Bill.

"Jesus, Lucia," Bill says. "Oh, Jesus, honey, what are you saying?" He's pale, shaken, and he reaches for her but she backs away slowly, as though he's a hooded figure in a shadow land of alleyways, her hands groping behind her, searching for something solid.

"I hate you," she says again.

She turns and walks down the hallway. The front door slams, and nobody moves.

"Someone has to go after her," Bill says. "I can't, she won't let me. Bren, go get her, quick. Hurry up, Bren, before she gets too far."

"Mom, are you leaving?" Tommy asks. "Mom?" His voice is full of tears.

"No," Brenda says. Then, "It's okay, Tommy, finish your cereal, it's okay."

Mack knows nobody believes her. Nothing's okay.

The day stretches on like three endless days in one. Mack and the boys shovel the driveway, anything to distract them, Bill stacks wood next to the covered gas grill on the back porch, and then all four shovel the neighbor's driveway and the connecting sidewalk. Tommy begs his mother for hot chocolate and she carries the mugs outside on a Hawaiian Christmas tray with obscene, big-bellied Santas in hula skirts dancing around its rim, Jesus, what a pointless tray Mack thinks, and they drink it standing in the driveway that is beginning to fill with snow again. It burns the roof of his mouth.

After dinner Bill disappears upstairs. Bernie and Tommy stretch out on Mack and Brenda's fold-out bed in front of the television.

"Can we watch *Laugh-In*?" Bernie asks.

"You always watch it at home," Mack says.

Bernie colors.

"He means are we allowed to laugh?" Tommy says and Mack knows instantly what Brenda is thinking, what they talk about in bed after the lights are out and it's easy to think out loud about safe subjects, how Bernie steps back, takes his time, and Tommy gets to the gut of the matter in ten seconds or less.

Mack walks over and switches on the set. "What channel?" he asks.

An hour later Bill comes downstairs with a cardboard box under his arm, and dumps it upside-down on the floor in front of the boys. There are three or four James Michener paperbacks, including *Hawaii*, its front cover torn. Mack remembers David reading it up on Moosehead Lake the summer before he signed up. There's a pair of leather ski boots, a heap of records albums and an even bigger heap of 45s slip-sliding over themselves on the carpet, a rolled-up poster, and a trumpet missing its case.

"I want you boys to have this stuff," Bill says. "The skis and poles are in the garage. They ought to be just about right for you, Bernie. David would want you to have them. Tommy, take the trumpet, but you gotta think of him when you play it, okay?"

Mack's ears turn hot. How can he ask the kid something like that? He wants to say Bill, you're a real shit sometimes, you know that, buddy, don't put that on my kid, but he remembers Bill's angry comment when they talked about David going to war, 'Leave my kid the hell alone, Mack,' and so he says nothing. But tomorrow he'll tell Tommy he doesn't have to think of David when he plays it. If he plays it.

Bernie reaches for the poster and unrolls a picture of a soldier with a yellow daisy blooming from the barrel of his gun. Underneath, in bold, jagged, black type, War Is Not Healthy For Children And Other Living Creatures. Bernie looks at it for a long time, rerolls it carefully,

and leans it against the pile of record albums. A moment later he heads for the stairs, *Hawaii* in his hand. "'Night," he says.

"Bed time for you, too, Tommie. Go on upstairs," Mack says.

"Don't forget to brush," Brenda says.

Halfway up the stairs Tommy stops and calls softly, "Dad? Mom? Is Aunt Lucia coming back tonight?"

"I hope so," Brenda says and Mack thinks, well I don't.

The three adults sit in silence.

"You know, all David wanted to do was come home," Bill finally says. "He never talked about what it was like, he just wanted to come home." He looks down at his feet. "Guess I'll go make some coffee," he says.

And I never told David what it was like, Mack thinks. If I had maybe things would be different. "Coffee sounds good," he says.

The woodstove is going full blast in the kitchen, and Brenda thinks God, it's hot in here, tugs off her sweater. She gets out the leftover blueberry pie and brings plates and forks to the table. Bill's fiddling with the percolator, Mack balances three cups in one hand, and she hopes they don't smash on the linoleum floor.

"There's a nor'easter coming," Bill says. "Supposed to be ten, twelve more inches of snow. Not crazy about that."

Brenda knows he's picturing the long, twisty drive inland to Bangor and how Lucia is so far away from herself she won't think to put on the tire chains.

“Maybe she’s there already. Have you tried calling?” Brenda asks.

“She’ll just hang up on me,” he says, and Brenda thinks, yeah, probably.

“Hey, Bren, Mack’s been talking about all the work you guys did on your house, says it’s all paneled. Insulated with that new stuff, and everything.”

“Yep,” Mack says, and Brenda nods.

“You still driving that old Chevy, Mack?”

“Sure am,” says Mack.

They lapse into silence.

Brenda wants to say, what about David, but she doesn’t, she’s gotten good at not asking things, so she swallows the question, reaches for the percolator and tops off the cups. The silence stretches on, a taut wire growing tighter, so thin a bird couldn’t perch on it, until finally she thinks damn it, it’s my brother I’m dealing with, not Mack, and the words tumble out, “So we thought David was near Laos. Didn’t you tell me he was near Laos?”

“Khe Sanh’s six miles from the Laos boarder,” Bill says. “His unit was closest so they got sent when the fighting went to shit.” He paused. “Hey, you know, you guys should move up here. Portland’s a good place, not too small, not too big. Damn sight better than Olean. Why don’t you try it?”

“Us move to Portland?” Brenda asks. “Why?” but she knows why.

“Why? Well, for one thing, Mack could make more money. Mack, we could buy a boat, you know, do some commercial fishing, maybe start a lobster business, it won’t be that much to get up and running. Get you out of that damn factory, anyway.”

“Well, yeah, I could make more money, maybe,” Mack says.” He nudges his pie plate toward the sugar bowl, nudges it back again. “But we like Olean. The boys are in school, there’s

the house we just redid, and I don't do so good out on the water," and he gives Brenda a help-me look.

"Billy, Mack's saying we belong in Olean. It's our home. We can't just move, you know? You know that, right?"

Bill doesn't answer, and they fall into silence again.

The quiet is making Mack tight in the gut. He takes a sip of coffee, coughs, is just about to say something, he doesn't know what, when Bill leans forward in his chair and says, "Mack? Can I ask you something?"

Mack shifts in his chair, he can't get comfortable, I don't like this, he thinks. "I don't know," he says. "Maybe."

"You were in Korea, right?"

Mack looks down at his hands and picks a thumbnail. "So?"

"So what was it like? I mean *really* like? Mack, what happened to my boy?"

Mack raises his head and blinks. He takes a sip of his coffee, puts the mug down in exactly the same spot on the table, turns the handle forty-five degrees, turns it back, takes another sip, studies Bill, wants to say Back off, leave me the hell alone. He thinks of David, and says nothing.

"Mack?" Bill says, and his voice is breaking with pain.

"I don't really know," Mack says finally. "I was just a kid, just nineteen. Bren was pregnant and all I remember was wanting real bad to get home. Then I got hit. That's it. I don't know."

"How can you not know?"

"I forget," Mack says.

Bill stares at him. "How could you forget?"

Mack hears the amazement in his voice.

"You just said you got hit. What was it like?"

Mack leans over, scratches his ankle, brushes a speck of something from his shoe.

"I wasn't hit too bad," he finally says. "They say if you're hit real bad you don't feel anything, you just go numb, get all spacey."

He stops talking, feels Brenda's fingers, she's stroking his palm, she's right there, he should have told David not to go, why didn't he say something, so now he closes his eyes, says, "First thing I remember was wondering what in hell I was doing lying face down in the mud. Jesus, the mud was everywhere, I remember it was sticky. Full of clay, I guess. God I hated that mud," and once he starts, he finds he can't stop.

"I mean, it's like…Okay, say I'm walking down the street and a car plows over the curb and hits me, I'd still know it was happening. But taking a bullet is different, you can't figure anything out, you don't know who shot you. It's not like when you kill someone, because when you kill someone you're aiming, you see who you shoot, you mean to do it. So it's different, you know? And all you want is the pain to go away, but it doesn't, it's like a bonfire under your skin. It's eating you and you can't move, and you know you're in the line of fire, you think fuck, I'm gonna get shot again if I stay here but you can't move, your legs don't work, and then you shit yourself, but you can't feel it, it just stinks, so you close your eyes and wait for the next bullet, just lie there in the shit and the mud's all bloody and it's sticky, and you wait."

He's shaking, he knows he's shaking, but he can't stop, and his war comes pouring out.

"And here's the weird thing. Your eyes are shut, but you can see. You don't see who shot you, you see the guys that *you* shot, both of them, they're kids, just goddamn kids, and you see their families, see the faces, see them all sitting around the dinner table, and even after you get home and it's all over, you still see them. You see them in the face of your own kid when you change his diaper, and you see them when you mow the grass, and shovel the driveway, it doesn't ever stop, they never go away, they never leave you the hell alone, and then your nephew gets killed. And you hope to hell the score is settled, will they leave you the fuck alone now? Or are you going to have to lose your own kid, too, to even the score, because you killed two, but you've only paid for one?"

The sweat's running down his face, he feels it trickle down his neck and disappear beneath his collar. He's panting, and he shoves back his chair.

Brenda grabs his hand, says, "Mack? Oh, honey," but he shakes her off, says, "No, Bren, don't, I can't," and he stumbles to his feet.

The coffee cups are full but he empties them in the sink, slowly, carefully, gone. He rinses out the percolator and makes a fresh pot nobody will drink, but at least his hands are busy, and he takes so long doing it that by the time he sits down again his voice isn't shaking anymore.

"I don't remember too much else. I just know I was scared shitless. And I was just a kid. Just a lousy, goddamn kid." His hands are still trembling and he slides them into his lap.

Bill sits, his head bowed, his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. When he looks up, his face is older than his thirty-seven years, and lined in a way Mack has never noticed before. It's bright, shining with sadness.

Mack sees Brenda is close to tears, but she doesn't cry. She reaches over, takes Mack's trembling hands from his lap and holds them to her cheek. "Honey," she says, "tell Bill it's not his fault."

He doesn't know if he can or not, he wonders if it's even true, but he wishes someone had said it to him, so he says, "It's not. It's not, Billy." And suddenly somehow it isn't.

"You sure?" Bill says, and when Mack nods Bill's face twists and he leans against his sister and begins to cry. Brenda wraps her arms around Bill, cradles him, strokes the back of his neck.

They sit like that for a long time, the fire in the woodstove dies out, and Mack notices how cold his feet are. It's late, after midnight.

"Bren, Bill, time to turn in," he says. "Come on, let's go, it's getting late."

Bill slips upstairs, Mack helps Brenda load the pie plates into the dishwasher, and they go into the living room, undress, and crawl beneath the single blanket and the two opened coats on the fold-out couch.

Brenda lies still, wide awake. Outside the wind is keening, the new storm is here and snowflakes pelt against the storm windows. Mack tosses beside her, and she knows he's awake, too, fighting to forget.

She tries to imagine Mack looking into Bernie's bunched-up baby face and seeing the face of someone he's killed instead, and she can't. She remembers Lucia's face, so closed and hurt, and Tommy's stricken face when Bill handed him the trumpet. And, suddenly, how

Bernie's eighteenth birthday is coming up in three months. He'll have to sign up for the draft. She sits up.

"Mack?" she whispers, "what if Bernie wants to go? What do we do, do we let him? You've heard how he talks. We can't make him go to Canada. Can we?"

Mack reaches for her and she settles against him.

"He won't be able to come home if he goes to Canada," Mack says. "They say if you enlist, your chances of going to the front lines go down. He might even stay stateside."

"David enlisted."

"Yeah, but that was before there was any bad fighting. No one knew. Not even Lucia." Brenda hears his voice harden when he says her name.

"I can't blame her. I might have done the same thing. Left, I mean," Brenda says, and she feels Mack's arm grow tight, it tenses around her. "But I'd come back," she says, and Mack relaxes.

"Mack, maybe it's time to talk to someone at the VA. About the nightmares."

"Maybe," he says.

For a long time she listens to the storm rattle the panes in the window over the couch. The wind tapers off when a thin half-light slips around the edges of the living room curtains, and her eyes grow heavy. She pulls Mack's open coat around her and whispers, "Don't sign up, Bernie. But if you do, please, God, please don't have him die like David." Her sweet nephew David, who skied like a champ, loved James Michener, and who played the trumpet from a rowboat in the middle of Moosehead Lake, the sun setting in purple streaks behind him. Sweet David, whose personal belongings had been shipped home, but whose body still lay in pieces somewhere outside the base at Khe Sahn, waiting for the fighting to stop.

Brenda closes her eyes, sees the tall, blood-splattered grass sway gently over his unmarked grave, and she begins, finally, to weep.

HUNTERS

She'd give anything for a cigarette. She still longed for the calm that came with the first, early morning inhale, and she still missed the smooth, slender length between her fingers, even missed the sharp stink of an overflowing ashtray. She missed matches, too, the snapping spark and sputter along with the luscious linger of sulphur. But Jack had been after her to quit for forever, and last Christmas both kids had begged her to quit as a present for them, so she tossed her pack into the trash on Christmas Eve, stared at it among the egg shells and apple cores, and sighed. Over. Done. She'd been suffering ever since, and right now she wanted one so badly she'd give anything. Her neck was an iron band and she massaged it with both thumbs.

She reached for a piece of cold toast and chewed mechanically. Almost one year and counting. And if she got through this day without sneaking one from the emergency pack upstairs in the toe of her ski boot, it would be a miracle.

It would have been so much simpler if Tate had just come out and told his father he didn't want to go deer hunting. But Tate was sixteen, so instead he punched his little sister's arm until she cried, snapped at them, and avoided any talk of the day his father had spent weeks planning. And here was Jack, Tate's polar opposite, revved up like a kid on Halloween, so eager to go he couldn't see anything but antlers. He was convinced Tate couldn't wait to go, either. It had never occurred to him that his son would rather do something, anything, else.

She studied the two of them at the early morning breakfast table, her husband fiddling with his coffee mug and Tate hunched over his oatmeal, avoiding her eyes.

“Well,” she said, “I guess the sooner you go, the quicker you’ll get back. And Tate, you pay attention out there, you put on that orange vest the minute you get out of the truck, and I mean it.”

“Mel, quit worrying,” Jack said. “He’ll be fine. Hell, he was the best shot in his hunting safety class.” He turned to Tate. “C’mon, it’ll be full light pretty quick. Let’s go, buddy.”

“I’m going,” Tate said. He reached for the gallon of milk in the middle of the table and tipped it over his bowl.

“Forget the milk, buddy. Let’s roll.”

Tate shrugged and stood up. He was tall now, taller than Jack. At seven he had been nothing but elbows and knees and now, ten years later, his hair was halfway down his back, and he was all Adam’s apple and size sixteen-and-a-half feet.

And acne, something else Jack struggled to understand. When he was seventeen, Jack’s face had been smooth and clear and almost too handsome, which was why Melanie had started dating him in the first place. Within weeks, dating had led to the double sleeping bag in the bed of his father’s Isuzu pickup, which had led to Tate, and now here they were, seventeen years later, with a balky teenager who showed no interest in the things his father valued, and a father who showed only frustration at the things that interested his son, and a woman who loved them both.

Tate would like traipsing through Mosher’s woods, she knew, the sun warm on the back of his neck. He would love the twittering rivalry of birds in the berry boughs, the squirrels swooping among the tree branches like acrobats. But the business of hunting, the heft of the gun that grew unaccountably heavier once the quarry was in the crosshairs, the trigger tug that was

supposed to be smooth and steady but never was, the eye-watering burn of cordite mingled with the raw smell of newly spilled blood, all of that was another matter.

Lynnie, Tate's eight-year-old sister, sat huddled in a blanket at the other end of the breakfast table, one bare foot rubbing the other for warmth, her fingers clutching the edges of the blanket around her shoulders. Melanie had woken her at five in the morning, as promised, because last night Lynnie had said, her eyes round and solemn in her perfect face, "I can't miss Tate's big day, Mom."

Now Lynnie sat, her uneaten bowl of Rice Krispies turning to slop, and regarded her father with the same sober expression.

"I still don't get why you have to kill deer. They don't do anything to us. Are you going to make me shoot one when I turn seventeen, too?"

Jack stopped pacing. "Only if you want to, Squirt," he said.

"So how come Tate has to?"

"No one said he has to," Jack said. "He wants to."

"No he doesn't," Lynnie said.

"Sure he does. Tell her, Tate."

"Yeah, I wanna go," Tate mumbled. He glared at Lynnie, his face flushed.

"That's not what you said last night. You said you had to."

"I did not." He aimed a kick at her bare feet. "I never said that."

"Did so," she said.

"You're a liar."

"Am not."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"That's enough," Melanie started, but Jack cut in.

"Well, that's interesting. So which is it, Tate? You going because you want to? I don't want someone covering my back out there because they think they have to."

"Oh, for God's sake, Jack, it's not a war zone," Melanie said.

"I want to," Tate said.

"Well, okay then," said Jack.

Tate pulled on his old down jacket. Feathers poked through the seams and he pulled out a few tufts and blew them at his sister.

"Thanks a lot, Snotface," he said.

She stuck out her tongue in reply.

Jack took the lunch bag Melanie handed him. "Quit worrying," he said again. "We'll be back around three or so. With a buck, huh, Tate?"

But Tate was tying his bootlaces, and didn't answer.

Melanie watched the truck pull onto the narrow country road and imagined Jack and Tate an hour from now, navigating around ponds and fallen trees, one behind the other, neither speaking. She visualized each footfall planted with care to avoid rustling the crumbling autumn leaves, and the watery light slanting in great shafts through the treetops, glinting off their shiny, freshly-oiled guns.

Jack loved the woods as much as Tate, maybe even more, but differently. It wasn't the muted calm he loved, but the thrill of sliding through the underbrush in pursuit. It was like being

a soldier, he told her once, was like the Nam stories he'd heard about from his brother, how the danger was lurking just out of sight, camouflaged, just its eyes showing.

The difference in those perceptions had always been the problem. Unlike his sister, who shrieked with terrified trills when Jack tossed her into the air and pretended he wouldn't catch her, Tate was content to sit for hours at a time with his Legos, or he was begging to tell them a story, instead of the other way around. Lynnie, so like her father in temperament and looks, reached for the neon crayons, sharp pinks and headachy oranges. Tate's hand-drawn suns were a pale tan, or even white, never Lynnie's screaming, yolky yellow. And while Melanie had no problem understanding Lynnie, or what it took to calm her down, Jack was troubled by Tate.

"Is that normal?" he asked, if Tate hadn't stirred from a book for an entire Sunday afternoon, and he looked doubtful when Melanie said yes. It wasn't that the two didn't love each other. Jack often went out of his way to find things the two of them could do together. But that was the problem: they had to work at it.

Shortly after one o'clock a chilly north wind sprang up, and the temperature dropped to the low thirties. An hour later snow flurries, so delicate Melanie had to squint to see them, began to fall. The sky was a pale, icy blue, and as she watched, the flurries grew larger and more insistent. They caught the sun and swirled in light, bright eddies.

Lynnie knelt on the couch, pressed her nose against the cold window, and watched the dancing flakes. Melanie tried not to think of bare hands on steel gun barrels and tempers growing shorter with each footstep.

She and Lynnie baked brownies and watched *Lady and the Tramp* until yawns overtook Lynnie, and by the time Lady met the Scottie dog next door, she was curled into a small comma on the couch, fast asleep. Melanie covered her with a quilt, turned off the television and turned up the thermostat.

By four the flakes had accumulated against the low stone wall separating the yard and the road. Melanie had visions of black ice, treacherous and sudden. The sandwiches and coffee she had packed for them must be long gone, and she was certain they had left their gloves in the truck, unaware the temperature would drop so quickly.

It was nearly four-thirty, and dusk was making it hard to see beyond the mailbox. Soon the watery light would be a chill, winter blue, and then it would be dark. Jack had talked her out of buying a cell phone when they'd cut back her hours in the payroll department down at the plant, and now she resented it. See, she would say when they got home, see, it isn't an extravagance at all. Or some dumb teenage status symbol. People buy them for a reason, Jack, she'd say, and she was damn well going to get one with her next paycheck.

The bands in her neck throbbed and she visualized the ski boot in the upstairs closet. Just one. Half of one. No, she'd wait until five, and if they still weren't back she'd light one and take two drags. Maybe three. Just enough to still her, then she'd snuff it out. And this time, when the last cigarette was gone, she wouldn't replace the pack.

Where were they?

As though probing her thoughts with an uncanny mental Braille, Lynnie's eyes popped open.

"Mom? Are Tate and Daddy home yet?"

"Soon, honey. They're probably on their way, right this minute."

"What if they fell in a stream? What if they got lost? What if they got cold? What if they got eaten by a bear?"

"They're just fine. No bears. Daddy knows what he's doing out there. Now come on, let's go build a fire in the woodstove so they can warm up when they get in. You can stack up the kindling over the newspaper. And then we'll make chili and corn bread for supper."

It wasn't until Melanie heard the crunch of tires on gravel that she realized how frightened she'd been. It was three minutes to five. Through the watery porch light she could just make out the slope of the truck's windshield and the oblong shape of something on the roof. She watched them emerge from the truck and come up the walk, side by side, saw Jack put his hand on Tate's arm and say something. The kitchen door slammed behind them.

Lynnie ran into the kitchen, the quilt dragging behind her, and stopped when she saw her brother.

"What's wrong?"

Tate didn't answer.

"Gross!" She pointed to the dark crescents beneath the fingernails on Tate's out-stretched hands, then stepped back. "Oh," she whispered. "Dad?" Her voice was uncertain. "Is that deer blood?"

Jack laughed. "That's nothing, you should see the deer. Melanie, you wouldn't believe it! First time out and he scores. And with just one shot! Sweet and clean as a whistle. I'm telling ya, the kid's amazing!" His eyes glowed. "Mel, we got us a champion here. I knew he could shoot, but who knew he was so good? Tate, we gotta think about bow hunting. It's a whole lot harder,

but bows make rifles look like sissy sticks. Yeah, we got to start thinking about this. A good bow can cost a bundle, but it'd be worth it. What do you think, Mel, think we can swing it?"

So it had gone well. Melanie smiled with relief and squeezed Tate's shoulder. He gave her a fixed smile.

"Good for you, sweetheart," she said. "We'll check out some bows. Jack, what are you going to do with the deer overnight? Leave it on top of the truck? When does Phil Horwood's packing place close? Can you get it to him tonight?"

"He's open till nine. Come on, buddy, I showed you how to do the rough field dress, now we'll finish the job. Then we'll run it down to Phil's and he'll cut it and wrap it. Mel, give him a call, tell him we'll be down in an hour or so. And make some room in the downstairs freezer, we're gonna need it."

"Dress that thing as fast as you can," Melanie said. "Dinner's ready, I just have to reheat it. Why don't we eat first, before you run down to Phil's?"

"Gotcha. Let's get going, Tate," Jack said. "And you can watch if you want, Lynnie, it's not scary."

The door slammed behind him.

"Mom, I can't find my jacket. And Tate's gonna throw up."

It was true. Tate's eyes were glassy and he still wore the same fixed smile. He was looking down at his still-outstretched hands.

"What is it? Tate? What's wrong?" She put a hand on his forehead. "You don't feel hot."

"I can't go out there." He turned and took the stairs two at a time, and Melanie heard him retching, heard the toilet flush. Then retching again.

She found him lying across his bed, an arm thrown over his eyes. His long pale wrist, so exposed, looked vulnerable against the red corduroy bedspread. She put two fingers on his pulse point and timed her breathing to its low, reliable beat.

"Hey," she said. "Feel better?"

He didn't answer.

"Tate, you know your uncle Keith, how he is about hunting? Well, one time when we were kids, he was about your age so I was fourteen or so, he took me squirrel hunting because I was nagging him to death, said I wouldn't quit till he did. He said I'd never be able to hit one, but I did. I hit it right smack in the eye and knocked it off the branch. But it didn't die. I watched it run back to its nest, but it only made it partway. I stood there, watching it suffer, and I threw up. Right in the middle of the pasture. I know it's not the same as shooting a deer, but it was still terrible. Sometimes throwing up when you kill something makes sense."

Tate lowered his arm. "You killed a squirrel?"

"I did. It was trying to climb the tree branch but it kept slipping, and its blood was running down the tree trunk. Some people aren't cut out to be hunters. Like me. And I don't know, maybe you."

She sat on the edge of his twin bed, waiting, hardly breathing, wondering if he would say anything.

Suddenly he sat up. "Mom, the deer was all bunched up and it ran sideways. I knew I'd hurt it bad. Even though it was just one shot, I knew it was going to die slow. And it did."

He began to cry. "Mom, I tried so hard to like hunting, I really did. I wanted him to be proud for once. But it wasn't like that hunting safety class, where you shot at sand-filled Coke

cans. I don't know what I do to make him mad all the time. When I asked him today, he didn't answer, he just walked away."

She knew exactly who the "him" was. "Oh, honey," she said. She could picture the two of them, Jack the thicker, jauntier figure and Tate in step beside him, slender and tall, and hating the whole long, cold ordeal.

How could she bridge that gap? Her neck muscles were steel bands again, and she wanted a cigarette more than she had ever wanted one in her life. She wouldn't bridge the gap, that was how. She couldn't.

"Look, why don't you take a hot shower and then come down and eat? You'll feel a lot better."

She stood at the head of the stairs until she heard the bed creak and Tate moving around in his room, then went downstairs, grabbed her coat, and went out on the back steps. She couldn't remember ever being angrier. How could he not talk to his son?

The snow had stopped and the air was perfectly still and very cold. She exhaled deeply and the twin streams of breath reminded her of the hidden cigarettes. She could taste the tobacco, feel a tiny shred of tobacco on the tip of the tongue, and she automatically reached to remove it.

The buck lay on a sheet of plastic in the driveway, its legs sprawled at awkward angles. Jack was kneeling beside it, one reddened hand propping open the clean slit he had made from anus to breastbone, while his other hand worked inside, scraping. Lynnie was squatting beside him, staring into the carcass, her expression a mixture of horror and curiosity.

"Look, Mom," she said. "It's kinda gross. But kinda not, too."

"Hey, where's Tate?" asked Jack.

"Upstairs."

She knew her voice was hard, but he didn't notice. He gave a quick swipe of the knife and a small pink blob popped out of the opening. Looking at it, lying naked in the porch light, made her queasy.

"He's getting cleaned up. Why don't you go see if he's done, Lynnie. I want to talk to Daddy for a minute. Go on, now." Her voice wobbled with anger.

When Lynnie was gone, Jack stopped scraping and said, "Well, a shower's a waste of time. He's just going to get bloody again."

"He's not going to finish dressing the deer with you, Jack," she said.

"That's ridiculous. He needs to learn this part, too."

"He's miserable."

"What do you mean, 'miserable'? He was fine an hour ago. Did you see how proud he was? "

"He isn't fine at all. And maybe it was just you who was proud."

Jack looked up at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Here it was. Melanie inhaled sharply, wished she had the comforting tug of nicotine to spur her on, and said, "It's pretty rotten when your own kid can't tell you that he doesn't want to go hunting with you because he's afraid you won't like him. And it's even worse when he asks you what he's done to make you dislike him, and you won't even give him an answer. For the past month you've been a shit to live with. We're all tiptoeing around the house trying not to set you off. Only now I'm done tiptoeing, so let's have it."

Jack lowered the knife.

"Come on, let's get this over with. What's wrong? And don't say 'nothing' because I know better."

"Okay," he said. "Okay, you're right. I've been pissed off lately. So let me tell you something. This afternoon Tate and I were about to cross that little stream on Mosher's back lot, you know the one by that stone wall?"

She nodded. They had taken the kids there for picnics years ago. She wondered why they had stopped taking those picnics, and when.

"I'm not stupid, I knew Tate was having a lousy time, the kid's a good shot but he's not a hunter. And yeah, I'm disappointed, but what the hell are you gonna do? You can't make him like it, right? But here's the thing. And this is what really gets me – oh, forget it."

"Just say it," Melanie said.

"Okay. We were about to cross that stream and it hit me all over again how I would have given any damn thing I owned to be hunting with my dad, when I was seventeen. Ever since that game tag came in the mail, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. And here my own kid was, out there with his dad, and he couldn't wait to get home." He picked up the knife again, and turned back to the buck.

"That's it? You wanted to go hunting with your dad and didn't get to go? That's why you're punishing Tate? Jesus, Jack."

"You don't get it."

"You're right, I don't. I don't see why it's such a big deal."

"It's *why* I didn't get to go that bothers me," Jack said. He was scraping faster, and his face was flushed.

"Which was?"

"I didn't get to go because I was working all the time. I worked longer hours than my dad, even. Remember how I was always falling asleep in school? I would have given anything to

take off and go hunting. And my dad used to ask me, too, and every time he asked I had to say no, so he'd go off with his buddies and then tell me what a great time they had, when he got home. It used to piss me off. I hated hearing him talk about it, but I hated not hearing about it, even more."

"So why didn't you just take time off, or skip school, and just go?"

"Because I couldn't, that's why."

So this was how it was going to be: one bite-sized piece of information at a time. Melanie sighed impatiently.

"So why couldn't you?"

He didn't answer.

"Jack!"

"Because you were pregnant!"

The shout hung in the frozen air.

"What are you saying?" Melanie asked finally.

Jack looked up at her, his face a twist of anger and shame.

"I'm saying I was stuck down at that damn mill, taking every shift they'd give me. And I'm *still* at the mill and the only thing's that's changed is that I use a computer I don't know shit about, instead of a saw and a planer." His voice was ragged. "And here's this kid who can do all the stuff I couldn't, and he doesn't even want to." He gave a short, sad bark. "What a kick in the slats. Jesus. And it all came to me when I was crossing that stream."

He wiped the knife blade on a sheet of newspaper and tossed it onto the porch.

"Jack? You didn't want to get married, did you?"

"No."

He said the word too quickly, and so quietly it might have been a whisper, but it wasn't.

"I never knew," she said.

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "And say what? That I wasn't the father? I knew I was."

"So why did you stay? Why didn't you take off?"

"Because everyone kept saying I should stay, that it would be wrong to leave. And I knew it would be shitty to ditch you like that. But I wanted to, Mel, I wanted to run so bad I could taste it. We were just kids, the same age Tate is now, and I couldn't believe you weren't scared, but me, I was scared out of my mind. You walked up the aisle that day in your yellow dress and a big smile, and all I could think was I didn't even know who you were."

That day. And that simple, empire-waist yellow dress so snug around the middle that it chaffed the belly it had been designed to hide, her mother's expression of pity mingled with resignation, her father studying the pew backs, his face splotched red with angry embarrassment, his eyes revealing nothing, Jack's equally unreadable face, and the pause before he said his vows that went on so long that people shifted in the pews. Those were her memories.

And underneath them were the darker memories of the panic lodged in her throat, the determined smile masking the resentment at losing her pretty waistline, and her new, terrifying, unmapable future. No one had thought to ask her what she wanted. And if they had, she couldn't have told them because she didn't know. She'd never thought to ask herself. She never knew she could.

"Oh, Jack, I was so lost," she said. "And so scared. And then the baby came and there wasn't time to be lost anymore, only I still was. For a long, long time. But back then you got

married. My father would have killed me before he'd let me have an abortion, and my mom would have let him. I wasn't as lucky as you; I couldn't have run, even if I'd wanted to."

"Pretty shitty system," he said.

He climbed the porch steps and was reaching for the storm door when she grabbed his arm.

"Jack, deep down do you wish we hadn't gotten married? Right here, right now, do you wish we hadn't?"

He stood for a long time, the door handle in his hand.

"Sometimes," he finally said. "It would have been nice to do some stuff. Finish high school. Travel some. You know."

She studied her bottom coat button in the porch light. She wasn't sure she was breathing.

"Do you want out?" she asked carefully. "Is this the jumping off place?"

"I don't know, Mel. This afternoon wading that creek I thought it was. Now I guess I don't know what I want. What about you? What do you want?"

"I guess I want someone to ask me what I want," she said. "And you just did. What I *don't* want is to be married to someone who doesn't want to be married to me. Do you want to be married to me, Jack?"

The door opened a crack and Lynnie peered out, her face as unsure as it had been when she studied Tate's fingernails.

"Are you guys fighting?" she asked.

Jack's eyes softened. "Hey, Squirt. Nah, we're just talking."

"Good," she said. "And Mom, I'm really hungry and Tate said we're having deer guts for dinner but we're having chili, right? When I told him he said no, deer guts, and now I'm gonna go tell him he was wrong, and can you guys come in now?"

"Sure, honey, we just lost track of time. I'll be right there. Go get washed up for dinner and go tell Tate we're having chili. No guts."

"Okay," she said happily, and disappeared.

Melanie stood up. "Well," she said. "I guess that's that."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know what to say, Jack. I hope you figure it out. What you want, I mean."

Jack held up a hand. "You know, I think maybe I needed to say it. Out loud. Just to hear the words, you know? I never told anyone. Not ever."

"Okay," Melanie said slowly. "So does it change anything to say it out loud?"

"I don't know," he said.

She watched as he gathered the plastic sheeting around the deer, hoisted the bundle over his shoulder and maneuvered it into the truck's bed. It took an age.

"Well, this is crazy," she finally said. "I'm not going to just stand here, waiting to see what my future holds." Her voice shook. "When you figure it out, let me know."

"Guess I'll drop this off at Horwood's, be done with it," he said, as though she hadn't spoken. He got in the truck and started it up.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know."

"Well, will you at least be back tonight?"

"Look, Mel, I don't know. You need to stop asking me questions I can't answer."

"That's just great, Jack," she said, and went into the house and slammed the door.

She was holding an unlit cigarette and staring at the stars out the kitchen window when an unfamiliar pick-up drove up the tree-lined driveway. It was well past midnight and so still she could hear two voices clearly, although she couldn't make out their words. The snow squeaked under their boots as they climbed the porch steps. She drew her bathrobe around her neck and opened the door.

Jack was leaning on Phil Horwood. "Hey, Babe," he said.

"Sorry, Mel," Phil said. "My fault. We got to talking over a few down to Goldy's Bar. His truck's still there. It's around the back."

He shifted Jack onto a kitchen chair and straightened up. "Hit the hay, buddy," he said. He tipped his cap in Melanie's direction, mouthed "sorry," again, and shut the door gently behind him.

"Babe, why's your ski boot on the table?"

"You're drunk," she said.

"Nah, not drunk," he said. "Just pretty buzzed. Too buzzed to drive, is all."

"So how 'not drunk' are you?"

"I'm okay. I've been thinking, Mel. Thinking a lot. Well, drinking and thinking, but mostly thinking."

Her stomach flew to her throat. "And?"

"I figured out what I want."

"What?"

“I’ll show you.”

He led her onto the porch and pointed to the sweep of yard, the low stone wall and the maples lining the driveway.

“I want this. All of it. And I want my girls, and my boy. I guess what I’m saying is, I want what I have.”

She took a long breath, the first one in hours, it seemed, and leaned against him. “And you know what I want, Jack? I want to quit smoking. For real this time. And not for you and the kids. I want it for me. I really, really want it.”

He nodded, leaned over and kissed her neck. “Let’s go upstairs,” he said.

Later, Jack asleep and snoring lightly beside her, she shifted her head back and forth, just to check. Her neck didn’t hurt, and she didn’t want a cigarette. She rested her hand on the down-covered hump of Jack’s shoulder. He was a good man, a good lover, a good father. She was proud that he had chosen to stick by her when many men wouldn’t have, proud that he loved his kids, and proud that he was a good hunter. And she was proud of Tate, too, because he wasn’t.

BEYOND THE PARKING LOT

Something was missing. Sophia sat back on the weeding bench, gave her flower garden a critical once-over, and said to her cat, Sister Mary Beatrice, “It’s unbalanced. The peonies in front of the rock wall are too tall. Maybe the entire wall should come out. What do you think?”

The cat regarded her through golden eyes narrowed to slits.

“Maybe it’s the begonias in front of them. I should have gotten the deep pink ones. And the pansies, look how they’re leaning, I hate it when they do that.”

She narrowed her own eyes. “Is that a dandelion?”

It was. The small blot of yellow hovered, almost out of sight, beneath the stand of irises. Sophia reached into her gardening smock pocket for the pronged dandelion digger her husband Stan had given her the Christmas before he died, snatched the weed up and crushed its spidery white roots to pulp between the fingers of her gardening gloves.

“Miserable things,” she said to the cat. “Good for absolutely nothing. Gaudy heads, leafless stems. There’s just nothing nice about them at all, is there? Okay. Now I’ll go stake up those pansies, and then I’ll—” She caught sight again of the stacked slate wall, set just so in the sloped hillside, each shear of rock perfectly and solidly placed, the shades of bluish-gray balanced in hue and tone, exactly as she had intended when she drew up the plan and had it approved by her gardening club. It looked peaceful, lovingly crafted, cool and yet muted on this soft June morning. It really *was* the ideal backdrop for her peonies, wasn’t it? And so what if they looked almost embarrassingly extravagant? Those peonies had won awards, after all. So

why, just a second ago, had the flowers seemed so incomplete, and so, well, so something? It didn't make sense.

"What is the problem, Sister Mary Beatrice?" she asked.

The cat yawned and gave her front paw a bored lick.

The first problem was that she was talking to her cat. But Stan had been dead for three years, so who else could she talk to? Not that Stan had ever talked much. Or listened, for that matter, but still. There was Viv, but you didn't live with your friends. Thank goodness. The thought of living with Viv, well, they may have been best friends, but Sophia would rather grow a garden of nothing but dandelions than live with her.

The real problem was the odd restlessness that had been tugging at her for the past few weeks. It bobbed and fluttered, was distracting, intimidating, and infuriating. Sometimes it showed up in her dreams, which seemed to Sophia to be an intimacy most unfair, not to mention inappropriate. No one or no thing got familiar with her without her consent, and not just implied consent, either. And here she was, in her garden, the place which was the complete and utter essence of her, and the restlessness was here now, too.

No. This would not do at all. She would take a stand, right now, direct those antsy feelings to disappear once and for all.

She pulled off her leather-palmed gloves, finger by finger, smoothed the short ponytail at the nape of her neck, and stood up.

"I'm going to get ready for church," she said to Sister Mary Beatrice. "Then I'll go to the Garden Club lunch, and after that I'll drive out to Keefer's for cedar mulch. See, I have plenty of things to keep me busy. I'm not unsettled at all, so there's no need whatsoever to give trouble a

name before it has cast its shadow. Don't you agree?" And with that she gathered the large, loose cat in her arms and set off for the house.

"I think I need a new hobby," she told Viv as they stood in the coffee line after Mass that morning.

"You're out of your mind," Viv said. "That's not your problem, you know."

Sophia sighed. Viv was so good at telling her what her problems were, what she didn't do right, or did only half-right, or didn't do at all.

"Don't you sigh at me. Listen."

Viv ticked her fingers, one by one. "You claim you're retired but one, you teach piano lessons all week, those same Chopin etudes over and over, plink, plink, plink, it's a miracle you don't jump off the Route 24 overpass into oncoming traffic. Personally, I couldn't stand it. Two, you run all the church meetings and then type up and distribute the minutes to the rest of us, plus you bake ten loaves of bread a week for The Harvest House, not to mention all the driving you do for those unfortunate people and three, you're president of the Darien Gardening Club and every time you turn around you have another meeting. The last thing you need is a new hobby. Go shopping. Get a haircut. Shoot, splurge and get a whole new style, Lord knows you've worn that one long enough. But no hobbies."

"Oh, I could never, ever cut my hair," Sophia said. 'But I'm driving out to Keefer's for mulch later, and I've decided to buy a birdbath for the garden, too."

How odd, she thought. It was true that she had had recent, undefined thoughts about a birdbath, but now the thought had taken form and popped out of her mouth without her knowledge. Or consent. How disconcerting.

"I'll come with you," Viv said. "I heard they're having a sale."

At one time Keefer's had been the largest feed store in southern Connecticut, but as the farms disappeared, the building had reinvented itself, first as a lumberyard and then as a country-western dance barn. These days it sold garden supplies, statuary, and pottery, and the current owner had commissioned an artist to paint an enormous garden mural on three of its four sides.

The parking lot was lined with statues, hundreds of them, from small, wrinkled garden gnomes holding trowels to larger-than-life brown bears standing upright, teeth bared in mid-roar. Greek goddesses dressed in flowing togas held platters of stone grapes, and flute-tooting Pans mingled with rearing stallions. Saints of every description stared benevolently at glaring eagles, arrows clutched tight in their grips. Each statue marked a parking space and all wore patriotic symbols in honor of the Fourth, still two weeks away.

Sophia parked in front of Saint Francis. A spiked, Statue of Liberty crown of green Styrofoam perched, rakishly atilt, on his head, and Fourth of July confetti fed the small stone birds on his plinth.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Viv. "Why didn't they just put up a big flag and get it over with?"

A flash of annoyance swept Sophia. "Oh, Viv, don't be such a fuddy-duddy. It's funny."

“No, it’s trashy. It looks like that ‘Rent-A-Wreck’ place in the middle of town with those ratty plastic flags strung all over the place.”

“No, it’s funny. Remember what fun is?”

“How come you’re so snippy all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” Sophia said. She had been wondering the same thing, and was amazed to discover that she wanted to stamp her foot. My, she thought, next thing I know I’ll be sticking out my tongue. What in heaven’s name is wrong with me? I’m fifty-six years old, and here I am, acting like I’m eleven.

“And what, exactly, is that?” Viv asked. She grabbed Sophia’s arm and pointed across the parking lot.

Sophia squinted in the direction of Viv’s finger. “Oh, my,” she said.

The statue across the parking lot was completely naked except for a circle of red, white, and blue tinsel stars looped carelessly around one wrist.

As Sophia drew nearer, she could make out soft chisel marks along the sinewy calf of the right leg. A small chip was missing from the right knee, and a well-defined crack ran across four toes on the left foot. A darker crack, no thinner than a pencil lead, ran like a thread around the undecorated wrist. The rest of the statue appeared sound, from the slight creases in the knuckles to the long length of rippling torso that came to rest in a frozen tangle of pubic hair. Its stone penis slept against one leg. The statue stood on a three-foot high pedestal that was deeply weathered, and the intricate, wavy scrollwork flowed upward to the life-sized man himself.

It was remarkable in its entirety, but the statue’s face drew Sophia more than anything else. It wore an expression of longing, a deep, implicit yearning, as though its only desire was to explore the world beyond the parking lot that the stone eyes had only imagined. As if on cue, the

restlessness she thought she had banished opened its eyes, stretched, and began to bob and weave like a tiny boxer within her.

"Oh," Sophia whispered. "I want it."

"If you like this one, you'll love our statue of David," said a voice behind her.

Sophia turned and looked into the face of a middle-aged salesman. A name tag attached to his green shop apron read, 'Welcome to Keefer's Garden Barn! My name is _____. The name 'Pete' was scrawled above the line in red magic marker.

"This one's got a few problems," he said. "Someone backed into the pedestal a few weeks ago and the impact traveled up, cracked an arm. And some toes. I just keep it here for show. We have a bunch of other ones inside. Better ones."

"Oh, but I want this one," she said. "It's perfect. It's art."

"Art, my foot," Viv said. "It's obscene, that's what it is. Sophia, you can't possibly want it. And you certainly don't need it."

It was true, Sophia thought, she didn't need it at all. She was here for a birdbath, not a statue, and most certainly not a naked one. Stan had implemented several shopping rules right after they got back from their honeymoon to Niagara Falls twenty-six years ago, among them a restriction against impulse purchases. He equated name brands with waste to the point of selfishness, and eventually, although reluctantly, she had given up the idea of wanting anything remotely frivolous at all. Or expensive, like children.

But oh, the statue was an exception. It had to be an exception.

"You know, Viv," she said slowly, "Stan used to tell me I didn't want things all the time. Or need them."

"And for good reason," Viv said.

"But I *did* want them. And I want this statue."

"You don't know, it could cost a million dollars. But go ahead, waste your money, see if I care," Viv said.

"I don't understand why you're so upset about a statue," Sophia said.

"For heaven's sake, do I have to spell it out for you? It's naked!"

Pete cleared his throat. "I'll come back later," he said.

Sophia touched his arm lightly, and her restlessness fluttered. "No, stay. Please. Tell me about the statue. What's it made of?"

"Well," Pete said, "it's what they call a hydro-stone plaster mix, which means it won't show wear like plain concrete. Now, it's not the high-end resin and fiberglass material, that'll wear like iron, last forever, but this here's a good, sturdy product. It'll last a long time."

Viv pointed to the ring of stars around the statue's wrist. "Seems like you could have made better use of that tinsel," she said. "Ever think of wrapping the stuff around its waist? Or, better yet, using a big flag?"

"You know, that thought never occurred to me," Pete said, and he smiled.

Viv did not smile back, but Sophia did. She liked the laugh lines around his eyes, and his small, even teeth.

"I'm Pete Keefer," he said, holding out his hand. "Owner, manager, accountant, you name it."

"Sophia Kozak. And now, Mr. Keefer, how much does my statue cost?"

"Pete," he said. "Name's Pete. And as far as cost goes, it was $1200, but that car hit it pretty hard, so how's $700 sound? Shoot, call it $650. And we deliver free if you live in Darien. How's next Wednesday, say around three o'clock, sound?"

"Perfect," Sophia said.

"Will you excuse us for a minute?" Viv took Sophia by the arm and pulled her several feet away.

"I don't even know where to start," she said. "Have you thought about your Garden club? How are you going to explain a man in your peonies, let alone a naked one? They'll die ten deaths, especially Mrs. Patterson. And Stan, my Lord, the poor man is spinning in his grave. He would never let you do anything so foolish."

"You're right," Sophia said. "He wouldn't. And I can't do anything about Elva Patterson. She'll just have to faint." She withdrew her arm from Viv's grasp, walked back to Pete and said, "I need a birdbath, too, a fountain one, with a heating element so the water won't freeze."

On the way home, Viv sat rigid, her fingers locked in her lap. As they neared the center of town she said, "I'll just say it. Sophia. You're not yourself. You're unpredictable, argumentative, and, sorry to say, just plain self-centered. I don't know who you are anymore. I think you should see someone, I really do."

With a flush of recrimination, Sophia thought, Viv's right. I haven't been myself lately. It's that restlessness. It has me doing crazy things. She opened her mouth to explain, even apologize, and found herself saying instead, "You were pretty rude back there yourself, especially to Mr. Keefer."

"Well, excuse me for living."

Viv tapped her fingernails on the buckle of the seat belt with angry little clicks. The sound reminded Sophia of the many times Stan had walked across her freshly mopped floors in

his golf shoes, scattering snips of turf as he went. It was not the first time Viv had reminded her of Stan. Both were bossy, unreliable, and selfish most of the time. And knowledgeable, intrepid traveling companions, which almost made up for the rest.

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

The following Wednesday at three o'clock four workmen arrived in a mud-spattered pick-up. Pete pulled up a few minutes later. The five men wrestled the statue onto a dolly and dragged it through her side gate and into the high-fenced back yard, and heaved it onto the spot she had cleared in the middle of her largest marigold bed. Next they installed the birdbath behind her row of peonies, and connected the water and electrical lines. An hour later water bubbled from the mouth of a dancing, upright fish, splashed into the top tier, and spilled into the larger, curved tier below it. Sister Mary Beatrice sat on a cast iron bench across from it and watched the flowing water, her tail twitching with tight, anticipatory flicks.

It was nearly five o'clock by the time the men left. Pete stayed behind on Sophia's patio, turning his Yankees cap over in his hands, waiting as she dug through her purse for her checkbook.

"I must have left it on the kitchen table, Mr. Keefer. I'll be right back."

"Pete," he said.

When she returned, she found him squatting on his heels in the middle of her garden, examining the row of forget-me-nots that marched around a stand of snapdragons and came to rest at the edge of the marigold patch that surrounded her statue.

“This is some garden,” he said. He had a gravelly voice, low and almost gruff. “Some cat, too.” He reached down to stroke Sister Mary Beatrice, and she arched her back and curled herself wantonly around his boots.

The restlessness she had spent the better part of the last week dampening was back, bobbing in her stomach. Now that his cap was off, she saw that his hair was significantly gray, with darker hair in back, and it curled slightly at the nape of his neck. Stan had been bald as a balloon. She pressed her hand against the flutter and had the sudden, inexplicable desire to stroke the nape of his neck. Quickly she shoved her hands in her pockets. This would not do at all. Maybe Viv was right, maybe she should see someone.

“This is where I’m happiest,” she said.

“How many hours a week you figure you spend out here?”

“Oh, lots,” she said. “After Stan, that was my husband, after he died, I started spending every spare minute out here. Before that I just dug up dandelions.”

Pete pointed to the forget-me-nots. “They sure look organized,” he said.

“I’m a perfectionist,” she said. “I like clean lines.”

“That’s funny, your statue has cracks all over the place.”

“I know,” she said. “I can’t explain it. Call it a whim, I guess.”

“Whims can be good things,” he said, and gave her the same smile he’d given her in the parking lot. He picked up the cat and held her against his chest.

“How did you come to own the Garden Barn?” she asked.

“Buying the place was Janey’s idea,” he said. “She had a thing about gardens, flowers mostly, could make anything grow, she looked at it and it took off. At first I did the books and

she worked the floor, but after she, well, after she died, it got to where I couldn't stand the quiet in the office. The floor's always busy."

"How did--?"

"Breast cancer," he said quickly. "It'll be seven months on July ninth. It got her mom and two sisters, too. She kept putting off the x-ray, that mammogram, and then one day she had a little cough. By then it had spread all over, and six months later she was gone."

"What a terrible thing," Sophia said.

Pete blinked. She reached over and took his hand. It was warm, and softer than she expected. His fingers trembled in hers, and he withdrew his hand.

"I never told anyone about how she wouldn't get that x-ray. Not her dad, not her brothers, nobody. We used to argue about it. She was just too scared to know, I guess." He cleared his throat. "Hey," he said suddenly, "would you have dinner with me sometime?"

"I'd like that," she said.

He stood, brushed back his hair with one hand and pushed his worn cap on with the other. He held out his hand and she was surprised again by its softness.

"I saw your phone number on the check. I'll give you a call. See you."

"Wait. Please," she said, although she had no idea what she was asking him to wait for. The flutter turned into bees and swarmed high in her chest as she reached up and touched his cheek. "I'm so sorry about Janey," she said.

He took her hand, turned it over and studied her palm intently.

"I watched you get out of your car the other day and I liked how you were. That's why I came over, instead of sending one of the high school kids. I always knew Janey was it for me, so I was pretty surprised by how I felt, when I saw you."

“Me, too,” she said. “I was surprised, too. The entire last month has surprised me.”

Later that night Sophia called Viv.

“Are you still mad?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Viv said.

“Can you stop being mad for a second because I have news, and if I don’t tell you I’m going to burst. I’m having dinner with Pete Keefer. And I’m really, really sorry about before, it’s just everything’s been crazy, and I don’t know what’s happening anymore, but he asked and I said yes, and this will be my first date in twenty-six years and I’m scared to death.”

There was a long pause.

“Viv?”

“Just promise to call me the minute you get home, and don’t forget anything. I want every last detail. Okay? And have a good time.”

“I will,” Sophia said. “And thanks, Viv.”

Three days later an Italian meal at Darien’s La Strada restaurant turned into dessert and coffee at The Cappuccino Café, followed by a walk around the pond at the outskirts of town. It was a warm night, and lightning bugs flashed on and off in the grass. The croak of frogs mingled with the call of peepers in the rushes near the pond’s edge. Pete pulled a red plaid blanket from the trunk of his car and they sat for a long time on the stony bank, watching the moonplay on the water.

"So what happened to your husband?" he asked.

"Stan? He had an aneurism on the fourteenth hole of the golf course. He was golfing with my friend Viv's husband, and Don told me later that Stan looked at him, said, 'Damn, I'm thirsty' and died. Just like that. That night I found a letter stapled to his will saying he didn't want to be buried here in Connecticut after all, he wanted to be buried in Albany, New York, behind the church he went to when he was a kid. And we'd just finished paying for two lots here. He'd never said a thing." She shrugged. "But that was just Stan being Stan. It was a huge hassle, getting him buried in New York."

"Janey used to hum this hymn under her breath, over and over, so low I couldn't hear it, but I couldn't not hear it, either. Sometimes she'd start humming and I'd want to kill her. It got to where I'd leave the room. That song's in my head all the time now."

"Can't live with, can't live without, I guess."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I could live with Janey just fine," Pete said. "It's living without her that's hard. But it's getting better."

"It's even nice, after a while," Sophia said.

"That's what I hear."

"He's really pretty wonderful," Sophia told Viv later that night. "And, oh, Viv, he's got grandchildren! Two of them, little ones, twin girls. His daughter's thirty-two, married. She and her husband live in Hartford. Lucky."

"You're taking it pretty fast, don't you think?" Viv asked, and once again Sophia felt the familiar flash of annoyance.

“Don’t start, Viv. I’m not in any hurry,” she said. She glanced out the dark window toward the garden, imagined the cool stone of her statue gathering the night moisture, and knew it wasn’t true.

Dinner followed dinner and on their seventh date, nearly two months after they met, Sophia suggested a dinner in her garden. It was late August and her garden was at its peak, each of the meticulously tended blossoms velvety and just the right size, each leaf a rich, glossy green.

After dinner Pete brought the red plaid blanket from the trunk of his car, and they sat close together on the bench by the fountain, the blanket pulled around their shoulders. Twilight had deepened, and the moon shone white and was perfectly round. Sophia looked up at her statue, and although she was not cold, she shivered.

“Here, this will help,” Pete said. He slipped an arm around her and kneaded her shoulders with one hand. Her heart chugged as though she had just finished ten laps in Viv’s pool. This was a kind man, she thought, a good and kind man. A man she could love.

“Did you grow up in Connecticut?” she asked, but instead of answering he began to rock sideways, teasing her, coming close and closer with each sway, smiling his wide smile, getting nearer and nearer until he was kissing her and she was kissing him back. The bees in her stomach swarmed.

He took the blanket from her shoulders, spread it on the grass in front of the statue and pulled her down. Sophia settled on top of him and pushed her toes against his boots. She slid her hands to his waist and stroked the hollows of his hips beneath the rivets in his jeans.

“It’s been so long,” she said. “I think I’ve forgotten.”

“No, you haven’t,” he said.

His hands moved over her shirt and slacks and they slipped away. She wasn't aware he had taken off his own clothes until breast met chest. Her hands traveled the small ridge of goose bumps that ran the length of his spine. He touched her slowly, quietly, until she forgot his hardness, her slickness, almost forgot him. She rolled beneath him and wrapped her legs around his back. No, she hadn't forgotten after all. But she had forgotten the wonderful weight of a man. He called out, was it "Janey"? and she came a split moment later and bit the soft flesh of her inner arm to keep from moaning out loud. No, he had not called her Janey. He had not. No. He couldn't have.

The night slowed and became still. He sank away and she touched her cheek to his, held him loosely until he dozed. She lay quiet in the moonlight, widely awake and speechless at the new, unembarrassed woman she had become. She brimmed with moisture, full and soft as her pinkest peony, and she wondered why, only months ago, she had thought them sometimes showy to the point of ridiculousness. She looked around her, took in the faintly bubbling birdbath and the bed of orange coreopsis behind it, and stared for a long, quiet time into the face of her statue.

But something was wrong. It was the same flutter of knowing she had had several weeks ago. She sat up, eased from under Pete's arm and crept close to inspect the stature in the crisp moonlight. Yes, something about the statue lacked balance and flow. The stone man was perfect, but the statue itself was all wrong. She had no idea why.

After several minutes of puzzling, it came to her. The statue cried out for flowers that swayed, with tall, waving stems and full blossoms that bent, open-throated, toward the man on the plinth: purple irises, cascading lobelia, even the leggy, periwinkle cornflowers she had, until now, considered a waste of good color. These marigolds, so tightly constricted, looked like soldiers settling in for a siege.

She reached across Pete for her watch. It was a few minutes after eleven. She slid on her shirt and panties and knelt in the soft dirt of the marigold bed. She sank her hands deep in the rich soil, loosening roots, tugging, tearing, ripping out the small yellow flowers in handfuls. She had uprooted more than half of them when she heard Pete stir.

"Sophia?"

"I'm over here." She looked down at her smeared arms and dirt-caked fingernails and laughed. "And I'm a sight."

"What are you doing?"

"I've got to start over. My statue needs purples and blues, big wild flowers. Oh, wait till you see it! I'm going to use up the entire stock in your store!"

He was silent.

"Pete?" she asked.

"Sophia," he said, but he didn't say anything more.

"Oh, I'll buy the plants, Pete, I wouldn't dream of taking them for nothing. Do you have honeysuckle? I'm going to plant a huge bank of it, then put in some ivy that'll grow up the statue's base, and I may even get an arbor. For the first time in my life I'm thinking of planting for fragrance as much as color and height. Oh, Pete, it's going to be so beautiful!"

Pete stood. "I shouldn't be here." He turned his back and pulled on his jeans.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't do this," he said.

"Do what? What can't you do?" Her heart was thumping so hard she thought he might hear it.

“I wanted you to be Janey.” He gathered his shirt and the blanket in one sweep. “I can’t see you again.”

She lost sight of him in the dark and had to strain to hear the soft click of the gate latch.

“Well. I guess that’s that,” she said aloud. Sister Mary Beatrice emerged from beneath the fountain and Sophia lifted her up and buried her face in the soft fur.

“I should hate him,” she said. But she didn’t. “I should be furious.” But she wasn’t. Ah, wait, there was some anger. But each wave of it was interrupted by an even stronger swell of something else that had nothing to do with Pete. She wanted to fling off her shirt, whirl through her garden, arms outstretched.

The next morning she cancelled her pupils’ piano lessons and spent the time uprooting the remaining marigolds. At noon she called Viv.

“Hi,” she said. “Want to go to Home Depot for some plants? Then I’m getting my hair cut. Short, I think. Then I thought we could go to the travel agency and plan a trip to Greece. Let’s go sit in the sun and eat wonderful olives. What do you think?”

“Sophia, what happened?”

“Quick, yes or no, Viv. No planning, no thinking. Do you want to go?”

“I’ll go,” Viv said.

On the way to her car Sophia caught sight of a smudge of yellow in the side yard. She walked across the lawn and nudged the dandelion with her foot. How odd that it was almost pretty, she thought. How had she never noticed before? She took another look at the dandelion, sidestepped it, and continued down the driveway.

BARDENBROOK

Two weeks before my fifteenth birthday the fishing boat my father named after me capsized in a September squall, and he drowned when the pilothouse buckled and swept him over the side. I could understand how the *Carly* could have gone down in a storm, but the drowning part didn't make sense. My father was a third generation lobsterman, and like all fishermen up and down Maine's coast, he was trained to kick off his hip boots in under five seconds. I'd seen him do it. But this time he didn't, or couldn't, and he sank like the *Carly*'s engine block when they filled with water.

By the time Skeet Cormack found my father's body, the entire fishing community of Bardenbrook was huddled around the pier at the fisherman's co-op, waiting. The morning fog, rich with creosote and diesel fumes, was starting to burn off, and the pieces of the *Carly* that rescue workers had piled on the gray rocks beside the town dock were transforming, little by little, from shrouded, land-bound whales to large shredded sections of fiberglass hull. The only sound was the slap of waves against pilings, the soft sputter of Zippo lighters, and the hum of panic in my head.

Skeet had been fishing a half mile from the *Carly* in his trawler, the *Rebecca Ann.* She was a rust-streaked scrap heap which suited him fine, because he was mostly scrap himself. He'd twisted his left leg in his winch way before I was born, and lost an arm to his hydraulic hauler right after my fourteenth birthday. He kept his left sleeve pinned, and walked with a cane he'd carved from ambrosia maple. His limp looked so painful it made me wince to watch him walk.

Even so, the man out-fished everyone else in Bardenbrook. Seine slipped through his fingers like smoke instead of cranky, hard-to-knot polypropylene, and he could spot a wide stretch of ocean better than anyone. “I bet there’s a mess of yellow fin right about there,” he’d say, and an hour later he’d be winching up a two-hundred pounder. No one knew how he did it, and he said he didn’t know, either, but no one believed him.

When my father turned sixteen, Skeet, who was closing in on thirty back then, took him into his fishing business as an apprentice. From then on they were trap-building buddies, football buddies, Nascar buddies, and Texas Hold ‘Em buddies. And drinking buddies, until Skeet quit cold turkey when he lost his arm. They were Mutt and Jeff from the start, and people said after he hoisted my father’s body onto the Rebecca Ann’s deck, Skeet pulled my father onto his lap and rocked back and forth, keening in high, strange wails. They said it was terrible.

The last we’d heard from Skeet was the morning of the accident, but since then, nothing. He always radioed in at least twice a day, and sometimes more, and by the afternoon of the second day I was scared that the *Rebecca Ann* had gone down, too. Why hadn’t he called in? Then I was furious. Who did he think he was, not calling? But then, the morning after he found my father, he came by our inn, The Gull Feather Bed and Breakfast.

I was sitting on the countertop, drumming my heels on the dishwasher and swinging between numb and a crazy hyper-alertness. Something was wrong with my hearing. When Skeet’s truck pulled in the crushed-shell driveway the crunch of his tires sounded like gunfire, but the heave of the engine he and my father had spent three months rebuilding sounded choked and small, like the gag in a throat before puking.

“Ma, Skeet’s here,” I said. I wasn’t sure if I shouted the words or whispered them.

“No,” she said. “No more people. I can’t.”

She was a mess. She had always been thin, but now she looked skinny. Her face was puffed and blotchy, and the dark red hair she always pulled back in a ponytail was loose around her shoulders. She hadn't combed it, and it was matted and tangled in back. She wore my father's blue bathrobe over her clothes.

Any other time she would have said what she always said when I sat on the counter, that she didn't care if I was fifteen, I wasn't too old to have my butt popped, and get off it, right this minute, she made food on it. She also would have said, "Shoot, I can't believe they rebuilt that old engine again. Three times, for God's sake. It's not like Skeet can't afford a new truck." But today she only said, "I can't," and her voice was a million miles away.

"Carly, go out and tell Skeet I'm resting," she said. "Please, honey, go on."

"No way," I said. I was still mad at him for not calling. Besides, this wasn't an ordinary day when she could make me get a newspaper for another pair of tourists, or grab a clean set of towels and run them up to the Pelican bedroom, or quick put on another pot of coffee because another couple called and they'd be here in ten minutes and everything had to be just so. "Go tell him yourself," I said, "and FYI, if I took someone else's pills you'd ground me till New Year's, but you're over there popping Tessie Henlow's Valium like it's going out of style."

It was freeing to squabble with her, normal and sane and predictable, and usually she argued right back, but today she just held up her hand.

"Carly, I can't do this. Not today."

She went to the sink and her hands wandered to a stack of dirty plates. She transferred them, one at a time, from the sink to the drain board, without washing them. She didn't cry, but I could tell she wasn't far from it.

I slid off the counter and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “You can yell at me if you want, or ground me, or something.”

She didn’t turn, or pat my hand, or say, “It’s okay.” She didn’t do anything.

Skeet never knocked on our inn’s front door but today he rapped once with his walking stick before he came in. His thick gray hair usually looked like a kelp bed, but now it was slicked off his forehead in an Elvis hump, and the comb marks gleamed wetly. He looked ridiculous. He limped to the first chair he came to, situated his bad leg and settled back.

“That’s Dad’s chair,” I said, but he was looking at my mother with sadness all over his face, and he didn’t move.

“Ellen, I got something to tell you,” he said.

Skeet had always been a let’s-get-right-down-to-business kind of guy, and I was afraid he was going to talk about finding my father’s body. He always called my mother El or Ellie, too, not Ellen, so I knew whatever he was going to say was going to suck. But I wanted to know about the accident more than I wanted to *not* know, so I stayed.

“Ellen, Mike and I had words before he cast off. I couldn’t take it anymore and I told him to choose. Our fishing business or that other. But not both, he couldn’t have both. And he didn’t like what I had to say.”

His words sounded rehearsed, like he’d practiced the best way to tell us.

“It stopped,” my mother said.

“What did?” I asked, but Skeet kept right on going, and the faster he talked, the faster he started sounding like his normal self.

“Yeah, well it didn’t, neither. Plus he’d had a few. I saw the empties by the cooler. And he was madder’n’hell. Then a couple hours later the storm blew in. So I went out to where I

could see the *Carly*, but the wind was whippin' so bad I couldn't get the *Becky Ann* to come to. Then I saw her tip up, and then the pilothouse went, and then…" And he started to cry.

Hearing Skeet bawl was just as bad as hearing about the *Carly* over the CB radio when I was eating a blueberry bagel and daydreaming about Ron Cook asking me to the Homecoming dance. I jammed my fingers in my ears.

I'd never seen Skeet cry, not even when he lost his arm a year ago. Back then he just lay in the hospital bed all shriveled up and old-looking. But a week later he was the same old Skeet, flirting with the nurses and saying hell, no, he didn't want a fake arm, all he needed was a pea coat and a parrot. It wasn't funny, but at least he wasn't crying.

The fight my parents had in the car on the way back from the hospital back then wasn't funny, either. It started when my mother said she wasn't surprised Skeet lost his arm because he was so careless all the time. "You'd think he would have learned his lesson when he got his leg all banged up, but no. All you fishermen get careless sooner or later. It drives me crazy."

She was walking a dangerous path, and I knew it. She hated the fishing, had always hated it, and my father hated it when she brought it up. I hated when she got on him, too, because they said such mean things to each other. Nobody ever won those fights, and nothing ever changed.

I knew she was scared, because I was scared when he went out, too. A lot could go wrong, and plenty of times it did. Most of the calls that came over the CB were chatty, the want-me-to-pick-up-something-at-the-co-op-on-the-way-home kind of calls, but then there were the other ones. The ones that made my stomach twist. They were about blown engine valves or electrical meltdowns and they came every few weeks. The bad ones about storms that turned out to be worse than The Weather Channel predicted came every couple years. The terrible ones

about squalls that blew in from nowhere and swallowed boats whole were few and far between, but they always came.

"Every time you go out, I wonder if it's going to be your turn," she said. "I wonder if you're going to get cocky, lose an arm or a leg. Or your life."

Her voice was beginning to rise and I made myself small in the back seat and waited for it to be over.

"When do you get to be the one I hear about on the radio?" She began to cry.

"Oh, for shit's sake, Ellen," my father said.

"God, Mike, I hate it so much. Why can't we just run the inn year-round? We could print up some fliers, you know, do the winter wonderland thing: sleigh rides, ice-fishing on Webber's pond, cross country skiing, roaring fires, hot cocoa. People from away love that stuff. Let's try it. Just for one year. If it doesn't work out, I won't say another word. I promise. Please, Mike, let the fishing go. Sell the boat. Please?"

Even though his back was to me, I knew the expression on his face by heart. He was pissed and sorry and sad, all at the same time. But mostly pissed. His hands were clamped on the steering wheel so hard his knuckles looked like rigid little mountains.

"Back the hell off, El," he said.

Nobody talked the rest of the way home. When we got in the driveway he got out of the car and slammed the door so hard the shimmy vibrated right through my sneakers. Then he was in his truck and the rear tires were spitting gravel in their hurry to get gone.

I woke when he pulled in the driveway. It was two in the morning. My mother was stirring, but when I snuck downstairs to see if they would pick up where they left off, he was alone in the kitchen.

He gave me a slow, lazy smile and I knew it was all bad. He hadn't been drunk for over two years, and now he'd gone and blown his best dry spell yet. When she found out, my mother was going to go from mad to furious. She'd be on him every waking minute until he started his AA meetings again, and she'd pester me to go to Alanon with her. No matter how many times I'd tell her I hated it, it was dorky, she'd keep at me until I broke down and went.

He nudged the chair next to him away from the table with his boot. "Come sit," he said.

His plaid flannel shirt smelled like the fisherman's hangout, The Old Stone Jug. It was a luscious confusion of odors: whiskey, wood smoke, his Lucky Strike cigarettes and something else, something musky, almost spicy and not quite sweet, all swirled together into one giddy-making bigger smell. I leaned over and gave his shirt a deep, satisfying sniff.

"She's not mad at you anymore," I said. We both knew I was lying, but I figured by now he'd be too far-gone to notice.

"Bullshit," he said. "But you listen to me, babygirl. One of these days you're gonna get yourself a guy, and when you do, cut him some slack. Don't knock what he does for a living. You'll be getting someone pretty quick now, and when you do, he's gonna want you real, real bad, so bad he can taste it, and that'll be it. You'll be gone. But like I said, cut the guy some slack."

I thought about Ron Cook. He was seventeen and he'd been an apprentice fisherman for over a year. He stayed in school, though, and sat at my lab table in biology, and two seats behind me in English. Every time I looked at him, I wondered what it would be like to kiss him real slow under the glittery, revolving mirror light at the Homecoming Dance. I wondered what his lips tasted like, whether they were sharply sweet, like tangerine Lifesavers, or bitter and stinky like the cigarettes all the fishermen smoked. I wondered what his hands would feel like when

they circled my slim waist and then began a soft, sliding descent to the top of my butt, and maybe even lower, and I knew my father was right about wanting someone so bad you could taste it.

"Daddy?"

"Babygirl?"

"Is it okay for a girl to want a boy real bad, instead of the other way around? I don't know yet if he likes me."

"Am I losing you already, Babygirl?" he asked, and then he got all teary, the way he always did when he drank.

I knew he'd start crying for real in a minute, so I slipped away when he went hunting for the bottle of Jim Beam my mother kept behind the canning jars in the pantry for making fruitcake.

After that my father had a light buzz on every morning by the time I left for school, and he was quietly and totally drunk by dinnertime. He stopped getting teary-eyed at the drop of a hat, too, and somewhere in there he stopped calling me 'Babygirl'. Within days my mother was crying on the phone while she ordered fresh flowers for the entry hall table, and the fancy, French-milled soaps for the upstairs bathrooms.

And now, almost a year to the day later, Skeet was the one crying, and saying, "I shoulda got turned around, I shoulda tried harder."

"Stop it, Skeet," my mother said. "It's not your fault. It's no one's fault. Not mine, not yours, not anyone's."

But she was wrong. It *was* Skeet's fault. My father had always headed for shore when the clouds came up thick and fast, always, always, but he'd had a few beers, and everyone around

here knew he didn't think straight after he'd been drinking. Skeet, of all people, knew it. He should never, ever have let my father cast off.

I couldn't stop myself. "It was too your fault, Skeet. You should have stopped him from going out."

My mother gave me a startled look.

"Carly, no," she said. "No, honey." For Skeet's benefit she added, "She's in shock. We all are, I guess."

"I am not," I said.

I knew I was right. The new truth was as bitter as the glue that seeped from the milkweed pods down by the seawall. My father was dead and Skeet was a sad, stupid, broken old man and I hated him.

A few days later the whole town gathered in the large downstairs rooms after the funeral. By three o'clock The Gull Feather was overflowing with fishermen in dark suits and their wives in frumpy dresses, holding foil-covered casseroles because there was no place left in the kitchen to put them. No one said a word about the accident. By then it was all over town that I blamed the accident on Skeet, and nobody said anything about that, either.

My mother wore my father's favorite dress, a slender, cherry red sheath with shiny black buttons, and she appeared every now and then, a vivid splash in that navy blue sea. Ron Cook stood next to his father. They had helped tow in the shattered sections of the *Carly*. His suit looked brand new, and I wondered if he'd bought it for the funeral or the Homecoming Dance.

Mrs. Bayley, the immense twitter of a woman who taught Sunday school at the Baptist church, burst into tears when she saw me and pressed a small blue handkerchief into my hand. ‘Kind deeds are fruits’ was embroidered around its hem in fancy blue stitching. The man next to her, her fisherman husband by the looks of his dark, deeply etched face, never looked at me.

My friends from school, twitchy in church clothes, huddled in a knot on the bottom three stairs.

One, Allison Reese, whispered, “Jeez, Carly, I know you’re upset and everything, but I don’t get why it’s, like, Skeet Cormack’s fault.”

“Because it just is,” I said.

She shrugged. “Whatever.” She sidled away, and didn’t say goodbye when she left. Ron Cook never said anything at all.

Later that afternoon I sought out Uncle Charley, my mother’s oldest brother. He was a policeman in Manlius, the next town over, and he knew everyone in three counties. Charley was still wearing his uniform, and he looked shaky and sad.

“Just got off work,” he said. He gave me a hug, then backed up a few paces and studied me. “What’s all this crap I keep hearing about Skeet Cormack?”

He hadn’t said ‘all this crap I keep hearing about you,’ and I loved him for it.

“It’s not crap,” I said. “It’s all true.”

“Aw, no,” he said. He put his beer bottle on the fireplace fender and hunkered down next to it.

“Sit,” he ordered, and spent the next twenty minutes telling me how Skeet had searched harder and stayed out on the water longer than anyone else. “So you best not blame him, Carly, he’s a hell of a guy. Hell of a guy.”

"Yeah, right," I said.

Charley raised his eyebrows, but he didn't say anything. He stood, gave a huge yawn and stretched.

"Guess I better go check on Ricki, see what she's up to," he said.

Ricki was Charley's wife, which, technically anyway, made her my aunt. She was really the town slut. Or she had been, till she married Charley. And I wasn't the only person who felt that way.

Ricki was something else. She had long, streaked blonde hair that she fluffed constantly with three-inch, French-tipped nails, and even though I knew for a fact she was forty-six, she said she was only thirty-something, but she wouldn't say thirty-what. She dressed like someone in high school, in skin-tight capris, and tiny, spaghetti-strapped tank tops that stretched across breasts so perfectly round I knew they were implants.

But silicone boobs and fancy nails weren't the things that made her so different than any other woman who paid big money to look hot. What set Ricki apart, and made her so slutty, was the sexual stun gun she aimed at any man within fifty feet of her. When she gave a group of men her challenging, come-hither look, and smiled the wide smile that showed off her blazingly bleached teeth, they got primal. They stood like tripods, arms folded across their chests, and stared openly at her breasts with jackal eyes.

She held court at The Old Stone Jug, and men bought her drinks by the boatload in exchange for a booty dance. I'd been in the Jug once to collect my father, and I'd seen her leaning up against the varnished oak slab bar, laughing and flinging back her waist-length blonde hair, a long line of beers stretched out in front of her.

And Charley loved it. He was proud of those implants and didn't give one red damn that she'd slept with anyone who bought her a drink. He'd tamed her, and she was sleeping with him now. I couldn't believe he'd married her, worse, eloped with her, and I called her Tits Muldoon behind her back. Mostly, though, I just ignored her, and when I couldn't do that, I acted like I was better than she was, just to piss her off. And it always worked. I was careful, though. Word was she was a thousand times smarter than she looked, and I knew for a fact that her mean streak had a long memory.

She didn't like me any more than I liked her, and neither of us gave a damn that we didn't like each other. Until she began to flirt with my father. From that point on, I watched her with narrowed eyes, like a rottweiler sizing up a mailman, and called her The Herpes Hag. And I quit caring if she heard me.

Ricki started making eyes at my father a year ago, right after Skeet lost his arm. All of a sudden she was popping into the Gull Feather every afternoon, asking my mother if she could help change sheets or make the breakfast muffins. When my father got home from the co-op, she was right there waiting. Soon she was teasing him in a silk-slidey voice and calling him 'Michael', not 'Mike' the way everyone else did. When she first started it, I told my father how stupid it sounded. He was drinking for real again, and he smiled into his beer and said, "Aw, it's just silliness, Carly. You're just reading her wrong, is all."

I wasn't so sure, but my mother was.

"I'm not wasting a second thinking about her," she said. "Ricki's nothing but a lame-brain and a flirt, honey, so you keep on ignoring her . She'll get over it eventually."

I believed my mother until she rented a blonde Cher wig and dressed exactly like Ricki , down to the overflowing bra and the spangly, orange and black come-fuck-me-shoes, for The

Gull Feather's annual Halloween party. She wore a Hello-My-Name-Is tag with the words SLUT QUEEN written on it in hot pink magic marker.

Charley thought it was funny, and Skeet told my mother, "You done good, Ellie-girl," but my father was furious.

"Ellen, you look ridiculous," he said.

"That's the whole point," she answered.

Ricki, her boobs cascading out of the Playboy Bunny outfit she'd rented from Portland, gave my father her hot-shot smile and said to my mother, "Love the shoes, El. Aren't they sexy, Michael?"

I wanted to slap her.

Later that funeral afternoon, when the townspeople began to drift home in twos and threes, Ricki came looking for me.

"I want to talk to you," she said.

She wore four-inch strappy sandals the same dark green as her dress, which, like everything else she wore, was too tight in front. Her newly streaked hair hung in a gold shimmer down her back, but her face looked pinched and puffy.

She took my arm and pulled me toward the bathroom off the downstairs hallway.

"Let go," I said. I twitched my arm away.

"The hell I will," she said.

She tugged my elbow and I tugged back. She dug her three-inch nails into my upper arm and hauled me behind her like a shopping cart into the bathroom. She shut the door and turned on me.

"You've got some explaining to do, Missy."

"I don't have to explain anything to you. And besides, I don't even know what you're talking about," I said.

"Don't you lie to me. Or play dumb, either," she said. "Right now you're in some pretty deep shit."

She fished a partially smoked Salem from a pink cigarette case and tapped it, whap, whap, whap, against the heel of her palm.

"How's that addiction of yours coming along?" I asked.

Ricki never took more than three drags from a cigarette. She claimed she only smoked to stay thin and said she couldn't possibly get addicted from three little puffs. The fact that she smoked two packs a day, three puffs at a time, escaped her completely. I'd never heard anything so dumb in my life.

She lit her stubby cigarette and studied me, slit-eyed, through the drifting smoke. She didn't answer.

"I'm leaving," I said.

She shoved her foot against the door.

She took her third drag, held the cigarette tip under a single drip of water from the faucet, and tucked it away in its little pink case.

"Okay," she said. "Now listen good because I'm only going to say this once. If you say one more word about Skeet Cormack, I'm going to slap you from here to Bangor. Got it?"

"Yeah? Hey, I have an idea. Why don't you stick to slutting around, and mind your own fucking business?" I'd never said the f-word to an adult before and it felt powerful and perfect.

Her eyes went flat, and for a minute I thought she might slap me for real.

"That man meant the world to your father, so you show some respect, do you hear me? Who do you think helped pay for your father's boat? Huh? He should have named it after Skeet but no, he went and named it after you instead. And you know what else? Skeet gave him, not loaned him, *gave* him the money when this place needed a new roof. Did you know that? Not to mention that Skeet made him a partner after only ten years. And who else would help your father build those stupid wood pots every year when everyone else uses the metal ones now? No, you better thank God for Skeet, girlie, because that man has been nothing but good to you your whole life."

I wanted to say something huge and biting, something so mean it would stop her in her tracks and wash away the guilt that was overtaking me, but before I could think of anything she burst into tears and sobbed, open-mouthed, like a five-year-old. And she *looked* like a five-year-old, silly and pathetic in her slinky, too-tight dress and teetery shoes.

A small twist of pity took root in the pit of my stomach. Maybe my father had been right, maybe I *was* reading her wrong. Maybe she just didn't know how *not* to look trashy.

"Here." I thrust the kind-deeds-are-fruits handkerchief at her. "It's okay, I haven't used it or anything. You can have it if you want. Go on, take it."

But she reached for some toilet paper instead.

"If you have to blame someone, blame your father, not Skeet," she said. "He should have headed in at the first sign of the storm. God, it was always so dangerous. I worried every time he went out. Whenever it rained I didn't breathe till I knew he was home safe."

She sounded so much like my mother that it infuriated me. My pity vanished.

"Mom hated it too, you know," I said. My voice was trembling and I couldn't stop it. I cleared my throat.

"Yeah, well, a lot of good it did."

She blew her nose and folded the toilet paper into a tiny, careful square. When she leaned across me to toss it into the small wicker wastebasket beside the sink I caught a whiff of something musky, almost spicy and not quite sweet on her slender wrist.

Wait, I thought. I knew that wonderful, giddy-making smell. I searched my memory, and then I knew.

The world slid back and forth the way it had when I heard the *Carly* had gone down. I stifled the crazy desire to laugh. Then I wanted to hurt her. I imagined myself on all fours, snapping like a mad dog at her trim little ankles, so saucy with their chintzy, tinkling ankle bracelets. The thought was so funny my stifled laughter erupted in gales.

"Daddy said you were nothing but a whore. A slut queen. He called you a slut queen. Slut queen! Slut queen! Slut queen!"

I was sobbing with laughter.

Her face was ashen, but as I watched, her expression switched from sad and pinched to meanly triumphant.

"Oh yeah? Then why did he ask me to move to Portland with him? He wanted to start over. We were leaving at the end of the month."

I quit laughing. Somewhere inside I knew it was true.

"Liar!" I screamed.

I shoved her against the towel rack so hard the bar fell out and clattered on the floor between us.

We stared at each other, first defiantly, then steadily and hatefully. All I could smell was that perfume.

She dropped her eyes first.

"I won," I said. I left the bathroom, and shut the door behind me with a gentle click.

A moment later I was standing in the kitchen, watching my mother stack foil-wrapped casseroles in the freezer. I couldn't remember walking down the hall.

"Hi," she said. She was wearing my father's bathrobe again. "Where've you been?"

"Nowhere."

"Well, I'm going up to bed. I put a new message on the phone saying the inn's closed for a while. You don't have to answer it if you don't want. And I'd like you to take care of the tomatoes on the drain board. And put the pies away. I know we have to talk about Skeet, but I can't right now, I'm exhausted."

"Mom? Can I ask you something?"

"Not right now, Carly, I'm too tired."

She shut the freezer lid with a loud thunk.

"Wait, Mom…. Mom! When did you know about Ricki?"

The freezer hummed in the quiet room.

"Mom?"

She sighed. Finally she said, slowly, "I'm not sure anyone really knew, not for sure. Well, Skeet, I guess. I don't think Charley knew. He suspected, but I don't think he knew."

"How can you stand there and lie to me?" I said. "How could Charley not know? You did, I know you did. You told Skeet it had stopped. That meant you knew!"

"All right, yes, I knew. Okay? It wasn't information I wanted to share. Look, Carly, this isn't the time. I'm so tired, honey. We'll talk about all of this, I promise. Just not right now. It's too soon."

But I knew we wouldn't.

I spent the next day on the backyard seawall overlooking the bay. Nothing looked familiar, not even the late-season sailboats tacking across the harbor in huge zigzags. A great V of geese swept high over my head, heading south, and their honks collided with the shrieks of the harbor gulls. The noise sounded like the inside of my head.

The ocean was a harmless, everyday gray with a light, lacy chop. Trawlers cast off and others returned, the older ones like Skeet's coughing diesel behind them like black cigarette smoke. At lunchtime I wandered down to the store on the pier and bought a bag of chips and a grape soda. Someone asked Bert, the store's owner, "What's she doing here?" and I turned in time to see him shrug.

"Who the hell knows?" he said.

My face burned.

I ate on the sun-bleached dock, threw chips to the seagulls, and watched the fishermen pull up in their rust-eaten pickups and slide into the wharf store for six packs and cigarettes. Not one of them spoke to me. Late in the afternoon, the *Melinda*, the boat owned by Ron Cook's father, brought in an enormous yellow fin tuna and everyone gathered around the pier scales,

high-fiving and passing out beers, happy as Christmas. It was like my father's death had never drawn these same men, shaken and sober, to our house only the day before. I saw Ron in the crowd, a beer in his hand, and tried to catch his eye, but he never looked in my direction.

I checked on my mother three or four times, but she always said the same thing, "I'm okay, Carly, just tired, I'll be down in a bit."

At dinnertime I gathered a handful of gold and scarlet maple leaves and put them on a tray with some reheated clam chowder and a bowl of Cheerios, but she was asleep. The house, awash with tourists and fishermen before the accident, was filled with a silence so loud my footsteps echoed. I slept in my clothes on the couch in the den, and had monstrous dreams of my father hanging, bootless and blue, from twisted fishing nets.

I spent the next day on the couch in the den watching Jerry Springer reruns. The women looked like obese versions of Ricki. At night I flipped between The Cartoon Network and The Disney Channel until I slid into another nest of nightmares.

The next day I turned fifteen. I knew my mother would never forget my birthday, and I waited for her to come downstairs with my presents and ask me what kind of cake I wanted and what I wanted for dinner. I'd say fried clam strips with extra tarter sauce, creamed corn, and a double fudge chocolate cake.

When she didn't show by lunchtime, I microwaved a quart jar of for-company-only lobster chunks, dipped them in melted butter and ate standing over the sink. For dinner I smoked three of my father's Lucky Strike cigarettes, and gagged down a full, eight-ounce glass of the Segram's Seven I found in the mudroom behind his extra pair of waders.

Six hours later I started puking, right there on the kitchen floor. I threw up so many times I lost count. By the time I was done, it was three in the morning and I wanted to die.

Late the next afternoon, when I was standing on the seawall, my head pounding and my stomach muscles screaming from dry heaves, a long, shrill whistle sounded behind me. Shit, I thought. Skeet. Why couldn't he leave me alone? I turned toward the sound, and he waved at me like he was flagging down traffic. It was too late to hide.

It took him forever to limp across the backyard.

"Where's your coat?" he asked when he got close. He struggled out of his ratty canvas jacket and draped it over my shoulders. "Could use some coffee," he said. "You comin'?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"Jesus H., it smells like chum in here," he said when he saw the kitchen. He maneuvered around the large puddle of vomit, and walked around poking his nose in the gouged-out pies lining the counter, the opened bags of chips, the gallon jugs of milk sitting out and stinking, and the tomatoes rotting on the drain board.

"Where's Ellie?"

I shrugged.

"Say again?"

His voice had an edge. I shrugged again, but nodded toward the stairs.

"Damn, ya think the smell would wake her," he said. He leaned against the counter, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at me.

A long thread of silence spooled out between us, and I hoped he could feel my hatred stretched along its length. I watched the clock's second hand. I'd be damned if I was going to talk first, but after a three-minute eternity, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"So you and Dad had a fight about Ricki that day, right? He told you he was ditching us, was that it?"

"Pretty much," he said. He pushed back his cap and scratched his kelp-bed hair. "Okay, look, he said he was moving to Portland with her, and I said he was full of shit. I said if he left, I wanted out. He could kiss the business goodbye. So he got pissed and took a few swings at me and I punched him back. So yeah, we had a fight that morning, and we both said hard things, and I'm not real proud of it, but there it is."

"You knew he was drunk. And you didn't try to stop him. You didn't. You didn't do anything!"

He reached over and gripped my wrist, and it hurt.

"You ever try to get your dad to do anything he didn't want to? Huh? Especially when he'd had a few? How'd it work for ya? Didn't work worth a damn for me, not one time. Hell, Carly, you're plenty old enough to know it ain't that easy. And the worst part is, the older ya get, the harder it gets, and that's just a damn fact."

I glared at him. He glared right back, but at least he let go of my wrist. He watched me rub it with my other hand.

"Listen," he said, "I hold me to account for what I do. I don't go around blaming other people when I done something wrong. And right now it wouldn't hurt you to do some thinking about what your dad's done. Wouldn't hurt you to do some thinking about what you've done, either. And that chippie, too. Don't forget her."

"You mean the whorebitch?"

He gave a small smile. "That's the one. But he was more than willing. Hell, he was champin' at the bit. Girl, your dad couldn't wait to get gone."

I knew it was payback, and I knew it was true, but it hurt a lot more than my wrist, and the tears came.

He reached over and took my hand. His was huge, rope-rough, and ice cold, but even though I still hated him, it helped. We stood in silence, side-by-side against the counter, hands loosely linked, for a long time.

"Well, tell your mom to call me when she gets up," he said finally, and I said I would.

After he left, I filled a big plastic bucket with soapy water and scrounged around under the sink for the big yellow floor sponge and some garbage bags. I figured it would take at least two, maybe three hours to clean up my mess. And if I was lucky, my mother wouldn't come down until I was done.

SUNDAY WARS

My grandfather had a large watercolor of Zurich over the roll-top desk in his study. Serene in its heavy gilt frame, the city sparkled at night in a light rain. Street lights reflected streaks of brightness down narrow avenues, and the avenues themselves shone like dark, turbulent rivers, dotted with the glimmering lights of cafes. The painting was dark, deep and peaceful. Unlike my grandfather, his life, or his marriage.

My grandparents bickered constantly. The sniping began on their first date and ripened during their courtship. At first it was sort of sweet, my Aunt Gracie said, how they'd argue about a word in a poem or who beat whom into the water down at Farnsworth's swimming hole. By the time they were married in 1927, the fights were routine and frequent. Now, thirty years later, what had once been careless tit-for-tats were winner-take-all strafings, calculated to inflict heavy damage, and the fights took off faster than my Cousin Jimmy's brand new '56 Chevy Bel Air sport hardtop. They always ended with my grandfather stomping off to his law study at the top of the stairs to brood beneath his painting of Zurich, while my grandmother stabbed at her embroidery and muttered to herself in an angry monotone.

"Why don't they just ignore each other?" I asked.

Aunt Gracie and I were clearing the table after the weekly family dinner at my grandparent's huge brick house on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta, and my heart sank at the number of dishes, their contents gummy, still waiting to be fetched to the kitchen. Nineteen place settings made boat loads of dirty china, and I wished, again, that Leticia's day off started after the dishes were done instead of right after church.

"Why? You want to know why?" Gracie lowered her wire-rimmed glasses and her pale, seventy-year-old eyes peered into mine for so long I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

At least I hadn't asked why they just didn't divorce and get it over with. I knew the answer to that. Only no-count people divorced. Northerners, mostly. Here in the south people had affairs, ran off on rainy nights, or murdered each other as a last resort, but they didn't divorce. No one in the family, except maybe my cousin Jimmy, would dare do such a thing.

"Well, let's see," she said. "For starters, your grandmother's stubborn, but she's not pig-headed the way your grandfather is. Here, Birdie, give me that dish, it's Wedgwood. For heaven's sake, girl."

She snatched the tottering, topmost dish from the stack in my arms.

"For another, your grandfather's memory's as long as a giraffe's legs. He can hold a grudge like no one else on earth. Plus he hates to lose. You know the story."

The story. Everyone in Atlanta knew it, and they still talked about it. It happened five years ago, back in 1951, when I was eleven. My grandfather lost his first case ever, and he lost big. They say he didn't twitch a muscle when the jury foreman read the verdict, or even blink when he polled each jury member, one by one, and found all twelve of them had voted 'not guilty,' 'not guilty,' 'not guilty,' all the way down the line.

He took the perfectly folded white handkerchief he always kept in the breast pocket of his hand tailored, three-piece suit, gave his forehead a quick swipe, thanked the twelve jury members for their service, then turned and tipped an imaginary hat at the opposing counsel.

Later that day he sent everyone on the winning side a case of bonded, twelve-year-old Kentucky bourbon, including the defendant. That night he called the man at home, told him he

was an embezzling bastard son of a whore bitch, and if he ever put his big toe over the Fulton County line again, he'd track him down and set the dogs on him.

"Mastiffs," he said. "I got two of 'em. Mudflap and Fart. Mean bastards, big yellow teeth. Trained 'em up myself. Now get gone. And leave the whiskey on my office steps. I'll send someone to fetch it, directly."

Never mind that the only dog we'd ever had was an ancient, lumpy, and lopsided pug named Mabel who took an age to gum the table scraps Leticia heated on the stove for her every night, and stared out at the world with eyes milky from cataracts, the man was gone by noon the next day.

By dinnertime the next day, Mudflap and Fart were household names, and the owner of Roland's department store, who'd lost thousands to an over-ambitious bookkeeper, promised to name his next-born son after my grandfather. I couldn't imagine such a thing. One Robert Emmett Baxter was enough.

For weeks after that trial my cousin Jimmy went around crooning, "bastard son of a whore bitch" and "Mudflap and Fart, Mudflap and Fart," under his breath, and tittering like someone demented, until I wanted to pop him one. But that was back when he was fourteen.

Now, five years later, Jimmy would eat a can of fishing worms before he'd titter at anything, no matter how funny it was. These days he was all smirking self-confidence, and when he wasn't ramming around in his graduation present Bel Air and blazing up trouble in Buckhead, he was idling in the back yard hammock, waiting for summer to end and the fall semester at Auburn University to start, his eyes shut, whisper-singing Elvis songs off-key in a low, throaty voice. I watched him by the hour from my bedroom window, and when I said my bedtime prayers I had to keep my mind on my business. I had a suspicion God would be better

off not knowing all the places I wanted Jimmy to touch me. And how much I wanted to touch that boy right back.

"Birdie, whatever are you doing?" Aunt Gracie asked. "Why are you looking at the grits like they hold the key to some fortune?"

I blushed. "I'm not."

"Thinking about anyone I know?" she asked. "And speak of the devil. Hey there, Jimmy-boy. Where'd you come from?"

"Hey, yourself," he said. "You still clearing, Birdie?" His eyes were sexy-lazy, and he was blasting his high-voltage smile right at me. "Come on, move it, girl. We got business."

"Wanna help? It'd go a lot faster," I said.

"I'm not doin' dishes. Hell, no."

"Watch that mouth," Aunt Gracie said.

"Yeah, yeah." He took our great aunt's small, lined face in his hands, and kissed her cheek. "I'll start watchin' my mouth when you take up with one of the men who follow you home from church like homeless dogs. They look sorrier than Mabel there."

Mabel heard her name, looked up from her dog bed in front of the hutch, and murmured something in the back of her throat.

"Troublemaker," Gracie said, but she popped a pink after-dinner mint in his mouth.

Gracie had lived with my grandparents from the time they came back from their honeymoon in Paris, and had never been out on a date in her life. And no man had ever followed her home from church.

"Hurry up, Birdie," Jimmy said.

He gave me a wolf grin, and the hair got warm on the back of my neck.

"You owe me seventy-five cents, a quarter from last week and fifty cents today. I got it all right here." He pulled out a small, black leather notebook from his back pocket and flapped it at me. "Ain't no hiding from me, little girl."

Jimmy was a gambler. Six days a week he bet on anything that flew into his head: a buck if it rained next Thursday, a quarter if the tenth car to round Peachtree Street was blue, and until he'd graduated from high school, fifty cents that the principal didn't have the guts to call Uncle Hoyt about Jimmy smoking in the boy's bathroom again.

But Sundays were different, sacred in their own wager-filled way. My grandparent's saved up their worst fights for the big family dinner, and the Sunday Wars, as we called them, were as inevitable as the country ham my grandfather sliced with his antler-handled carving set. Accordingly, all Sunday bets had to involve our grandparents, they had to be about the fights, and the only people allowed to bet were family members. But not, of course, our grandparents themselves. On Sundays they dined in ignorance, unaware that the rest of us were quivering on the edges of our seats, tuned like wartime antennae for the first drop of sarcasm or the first whiff of annoyance that might signal the upcoming skirmish.

Jimmy alone set the terms for the bets. They could involve something minor, such as which course was being served when the fight started, or something major, which in Atlanta meant God or politics.

In the event that there wasn't a fight, all bets were off, and we started over the next Sunday. But that had never happened. None of us could even imagine eating a Sunday dinner in peace.

My daddy, Robert Emmett Baxter, Jr., granddaddy's eldest son, said the Sunday Wars were making Jimmy the richest man in the family, and that was saying something. Like his two brothers, Uncle Forrest and Uncle Hoyt, my daddy worked in my grandfather's law firm and like them, he placed his Sunday bet with Jimmy quickly and quietly on the gray granite steps of the First Baptist Church before the family collected itself for the short, half-mile walk back home. Mama and the aunts and cousins were more discreet. They placed their bets closer to home, but on the sly. One by one they'd find a way to slip Jimmy a dime or two and whisper their hoped-for winner in his ear.

After dinner, when the bet had been decided, the women headed for the kitchen to spare Leticia a bad mess on Monday, while my grandfather went upstairs to nap. Only then did the uncles and cousins troop down the crushed stone walkway between my grandmother's flower beds, and into the clearing unseen from the upstairs windows, and settle up. The women joined the men after the dishes were done, their coins knotted into tight little wads in the corners of their handkerchiefs.

Everyone appreciated Jimmy's bets for the creative things they were and for giving the family something to focus on as the verbal grenades sailed over our heads, and no one begrudged him a hefty percentage of the take.

Gracie was the lone dissenter. She said she'd catch fleas and scratch to death before she'd bet against her own sister, and she would have, too. The two were thicker than tar on a January road. I thought it was curious that Gracie never once mentioned the bets to my grandmother, but Jimmy had been Gracie's favorite from the time he drew breath, so I guess loyalties undisturbed were loyalties unquestioned, and she was willing to be temporarily blinded on Sundays.

Today's dinner bet had been of the God or politics variety, and Aunt Doreen, Jimmy's mama, won the pot hands down when my grandmother said, for the hundredth time, "Lord, it's just a disgrace, havin' a Republican in the White House."

My grandfather, who had never voted for a Republican in his life, and said he'd rather roast in hell on a handmade spit, said, "Your problem is you don't know what you're talking about." Ike was a military man, no, a military genius, my grandfather said, and if anyone deserved to be president, he did.

"Now Robert," my grandmother replied, "You know good and well Mr. Eisenhower doesn't have the sense God gave a yellow-bellied sap sucker. That new-fangled Federal-Aid Highway Act of his is going to be the ruination of Atlanta, just you wait and see. It's going to turn this city into another big Yankee mess, noisy and dirty and just plain no-count. And that would please you just fine, wouldn't it?"

And with that, they were off and running. All the bettors nodded almost imperceptivity to Aunt Doreen and I was out a quarter. And now I owed Jimmy money I didn't have.

The next Sunday was my sixteenth birthday. Five minutes into the walk home from church I was sweating like a draft horse, and hoping Jimmy hadn't noticed the underarm stains on my pink linen dress. As usual, my grandparents walked in front. My grandfather swung his walking stick with authority and nodded to everyone we met. My grandmother walked beside him, dressed in her customary black. She was thin as a hat rack, and her back was a tall, rigid line. I wondered how she could bear to wear a high-necked dress on such a day. The rest of the family ranged behind them, and Jimmy and I brought up the rear.

"Hey, Birdie," he said, "who's gonna start the fight today? Him or her?"

"I'm not sure I'm betting today," I said. "I'm getting mighty sick of losing." I didn't mention the money I owed, and he didn't ask.

"Tell ya what. Seein' as it's your special day, I'll give you a big hint. Grandma's already mad at Leticia for burning the biscuits. Then she snapped at Gracie. I were you I'd put my money on her."

He'd remembered my birthday! He leaned close and I smelled lava soap and astringent aftershave.

"No lie, and then Gracie sassed her back, and now Grandma's madder'n hell. Look at her up there, her back all tight, like she's constipated."

"Can I bet something besides money?"

He looked at me appraisingly, as though he were evaluating a race horse. "Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know." Did I have the courage to offer a kiss? I took a deep breath and heard myself say, "I don't know, you pick."

"Okay, I'll think of something," he said. "So. She starts it, you win and all debts are cancelled. He starts it, I win. You can't beat those odds, Birdie. It's a birthday present. Deal?"

"Deal."

"That's my girl," he said, and gave his hips an Elvis pump and swivel.

"I saw that!" My grandmother had turned and was striding toward us, the two cherries on her black straw hat bobbing indignantly. "Mercy Maud, where are your manners?"

The fury radiated from her like heat waves.

"She looks like a dust devil," Jimmy said, but not quietly, and when she got within range she smacked him with her clutch purse.

"Lord help, I come back here wanting to talk to Birdie for a minute and what do I see the minute I turn around? You looking like nonsense come alive." She fanned herself with her purse. "And right here on Peachtree Street! I hold you just as much to blame, Birdie, I really do, the way you egg him on. It's disgraceful. Mercy, it's hot out here. Now Jimmy, get gone, I want to talk to Birdie alone. And you mind your manners or I'll mind them for you."

She waited till he was out of earshot and said, "Girl, I want to see some space between you two. Jimmy's enough of a handful without you chipping in. Just last night he was three hours late getting that Sawyer girl home, and her daddy called Hoyt and said next time he was calling the Sheriff. That boy can't get to Auburn fast enough to suit me, and your cow eyes aren't helping. I won't have the Baxter name going up in smoke because the boy's got unruly hormones. Roberta, are you listening to me? Roberta!"

"What? Oh, yes, ma'am," I said automatically.

Sunday dinner was strangely quiet. By the time my grandmother cut into my birthday cake, a chocolate mint double-decker spiked with so much Crème de Menthe I could smell it from the kitchen, the aunts and uncles and cousins were sending each other questioning glances.

"Happy Birthday, Birdie," my grandmother said, handing me a small silver plate. She smiled but her eyes were narrowed, and they said, 'Remember our talk.'

Ten minutes later my grandfather put down his coffee cup, took the white damask napkin from his lap, folded it neatly in eights and placed it gently to the right of his water glass. My grandmother followed suit. Dinner was over.

Nobody moved. This was history in the making.

My grandfather smoothed his napkin twice, almost tenderly, and cleared his throat. Everyone sat up a bit straighter and looked at him. Even Mabel raised her head off her paws and gazed at him expectantly.

I knew the family was expecting the fight to start, but I wasn't. I knew a draw when I saw one. When my grandfather was angry, he tossed his napkin in a crumpled heap in the middle of the table; he didn't smooth it lovingly. Something was afoot.

"Well," he said. He smiled at us all, again almost tenderly.

Everyone was silent, tensed.

"I've decided to move to Zurich," he said. "I leave on Wednesday."

My father stopped chewing. Jimmy lowered his fork onto his cake plate without making a sound. Gracie's coffee cup was frozen in midair. Her wrist quivered. My grandmother simply sat, her mouth slightly ajar, as though an unspoken question was propping it open.

"I beg your pardon?" Daddy asked carefully.

"I don't intend to be back," my grandfather continued in his best lawyer voice, "so she," he gave a brief nod in my grandmother's direction, "will have to stay next door with you." He said this last to my mother.

"Well, I guess that would be…fine," Mama said. She looked helplessly at my father. "Robert?"

My father swung his head back and forth furiously, as though he were shaking water from his ear after a swim in Lake Lanier. He knew as well as I did that my grandmother couldn't live with us. Mama was from Baltimore, which practically made her a foreigner, and the two of them were like oil and vinegar – they did well mixed together briefly, but they separated as fast as they could, quickly and politely and for as long as they could, without drawing attention to

themselves or their mutual dislike. Mama had never said so, but I knew she hated living next door to my grandparents. Normally vivacious and talkative, my grandmother's presence drove her to silence.

My grandmother hadn't moved. I waited for her typical angry squawk, but instead she gave one short, sharp cry, and began to tremble. Then she was rocking back and forth and back, open-mouthed, and weeping soundlessly, her face as tight as a clenched fist. As though in sympathy, Mabel raised her small, squashed face to the ceiling and began to howl long and loud, as though giving my grandmother voice, and she would not be shushed.

I had never seen my grandmother cry before, and the sight was even more shocking than my grandfather's announcement. I didn't know what to do any more than the adults did, so I did nothing. Nobody looked at anyone else. The special cake, *my* special cake, turned to sand in my mouth.

She finally stopped crying, Mabel stilled her howling, and still we sat, waiting for something to happen. The only sound in the room was the click of Mabel's nails on the oak floor as she made her way around the table, begging for scraps of reassurance and finding none.

My grandfather looked around the circle of shocked faces. He fished a ten dollar bill from his wallet and tossed it down the table toward Jimmy. Jimmy, his face scarlet, didn't reach for the bill and it fluttered between us and came to rest against my water glass. I didn't reach for it, either.

"Starting now, all bets are off," my grandfather said. He stood up, pushed back his chair, and strode from the room.

Watching that stride, I remembered a time when my parents and I were standing on the corner of Peachtree and Powers, talking to Mr. Loudermilk, owner of the Kirby vacuum store. It

was a warm Atlanta evening in mid-summer and I was six, and bored, barely listening until the man said, “Lookit him go! Don’t he have the gait of a racehorse, though? Nobody else walks like him, like he owns the street, and the air, too.”

I looked at the object of Mr. Loudermilk’s pointing finger and saw my grandfather marching up the other side of the street.

And now, as he walked from the dining room, his face shining red and his hair shining so white, his gait was proud and quick, like the smooth, well-oiled motion of a pacer in mid-stride. He looked happier than he had in years. I took a sip of my water, put the glass down, and began to cry.

My grandmother was related, in a typically southern, convoluted way, to Braxton Bragg, the southern general at the Battle of Chickamauga. Georgia red clay ran in her veins. She was as southern as paper shell pecans, and she had been bred to believe her very soul depended on grace and good manners. My grandfather’s departure wasn’t about to make her any less gracious, and I spent the next three days watching her pain-staking civility with amazed eyes.

She helped Aunt Gracie iron my grandfather’s shirts, she picked out the ties that went with them, and she packed his socks, underwear and shaving kit in the biggest valise, though she did it with her lower lip caught between her teeth. I sat on the big bed and watched her folding the crisp white handkerchiefs he tucked into his breast pocket. She looked like sadness itself. But refined sadness.

Friends who had known her for decades said she had been pretty once, but years of squabbling had given her a pinched, sallow look, and since my grandfather’s announcement, she

seemed a pale imitation of herself. Mabel had taken to following after her, and the two of them seemed more lopsided and lonely than any other two beings on earth.

I had only seen Jimmy once since the dinner, and then only long enough for him to say, "It's not right, Birdie, what he's doing. She's a good woman, he's just…"

He wouldn't say any more, and when I said, "Go on, finish your sentence," he just shrugged and went silent.

"Come on, Jimmy," I said and I pulled his arm. "Let's go on down to the Rexall and forget about this for a while."

"Quit, Birdie," he said. He shook off my arm. "Damn, he's doing her dirt by runnin' off like this." And he walked away.

So Jimmy was as confused and frightened as I was. I was pretty sure he was asking himself the same questions that kept me awake. Who else but my grandfather could run the family? It wasn't that I doubted my father's ability, exactly, but he hadn't had any practice, and he hadn't been able to talk my grandfather out of running away, either. Nobody had.

Well, then maybe I could. My grandfather had stopped going to the courthouse, and spent his days behind the closed door of his study. The day before he was due to leave, I waited until my grandmother was down in the kitchen giving Leticia the daily dinner plans, then took the stairs two at a time, up to the room at the top of the stairs. I tapped gingerly on the thick, oak door and waited for the white china knob to turn.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Roberta," I said. "Can I come in?"

He opened the door. "*May* you come in?" He studied me for a long moment, and conflicting emotions flitted across his face. I had grown up knowing I was his favorite because I

was the first daughter in a generation, and named specifically for him, and it was true that he had always been more considerate of me than most, but until today I had never thought to trade on that good fortune.

"What is it?" he asked. His light blue eyes were as fierce as ever, but his voice was kind, and my stomach stopped quavering.

"May I come in?"

He drew the door open. His study was dimly lit even at two in the afternoon, the heavy maroon curtains drawn tight against the blazing afternoon sun. Behind him was the large painting of Zurich, with its damp streets shining in the light of the street lamps.

He followed my gaze. "It's lovely, isn't it?" he said.

Without warning, a longing to see a part of the world so unlike my own which, just as suddenly, seemed starched and smothering, overtook me. I wanted to go to Zurich with him, wanted to stand on the wet street corner under the awning of one of those cafes, my hand in the crook of his elbow as we stepped off the curb, and began the short walk back to our glittering hotel, where a light supper waited on covered silver platters.

"Oh, Granddaddy, I want to go, too," I said. My words surprised me as much as they did him, but not as much as the tears that followed. I sobbed.

"I do so appreciate the offer, Roberta. But no," he said. He handed me the handkerchief from his breast pocket, put his arm around my shoulders, and together we stood in silence, watching it rain in Zurich.

The next day we dropped my grandfather off at the Atlanta train station. He shook my daddy's hand, thanked him for taking his caseload, and gave him a ring of keys so heavy they put a permanent sag in my father's suit coat pocket. He gave a small smile to me and a curt nod to the rest of the family, and boarded the train. He ignored my grandmother.

Halfway home she dissolved into tears and wailed so loudly, right on Peachtree Street, that I didn't know where to look. She slapped away Aunt Gracie's proffered hankie, and began to pant her grief in short, hard breaths. By the time we got her home, she was screeching.

Oddly, it was my mama who bustled her up the stairs, forced four large spoonfuls of sugared bourbon down her throat, settled her into her long white nightgown, and then into bed. We left my grandmother sobbing under the covers in the darkened room, with Gracie sitting on the bedside chair next to her, wringing her hands.

Three weeks later my grandfather returned as unexpectedly as he'd gone. I was rocking on my grandparent's porch swing when the front gate opened and he appeared, the large valise stuffed to the gills.

His clothing was rumpled and he was unshaven. He looked battered by exhaustion, and at least ten years older than his seventy-two years. How was it possible to age ten years in just three weeks?

"Holding down the fort?" he asked. His voice was rusty, as though from disuse, and he cleared his throat.

I gave him a quick hug. He smelled old, like dirty socks and unwashed scalp, and I pulled away.

"Did it look like the picture?"

"Did what look like the picture?"

"Zurich," I said.

"Zurich? Oh, I didn't get that far," he said vaguely.

"Where were you?"

"Philadelphia, mostly," he said, and he walked past me and into the house.

This wasn't the grandfather I knew. There was something desperate in the way he walked, leaning on his walking stick instead of swinging it wide as he did on the way home from church. It had become a cane.

I thought about it for a long time, there on the porch swing. Maybe he had grown old when he opened the curtains and stood in his hotel room, alone, staring out at the soot grays of the city chimneys. Or maybe it had been raining, and he had gone out into the late night streets and heard nothing but his own, echoing footsteps. And maybe that was when, after all the years of watching my grandmother grow rigid, and thin-lipped from arguing, he realized that he, too, had grown old, and the days of galloping hard to the top of the legal profession were over. It hadn't been about Zurich at all.

I walked across the street and knocked on Uncle Hoyt's door. Aunt Doreen answered. "Hey, Birdie, Jimmy's not home," she said. She was making biscuits and her hands were dusty with flour.

"Granddaddy's home," I said.

"I told Hoyt he would be," she said. "I knew he wouldn't be able to stand not having your grandmother to fight with. But wasn't the quiet nice while it lasted?"

Jimmy had a different take.

"I've been thinking," he said later that evening. We were sitting on my grandparent's front steps, waiting for the family to gather to welcome my grandfather home. Leticia had roasted an entire suckling pig in his honor, and the smell of pork cooked with yams and brown sugar made me want to yowl with hunger.

"Granddaddy just needed a rest from grandma. Shoot, it's a man's right to take some time off from a woman when he wants to. I know you don't have the first clue what I'm sayin', but us men, we know all about it because we're the ones who have to put up with y'all. What'd ya bet they're fighting before Leticia gets the buttered biscuits on the table? I say a quarter. How about it?"

"Says who?" My anger was instant and clean and strong. I wasn't my grandparents' grandchild for nothing.

"Okay, make it a dime Deal?" he said.

"Jimmy, grow up." I stood up and walked into the house.

After supper my grandfather handed out the gifts he'd brought home with him. He gave Mama and the two aunts tall crystal vases etched with hummingbirds that hovered near the thin rims. Daddy and the uncles got striped silk ties, and he brought Jimmy a brown woolen sweater with the words Philadelphia, City of Brotherly Love stitched across the back in white wool. It was hideous. The smallest girl cousins got toilet water in small gilt bottles, the babies got blankets, and he handed me an ivory-backed mirror and hairbrush set. He doled out the gifts from a big, Christmas-sized pile, one by one, until there were none left. There was a sudden stillness when we realized he had brought nothing for my grandmother.

"And for my wife," he said, when the silence had reached the breaking point, "I have something special." He left the room for a moment and returned with a long black garment bag. Fineman's Finest Clothing was stenciled across it in large gold letters.

"Go ahead, open it," he said.

She unzipped the bag slowly, drew out a shimmering, ice-blue, watered-silk gown, and gasped. It rippled across her lap in silvery waves. Stitched to the low V-neck was an enormous, deep feather boa, dyed to match. It whispered between her fingers. She smoothed the boa with her hand and held the dress up over the black one she was wearing. It fell in loose, perfect puddles around her feet.

"Goodness!" she said. "It's a wonder you even remembered my size, Robert." But there was an obvious ring of pride and affection beneath the scolding.

My grandfather reacted as though he's been jabbed with a stick. I took a breath and waited, but he only opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. There was a dead silence until he said, "Of course I remember. My bride wears a tiny size 8."

And to our shock, he walked over and put his arms around her. She wound her wiry arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. Mabel sighed heavily and readjusted herself in sleep.

"Well, I think we need some flowers for these vases," Gracie said. "Go on, y'all, there are some fresh red roses down in the garden."

Jimmy caught up with me by the badminton court and tugged my elbow. "Hey, Birdie, what do you bet he's kissing her right now? Got a quarter that says he is. I can sneak in there right now and find out. Okay, a nickel. Deal?"

“You know what Jimmy?’ I said, “Until now I never knew he needed her as much as she needed him.”

“What are you talking about? You’re crazy, that’s what,” he said. “So what’s your bet?”

“Go away, Jimmy,” I said.

The roses were still bright, even in the near dusk. I broke off a blossom, tucked it behind my ear, and went to join the rest of the family.

THE SUMMONING

For Charlene Shepherd, 1944 - 1995

From the moment she learned her cancer had spread, Stella's dreams grew increasingly muted. As the pain ripened, the edges of her dreams softened and diffused and often, when she awoke, she could only remember the pale, watercolor taste they left in her mouth. She imagined the colors draining from them as they fluttered against the morphine membrane that cradled her. Finally, one blue August morning, her dreams stopped altogether. She grieved their loss more keenly than her missing right breast.

Three months later, on the night of her fifty-first birthday, she was summoned from sleep by a small, momentary sound. It was almost, but not quite, familiar. She lay perfectly still, the shadowy half-light filtering through the rice paper blinds, and wondered at it.

Of course. It was the same minute noise that had interrupted her empty sleep for weeks. Tonight, however, was the first time the noise had roused her completely. What was it? She struggled to bring the rest of her thoughts into focus. A light rain was falling; could that have been the sound? No, it was more of a rustling than the gentle pattering of drops on leaves.

She wondered if Beth could hear the sound, too. She shifted her head until Beth was in her line of vision. As if in answer, Beth turned, her hair a tumble of dark on the pale orange pillowcase. A sadness had overtaken Beth's face, even in sleep. Stella reached to smooth Beth's forehead, weighed the possibility of waking her, and wound a strand of the deep auburn hair around her finger, instead. She took such comforts whenever she could now.

Beth frowned. He eyebrows bunched with worry, and she murmured from somewhere within her sleep, “Okay, Stell?”

“I’m okay,” Stella whispered.

Beth drew a loud breath, exhaled, and rolled onto her side. Her breathing grew deep and even again.

In their twelve years together Beth had given as she had taken, with loving, uncomplicated depth and in equal measure. All that was changed now. For the past six months she had given all and received nothing. Even tonight she was willing to be robbed of the freedom sleep brought her. Stella gathered the top of the sheet into a nest and placed one hand on, the other under, the soft sphere of her remaining breast. She swayed as a breaker of fresh grief bore down on her. “Beth,” she whispered soundlessly. “Oh, Beth.”

There was the sound again. Right there. But where was it coming from? No matter how hard she concentrated, she was unable to locate its source. The silken, almost secret susurration continued.

She stirred and, as suddenly as it began, the sound was gone. She relaxed her muscles and breathed deeply. It hadn’t been a mechanical sound, nor was it animal. It was probably just the sound her undreamed dreams coalescing into what? A poem, maybe. Or a song.

She liked the idea of her unknown dreams transforming into musical notes, floating on an imaginary staff and beckoning to each other. She could picture them arcing, dolphin-like, in playful sound waves. Like the dancing tendrils of whale song captured on a shipboard monitor, she thought. Not whale song; dream song. She smiled to herself and closed her eyes. She knew it was best to enjoy such small indulgences while she still could; her pain would be back soon.

The pain roared in with the thought, and began to stalk her. Steady, then stronger, it ground into her bones and began to bludgeon her. Her clarity wavered, and she knew she would be unable to think within moments.

She needed more morphine. She had to hurry, quickly now, before she was so far inside the pain that she was nowhere at all. With all her effort, she raised her index finger and fumbled for the red button on the pain control pump. She found it, pressed it once, gasped, pressed it again, and smoothed it with her thumb, in thanks, when the lovely drug surged through her.

She was skimming the edges of sleep when the sound came again. This time it was an almost imperceptible fluttering, like the tiny, dry swishing of a bird's wings. She wondered if she was frightened; she wasn't sure. Instinctively her fingers sought out the dent that had been her right breast, where the malignancy had taken root before spreading to distant and equally promising outposts. The sound stopped.

There was the silken shuffling, back again, and this time louder. It was nearer, as well, and was almost recognizable. It seemed to be coming from the balcony off their bedroom. Stella leaned in its direction, and the sound disappeared when she moved.

She lay motionless and waited. Yes, there. It was a definite rustling, like the small, dry stirrings of tattered corn in a late autumn field.

The soft blue numbers on the bedside clock were flashing. It must have stormed. She tried to gauge the time. It was still night. She sniffed. The air had an early, leaden quality to it. It was maybe a little after midnight. One o'clock, maybe even as late as two, but probably no later.

She was thirsty, then suddenly unbearably thirsty. The radiation had left her scorched and hungry for moisture. She knew without having to check that the last inch of water in her bedside

glass was stale. Sweat rings from previous glasses, dried to white on the dark wood, were magnified in the blue clock light. The inside of her mouth was chalk.

She reached her hand for the glass, and as her fingers touched its rim, the sound began again. This time it was much louder. With it came a new persistence. The sense of urgency grew as she listened. Slowly, painstakingly, it began to shape itself into one voice, once cry, until she could no longer hear anything else. There was no mistaking its message: Come. Come to the balcony.

She turned her head to Beth again. Beth's eyes were dream-flickering beneath the smooth lids. She was deeply gone, oblivious to any sound. Maybe Beth was having her dreams, Stella thought ruefully.

She wasn't sure she could get to her feet without Beth's help, and even less sure she could walk by herself. And how could she make it to the bathroom for water, and then to the balcony, before the pain came howling back? She reached over to awaken Beth as gently as she could, and was about to stroke her forehead, when the voice said clearly, Alone. Come alone.

"Yes, I will," she said aloud.

Such simple words, each only one syllable, but they emerged from her mouth in a garble, and she wondered why she could hear them so clearly in her head. But she was wasting time. She must obey, and quickly. The pain was crouching close, waiting. Soon it would pounce.

She willed one leg over the side of the bed. Then the other. She stopped to catch her breath. She gave a lurch and she was almost sitting. Could she stand? As if to spur her on, the sound began again. She grabbed the IV rack, heard the bag slide, and steadied it. Then she was up, doubled over and limping. She inched her way, the IV stand dragging behind her, to the bathroom door.

The sink was smooth and cool as stone. She waited until the tap water grew cold, then colder, and drank greedily through cupped palms, one, two, three handfuls. She paused, fingers cupped in midair, when the sound came again. This time it was much louder, and it did not stop when she moved. And she knew, as clearly as she knew the pain was only a whisper away, that although the sound was summoning her to the balcony, it was coming from deep within her. It was her death, approaching fast, coming to claim her.

Stella stared at the water dribbling between her fingers, stupid with shock. Her death? Now? That couldn't be right. Where were the angels she had been taught to expect? Was there no harp, no golden glow to light her way, no shining tunnel stretching from this world to the next? No. There was only the rustling, like papery wings, and the unquestionable certainty.

Stella looked over her shoulder into the bedroom. Beth had rolled onto her back. Stella watcher her breathe. Calm air in, healthy air out. Beth was a steady woman, and a steadying one. From their first meeting and through it all, even the most frightening times, Beth had been her ballast. She was true, and constant as an ocean's tide.

Two years ago, when the first biopsy results had come in, they called it her illness, never her cancer, and measured its course by handfuls of hair instead of pain. They had hoped. There were the early, easy assurances: don't worry, the statistics are on your side, no other woman in your family has had it, you eat right, you exercise, you'll beat it. There were Beth's steadfast guarantees that Stella's suddenly single breast held just as much allure as the pair once had. "Are you serious? Of course I'm sure! I'm positive! Come on, Stell, it's just a breast. You're as beautiful as ever."

Stella knew she wasn't. Her scar was ragged and her eyes burned, feverish with fear and radiation. Her sallow skin clung precariously to her bones. Unlike Beth, she was sure of nothing but the progressively grim lab reports and Beth's obstinate determination to remain optimistic.

When the cancer wormed its way into her lymph nodes, however, Beth's forced enthusiasm turned to desolation, and Stella settled into a depression made grayer with an unaccustomed loneliness. She was unable to understand Beth's sudden retreat to a remote, inaccessible place.

"Why won't you help me?" she asked Beth.

"I can't," said Beth. "I can't even help myself anymore."

The dark circles under Beth's eyes had become a permanent part of her face. The pupils above them glittered like hard, blue jewels.

Stella watched Beth's frustration feed daily. It thickened into anger and then rose like malevolent yeast into a full, roiling rage. Her resentment singed Stella's already parched skin. She could feel its heat as they lay, far apart, on the sweat-soaked sheets. Stella wondered why Beth stayed, dreaded that she'd leave.

Fattened by fear, Beth's fury turned bitter. Her gestures, once tender and fluent, became jabs. She stabbed at the clutter of bedside medicine bottles, the ice bags, and the damp towels in a strangled heap on the bedroom carpet.

"No wonder you're dying! Look at the crap all over the place!" Beth grabbed a vase of listless flowers from the clutter of plants well-meaning friends had sent. "Look, Stell, these are dying, too. Just like you. And us."

She heaved the vase against the bedroom wall. It splintered and water rained on the carpet. "This one, too!"

Stella held her breath as a pot of calla lilies smeared, their open throats pale on the paisley silk curtains.

Beth's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "And you want me to help you? Who am I, God? You just lie there, stoned on painkillers, waiting to die. You're not even fighting it anymore." She sank onto the bed next to Stella. "I have to get out of here," she said, "before I start wanting to die, too."

"What do you want from me?" Stella's tongue was thick and the words were heavy and hard to say. She fought to form vowels.

"I want you whole again!"

They stared at each other.

"Just go," Stella said.

Later that night Beth pressed her face to Stella's so that their eyelashes touched, and began to weep for the first time. "Please fight it," she said. "I need to see you try. Please."

That had been the hardest pain of all, and the most costly. The anger, however, was as cleansing as the explosion, and slowly, inch by inch, they found their way back. It took two months, with Hospice's help, to learn to rage at the cancer's inexorable march instead of each other, and it took even longer to learn that hating was a part of loving. It took longer still to learn how to say goodbye.

Beth read her way out loud through the living room and bedroom bookshelves, Jane Eyre, Charlotte's Web, the poetry of Mary Oliver, all Stella's favorites, stopping only when her voice was dust, or when Stella fell into a restive sleep. She shopped at ramshackle groceries that stocked rennet tablets when, finally, watery custard was the only food Stella could manage. Best of all, she planted giant sunflowers in huge blue pots on the bedroom balcony so that Stella could

bathe in the light from their faces. They towered, tall sentinels, their raspy, overlapping leaves creating a rampart against the encroaching cancer.

"They keep moving," Stella said one day, in wonder. "See how they bend to the light."

Each night before she slept she whispered her favorite quote, the one she had chosen for the plaque on her memorial bench that would sit in Fernbank Park: 'Life: it begins in mystery and ends in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between!'

For the past six weeks she had credited the quote for finally nudging the two of them out of anger and into a sweet, bitter grief. Acceptance had come hard, but the leave-taking would be easier because of it. And now, tonight, she was empty of everything except the rustling.

She slid open the balcony door at the far end of the bedroom, stepped over the sill, and stretched her unencumbered arm to the rain. She caught it in her hand and opened her mouth and let it stream into her. She shrugged out of her nightgown, tossed it on top of the IV stand, and raised her single breast so it could drink, too. It softened with the water's weight, became gentle, almost mossy. The nipple was tender, and strong as earth. Her hair swam, and all of her, her distended ankles, even the arches of her unaccustomed feet, became buoyant. She was full and light, and suddenly completely peaceful. There was no pain. She was ready.

She peeled back the adhesive tape that bound her to the IV, and tugged the plastic umbilical cord from the back of her hand. She was free. She floated to Beth's sunflowers and stroked the faces that had brought her such joy. Then she turned back to the bedroom.

Her rustling surrounded her as she sat on the bed. She did not wake Beth. She leaned against the headboard, as still as silence within her bell tower of sound. And there it was, clear and strong. The voice. Quite soon, it said.

She swept her eyes over Beth. The head Beth had shaved so they would be bald together was thick with hair now. Stella studied Beth's face, still vigilant in sleep, and the shadowed hollow of her throat. She placed her hand on Beth's forehead to imprint her love deep in Beth's memory, then withdrew it.

She took in the long, slow slope of Beth's shoulder, the muscular length of arm, the swell of both breasts and the flatness of belly, the nest of pubic hair that held the lovely scent of her, and the strong, sculpted thighs. Her sturdy legs came to rest in long, smooth feet that carried her with such sureness in the world. She would miss every bit of Beth.

It was time. She lowered herself onto the bed and shut her eyes. She waited, and in the stillness came the final voice. It was deep and rich. It was loam, tangled tree roots, clods of soil aching for seed, and the ancient green of leaves. It was her earth.

She watched patiently and with no surprise as her heart opened and a large oval disc emerged. It grew round and then flattened until, so slowly, the head of a sunflower rose from within her. Its seeds rattled quietly, and the thin, familiar whisperings of its leaves, her leaves, unfolded upward and out. One by one her petals unfurled, firm and new and golden.

"Beth! Look!" she whispered, though she knew Beth couldn't hear.

Her legs had become tough, hardy fibers. She pressed them together and saw that her feet had been replaced by tangled roots. Soil clung to them. A long length of green stalk ran between them and her new, wide-open heart.

The first streaks of daylight were inching bright around the windowsill. She turned toward the newborn light, smiled, blew a kiss to Beth, and softly died.