

THE SISTERS AND THE UNDERTAKER'S SON: A
NOVEL MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

James Baldwin, in his Preface to *Notes of a Native Son*, wrote, “We write to give order and structure to a chaotic world” (7). Perhaps the only real way to make meaning out of the chaos of life is to create it, to forge cause-and-effect relationships in an otherwise blind and unstructured universe. As a means for creation, the novel is my craft of choice. Many writers propose that the invention of one’s own world allows for the building of a great expanse, one of both breadth and width, and for the novel’s general ability to provide largesse, I have always been drawn to its form. My history of writing illustrates my proclivity toward fullness and depth of picture. In the past, I have had difficulty writing stories within the span of less than a month, a timeframe some short story writers believe is a general allocation for composing a good draft. In addition, I prefer not to pen tales shorter than thirty pages. When I was twenty, I wrote a ninety-page novella in my time of transition between composing short stories and novels. For the next eight years, I concentrated on writing a series of novels and learned the general process. Then, within the past six years at Oklahoma State University, I wrote “The Sisters and the Undertaker’s Son.” When asked by peers about my reason for its composition, I said I wanted to write this novel before I could “forget” what it was like to be a teenager, even if I had to look back at those ever more distant years from an adult’s perspective. In

writing “The Sisters,” I also aimed to show the isolation many teenagers feel, their contradictory wishes to both die and be immortal, and their need simply to feel important. Difficulties in writing a finished, polished novel for the first time aside, I chose this particular form for my dissertation in order to have the opportunity to show my protagonist, fifteen-year-old Shine, and her existence both more fully and with a more gradual process of unfolding than I could have done in a short story. In fact, Charles May, a theorist in narratology, writes the novel is the place for “the accumulation of metonymic detail and the development of self through time” (65). With the novel form, in contrast to the rule of many short stories, I am not confined to showing an isolated problem in my protagonist’s life or relaying a single day’s happenings. Instead, I can display the minute build-up of events leading Shine to turn stumblingly but finally to an alternate reality and the violence this reality invokes. In the end, Shine moves toward her tragic fate since she cannot locate any *modus operandi* to make others affirm her attributes, place in the family, and dreams.

In writing “The Sisters,” I also wanted to explore possible circumstances that could lead young people to feel as if they were forced to engage in violent, out-of-bounds, and even bizarre behavior, despite the possibly foreseeable and perhaps deadly consequences. Around 1998, a friend gave me a newspaper article concerning three teens, a boy and two girls, in Florida, who called themselves “vampires” and had, in line with this identity, killed an elderly woman and attacked a handful of other unfortunate locals. The reporter who covered the story addressed many of the same questions I myself would ask upon becoming immersed in the account. We both seemed to wonder about the teenagers’ psychological profiles and especially whether they had any so-called genetic predispositions toward violence, the teens’ access to nurturing role models, the juveniles’

socio-economic backgrounds, and the teens' overall mindset and possible intents in committing the murders. My curiosity about the Florida teens' crime eventually led me to imagine vampirism as a possible role for a young individual who felt she had been cast out of the circle by an uncaring society to take on. Previously, I had also been interested in the Columbine shootings and possible causes that could have triggered two Colorado boys to attack their high school peers as an act of revenge for being ignored. With such instances of so-called or so-depicted "deranged" teenagers in the media in mind, I sat down at my desk.

Rather than pen a Romantic novel about "creatures," as did Mary Shelley, a gothic novel about the undead, as did Bram Stoker, or even a fantasy novel about "real" vampires, as had Anne Rice, I decided, with *The Sisters*, to explore the strange but then again perhaps not so surprising behavior, under the circumstances, of someone from a rather ordinary world who lets herself become a victim, if not of her own society, of her own mind's machinations. I set out to explore evil not as a tangible, physically embodied force as in *Dracula* and its character, the count, but as a humanly constructed and perhaps even so indefinable concept. During my composition process, I avoided vampire and gothic literature and films in an attempt to avoid stereotypes and make my character, Shine, as unique as possible. I abstained from reading this literature and viewing these films because I felt as if it was hard enough as it was to avoid the clichés about vampires and to put a new spin on the popular theme of the oppression caused by organized religion, with its otherworldly and polarized factions led by God and Satan. Among those "true" examples of vampires, however, I did choose to include a reference to the Romanian medieval figure of Countess Elizabeth Bathory in my novel. For most readers,

Bathory may represent a lesser known figure in vampire lore. She is also, conversely, the person who most resembles Shine, so I made limited use of Bathory, even as I changed elements of surrounding legends and limited mention of her to one scene. Together then, the Florida vampires, Colorado teens, and European noble acted as instigating agents for my novel's conception.

If I could categorize my writing style according to genre, I would place it in a new genre I call for my purposes "Midwestern gothic." Besides relying on contemporary and historical examples of "vampires" on which I could base my protagonist Shine, I found Edgar Allen Poe to be an inspiration for my novel with regard to its subject and tone. This influence should come as no surprise: When I was in elementary school, he represented my favorite writer. In fact, the physical appearances and personalities of my main characters, Shine and her older sister and the antagonist, Rowena, bear some resemblance to the characters of Ligeia and Rowena in Poe's story, "Ligeia." I even named my antagonist "Rowena" after Poe's character, since in both works these characters figure as "the other woman." In Poe's tale, Ligeia, a beautiful, black-haired, and dark-eyed woman is married to a man, the narrator. He had met her in an "old decaying" town and knows little about her, not even her surname. The man labels Ligeia's personality as "strange" and claims she has shown interest in the "forbidden." In body, Ligeia appears very thin, and her eyes, "divine orbs," stand out. After a time, she falls ill and passes away. Soon, the narrator seemingly forgets her and marries another woman, the blonde and blue-eyed Rowena. She also dies. Overnight, the man, fascinated, watches as the body of Rowena regains life mysteriously. As she does so, Rowena undergoes a metamorphosis and takes on the physical attributes of Ligeia. In *The Sisters*,

as in Poe's tale, Shine and Rowena share the same man, in this case, Rembrandt, the undertaker's son. Similar to Ligeia, who takes the place of her husband's second wife by inhabiting the woman's dead body, Shine competes with her older sister and even thinks about destroying her, perhaps through murder if all other methods fail, in order to regain her former place of power. As to other comparisons with Ligeia, Shine hails from a dying town, gives herself no last name, and even stops eating and grows thin by the novel's end as part of her self-instigated removal from the natural world. Shine, like Ligeia, is enthralled by the possibilities of the occult and the hope it seems to offer of fame and immortality.

In addition to being influenced by the characters caught in Poe's love triangle in "Ligeia," I also utilized his choice of combined first-person narrator and protagonist. I decided to create Shine as both narrator and protagonist, even if I struggled long to form a viable teenage girl's voice and invent a character who had the proper level of intellect and mental capacity the reader could trust. The premise that Shine is attracted to religion and even comes to believe in the existence of supernatural beings, such as vampires, seemed hard for me at first to convey in a manner that was neither farcical nor cartoonish. To show Shine's unusual potential to be drawn to the imaginative, I chose to construct the other characters and settings around her to seem as "normal" as possible in order to contrast her fanciful views of the world with those of characters holding more ordinary and uniform views. As an extra aid to the reader, I pushed the other characters to take pains to point out to Shine, albeit often cruelly, all of her detours from reality.

As far as containing likenesses in narration type and theme, other literary influences on me, as reflected in "The Sisters," include Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram*

Shandy, Patrick McCabe's *Butcher Boy*, and Jane Austen's *Emma*. All these novels have first-person, unreliable narrators comparable in some way to Shine. According to narratologist Wayne Booth in his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, all first-person narrators are suspect; they lack an outside and so-called objective view of themselves and are therefore necessarily unreliable. In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, for instance, Tristram describes the process of his own birth, an act rational readers would deem logically impossible. Echoing Tristram, Shine revisits her passage down the birth canal and even explores the reason behind her father's choice of name for her. McCabe's dark comedy features a mentally unstable boy from a poor family who depicts the ongoing situation of classmates making fun of him. The Butcher Boy eventually reveals his deluded thought processes as he narrates the act of murdering a neighbor whose son is the narrator's mortal enemy in school. Although Shine does not allow herself to commit such extreme actions, in so far as committing homicide and disengaging herself entirely from reality, to the point where she ends up in a mental institution, as does the Butcher Boy, she does explode eventually as a result of suffering taunts from peers and enduring a state of isolation. Like the Butcher Boy, Shine possesses a motive for seeking revenge against those surrounding her, based on their inability to accept her. On a lighter level, Austen's romantic comedy revolves around the self-told tale of a likeable but naïve young woman who loves being a matchmaker, even if she is often wrong in her calculations. Shine is similarly often a believer in false realities, if more dangerous ones, even as she, like Emma, attempts to be the author of her own happiness. "The Sisters," similar to the three novels mentioned here, hinges on the likeableness and uniqueness of its unreliable narrator's personality as opposed to resting on the authority of a central, all-knowing

narrator, an “accuracy” accounting of facts, or a superseding plot structure based on any combination of character types and their coincidental meetings. The theme of “The Sisters” cannot be help but be affected and even stimulated by the conflict stemming from the incongruity between the narrator’s belief system and the world of reality surrounding her.

While Sterne, McCabe, and Austen influenced my writing of *The Sisters*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* has had the biggest effect on my novel’s theme and narrative structure. *The Blind Assassin* is a tale of two sisters, Laura and Iris, and their fixation on the same man, a political dreamer who commits to neither. Atwood’s siblings, like Shine and Rowena, find themselves embroiled in patriarchal, sexually oppressive relationships, including marriage and rape, with men; face poor living conditions as a result of funds misspent or lost by guardians; and are forced to rely on parents absent mentally or physically. The sisters’ parents will later disappear completely, via death, even if the girls continue to feel imprisoned by their commitment to their parents’ legacy. Without suitable and lasting female role models, Atwood’s young women alternately attempt to adhere to old-fashioned forms of action and make their own molds with which to shape their identities. Nonetheless, neither of these choices serves to protect the women. In Atwood’s self-reflexive narrative, she inserts multiple texts, both the “true life” and fairytale, in which the sisters “compose” and thus attempt to affix their own lives’ events through the process of chronicling episodes that might happen or could have happened to them as made-up stories. Similar in narrative technique, “The Sisters” focuses on the act of telling tales as a way of inventing

possibilities for characters when knowing the “truth” about their identities is not possible or even preferable.

I wanted my novel to include a focus on the process of constructing stories to suggest that one can often never know for sure what has happened in the past, even if that past seems so integral to one’s identity. For purposes of knowledge, Rowena has to rely on what her pa, Burle, has told her about Monica, the girls’ mother, since Great Aunt Lucille had effectively separated the family and even “erased” some of its members by writing Monica a fake letter about Burle and Rowena’s deaths in a fire. Likewise, while Rowena shows concern for the events of her early childhood, Shine remains focused on episodes that happened even before her own birth. Atwood’s Iris and Laura decide to look to their dead grandmother’s scrapbook of newspaper clippings for an account of their family’s history and the dictates the girls feel they need to have upper-class social etiquette. In comparison, Shine must rely on stories she overheard Lucille, now a dying and therefore inaccessible woman, tell in order for Shine to create a framework concerning her early relationship with her then rumored to be homicidal and suicidal mother. Like Iris and Laura, Shine has not been able to rely on her mother to teach or enlighten her about anything, much less confirm their relationship as a loving one. Even if Monica is not dead, as represents the case later with the mother in Atwood’s novel, still, Monica refuses to be forthcoming with any information, especially concerning her descent into the well while pregnant with Shine. In fact, when Shine finds the courage to ask about the incident, her mother tells her the episode is none of Shine’s business. As the best example of the phenomenon of the useless pursuit of knowledge, Shine later becomes concerned with explaining her rape in order to place blame and dole out

punishment, yet she cannot find the words with which to form the story, even though it was one in which she “participated” fully. As in Atwood’s novel, the girls in “The Sisters” embellish stories, change them to suit their needs, and create totally alternate versions. Despite both sets of sisters’ diligence, the truth, especially when connected to identity, seems impossible to determine.

The writer’s choice of implementing a first-person narrator often allows the reader to take the position of being more knowledgeable than the narrator himself or herself. Yet the reader must determine whether the narrator, in telling his or her story, has meant to act deceptively or is simply wrong as to certain “facts.” Wayne Booth proposes readers should not necessarily construe the unreliable narrator as a liar but instead as someone who “is mistaken, or . . . believes himself [or herself] to have qualities which the author denies him” or her (159). My intention is to represent Shine as a likeable character for her gullibility and imaginativeness as opposed to creating her to be cunning. Even by the novel’s end, Shine cannot completely relinquish her belief in her family, Remy, and religion. She continues to imagine and uphold each as a possible agent that can save her even when it proves or has proven her wrong, either through its abandonment of her or failure to show itself worthy of being given such power to aid her in the first place. Shine, due to her age, personality, and lack of guidance, should not be blamed for continuing to endorse those bodies that have failed her. Rather I hope readers, as a result of their close proximity and unfettered access to her thoughts and actions, may feel sorry for and even empathize with her.

The reader may locate universal themes, including both the seeming necessity for women to marry and the plight of star-crossed lovers, not only in “The Sisters” but also

in other well known texts, such as D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter." With regard to these themes, both my novel and Lawrence's story contain, more particularly, a pond episode in which a man goes into the water after a woman in order to save her physically and psychologically or spiritually and thus links himself with her forever, or at least in her mind, arguably to the detriment of them both. In each text, the young female protagonist is in need of her parents' but especially her mother's guidance but unable to access or gain it. Shine believes she may have hope of gaining her mother's attention, while Mabel Pervin can only visit her parents' graves. Both women, identifying the presence of a void, seek to replace the attention of their parents with that of a newly arrived man. Mabel and Shine, seeking a new family unit and place to live and having opened themselves emotionally, if unconsciously or unintentionally, wish to engage the men in a commitment. The women even attempt to force the men to promise marriage. Dr. Fergusson and Remy assent out of a mixture of compassion, duty, and sexual desire. In the end, the couples' relationships seem doomed because the women have not learned to rely on themselves, and the men have other priorities than devoting themselves to these romantic unions.

In addition to the themes of marriage and ill-fated love, the other major motif in "The Sisters" on which I am focusing, in comparison with other fictional works, is abortion. Perhaps one of the most graphic abortion scenes, for its description of the use of a home-remedy and the pain involved in its application, appears in Jamaica Kincaid's *An Autobiography of My Mother*. In this first-person account by a fifteen-year-old Caribbean girl, Xuela chooses not to have a child. She feels as if she has not been mothered herself and believes her landlady takes advantage of her by allowing her, the woman's, husband

to approach and even pay Xuela for sex. Then, the landlady plans on keeping the unborn child to raise herself. In comparison to Xuela, Shine doubts, too, whether her mother, who possibly attempted suicide when she, nine months pregnant, fell into a well, loves her. Unlike Xuela, who is approached for sex by an older, experienced man but who engages willingly in the act even if she is not old enough to give an adult's consent, Shine endures an unwanted sexual encounter with her own cousin, someone with whom she has been in close contact her whole life and should have been able to trust. In contrast to Xuela, who decides herself to gain an abortion after a physically pleasurable experience with a man, Shine, who has been raped, desires to have her child after she finds she's pregnant.

As a second example of the abortion motif, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" features a discussion between an unmarried couple considering abortion. The American man suggests to his companion Jig that they take a train to locate a doctor who can, as the man claims, "let the air in." Shine and Remy have a similar conversation in which he shows the "logic" of performing an abortion, and she cannot successfully argue against him. Like Jig, Shine might be willing to go through with the operation if that act would please Remy, but at the same time, the reader becomes aware that if she undergoes an abortion, the operation could alter forever the possibility of their having a future together, based on Shine's resentment of the fact that his wishes overrode hers.

Then, there is T.C. Boyle's short story, "The Love of My Life," based on a true and much publicized account in 2006 in which China, a girl graduating from high school and entering college, postpones the possibility of having an abortion and delivers her

baby with the aid of her boyfriend, Jeremy, in a hotel room. Even though the couple plans to stay together forever, the two do not want children now. Jeremy kills the baby and puts it in a Dumpster, where someone finds the corpse the next morning. In the end, the couple is in jail and awaiting trial. The two face the temptation of turning against each other as a way of bartering with authorities for reduced sentences. China finally places the blame for the baby's subsequent death on Jeremy by claiming she believed the baby had been stillborn. She insists Jeremy is at fault for disposing of their baby even after he was able to discern that it was indeed breathing. Shine, on the other hand, takes full responsibility for her pregnancy, although a result of rape, and acts quickly to deal with it once she realizes her condition. Not only does Shine not blame Remy for his refusal to remain with her during her self-performed operation, but she also even tries to forgive her cousin, Arnold, for his violence against her. In "The Sisters," as in Boyle's story, the couples' members are at first obsessed with each other but eventually break apart after the introduction of an unwanted pregnancy. In both texts, a baby serves as a force not only to divide lovers but perhaps even to ruin their future lives.

In Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the teenage country girl Dewey Dell attempts to obtain an abortion. She is arguably tricked into trading sex for a quack remedy by McGowan, a chemist's assistant who disregards her medical condition. Finally, Dewey fails in her quest to receive treatment. She will be obliged to have the child, probably without her boyfriend's, Lefe's, financial or emotional support. Dewey seems to, at least according to her brother's, the narrator's, description of her plight and attitude of carelessness and sullenness, deserve being faced with this situation. Dewey Dell does engage in sex willingly, even if she naively views her participation to be the result of a

game of chance--whether or not her bushel basket has been filled by the time she reaches a certain row of corn. Dewey cannot understand the possible long-term consequences of having a sexual liaison with Lafe. Similar in circumstance to Shine with regard to her family and significant other, Dewey is unable to gain the sympathy and aid of either the Bundrens or her lover. In fact, her father, Anse, even steals the money she possesses for an abortion, in order that he might buy a set of false teeth to satisfy his own vanity. In addition, Darl, her brother and the book's protagonist, maintains the same attitudes of dismissal and blame toward Dewey Dell as does Rowena toward Shine when Rowena accidentally encounters Shine and Arnold entwined in the basement and refuses to interpret the act as a rape. Even Shine's mother, Monica, seems to suggest, through her words and actions, Shine may be implicated in the rape via her status as a formerly close friend of her cousin.

What I like about Shine, as a character, is her ability to adjust to or endure her circumstances, often without complaint, and her attempt to figure out problems without the proper advice of adult role models. Shine exemplifies a girl faced with forces, namely her family and town, alternately ignoring her and attempting to break her. She finds she has to protect herself, since no one else will, and even try to make her own kind of justice. Despite Shine's violent bent, I was not worried that in the end, readers might not approve overall of Shine as a character. Lawrence, in his treatise concerning the reason for long fiction's existence, "Why the Novel Matters," writes, "In the novel, the characters can do nothing but live. If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, . . . or even volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead. A character in a novel has got to live, or it is nothing. . . . You can develop an instinct for

life, if you will, instead of a theory of right and wrong, good and bad” (5-6). I, taking Lawrence’s advice, have not concerned myself so much with the question of whether Shine is moral but rather am interested in if she has changed, according to the circumstances, in a way that is believable and intriguing to the reader. In the same vein as Lawrence concerning fiction’s tone as set by the main character, Henry James, in the preface to his book, *The Portrait of a Lady*, warns, “Do not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life itself” (413). The more I can show both Shine’s positive and negative traits, the more lifelike she will grow, and the more the reader can identify with and, I hope, like her. Interest for the reader lies in encountering a unique character, James proposes (394), as opposed to a character that always commits the correct deed. I agree with James that rendering a one-of-a-kind character becomes possible because “Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad of forms Experience is never limited; it is never complete” (397).

As this novel concerns Shine’s development, I made her slightly older in this version than in previous drafts for a few reasons. In creating Shine as more mature character, I was able to make the novel’s language more sophisticated, even if Shine, as narrator, is also looking back from an older age at her younger self. In past versions, the diction had been too childish, so this change to a more mature narrator was needed. I chose age fifteen as opposed to thirteen as the best possible age at which Shine might not only believe in the existence of supernatural forces but also be able to become caught up in their seeming presence in her life, while at the same time be able to share her circumstances in an engaging way with the reader. Also, I made Shine, at fifteen, too young to drive, so she doesn’t have the possibility of greater independence and thus the

chance to drive away from Atwater in a car. She is at the age in which she is learning about sex and considering her body's changes. At fifteen, she is concerned as much with the loyalty of a boy as with that of her mother. If one can deem "The Sisters" a coming of age novel or one written in line with the Bildungsroman tradition, I aim for Shine, within this genre, to "find herself," only to be disappointed finally with what her process of self-illumination reveals. This novel thus depicts the theme of a main character's self-exploration in conjunction with her status as an anti-hero. In Shine's case, being in tune with herself can lead only, ironically, to disillusionment. Her awakening leads to self-hatred. Finally, Shine views the freedom of expression she desires, one linked with others' acceptance of her, as probably unattainable.

Rowena, who serves both as Shine's nemesis and idol, is a self-sufficient person who thinks of the world in relation to herself. She reminds me of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* for her seeming lack of complicated, multi-faceted thought as she gets a dancing job and moves from man to man after her journey to the city. Rowena, like Carrie, is single in purpose; she determines not only the best way to survive but also the quickest path on which to rise, even as those around her fall. Both characters are loved by others, even as the girls refuse the comfort of close relationships. With their attribute of beauty and self-involved focus on the body, the girls act as models, mannequins, in fact, as Shine describes Rowena. Still, one cannot arguably hate Rowena or Carrie, as both seem to be products of their environments, girls without families who are seeking not mainly familial bonds and romantic affection but fame in a new, larger world. Novelist Marilyn Robinson, in her article, "Diminished Creatures," writes that "[W]e orient ourselves in relation to cultural monuments we may never in fact visit" (156), and for

Rowena, her proposed future visit to Chicago becomes a final consideration in most of her present daily endeavors. Yet not only does Rowena become immersed in a kind of never-never land fantasy, but Shine also often attempts to borrow her sister's dreams, to the detriment of her own interests and wishes. Robinson sums up for me what I regard as Shine's fixation on Rowena, who represents for her an all-encompassing force, when Robinson writes that most people "inhabit a cultural landscape however passively, and define [them]selves in relation to it however unconsciously or even unwillingly" (156). In past drafts of my novel, Remy, not Rowena, was the antagonist. Yet only when she became the villain did Shine's basic motivation become obvious to me and the plot's events simple to construct, according to episodes based on a clearer structure of cause and effect: Rowena's entrance leads to Shine's figurative exit, with regard to Shine's popularity with family and friends.

Remy acts as Shine's lover, rather unwilling accomplice, and sometimes guide. In previous versions of "The Sisters," he was the original "vampire" who tried to get a partially unwilling Shine to join the dark side. I changed his character to make him more "normal," if still mysterious, in the current text in part because my workshop readers had difficulty determining which characters represented logical and "sane" thinkers as opposed to those, like Shine, who were "imaginative" in their conceptions and followed a rationale of their own making. In allowing only Shine, of all the characters, to believe in the supernatural, I not only set apart her viewpoint as special but also enabled her to pursue her own route to her demise. I did not give Shine or the reader the option of wholly blaming someone else, such as Rowena, Monica, or Remy, for the violence Shine

wishes to cause in the conclusion. In the end, Shine has no right to claim a victim's status.

In "The Sisters," other major players include Shine's and Rowena's parents. The mother is a reserved figure, perhaps harder to figure out than any other character, even for me. The father is easier to understand, and Shine identifies with him, especially as both are concerned with capturing Monica's love. John, Shine's father, attempts to follow town norms and is conventionally religious. Similar to most of the men in town, he does not talk about existing power structures, such as the Church, Family, or Government, even as they consistently fail him. Rowena's pa, Burle, more lightly drawn, is a dark horse. In past drafts, he played a greater role in the novel. In the current version, I make him a shadowy figure who never actually stops at the house but only drops off Rowena and drives on in order to keep the focus on Shine's family unit. The reader may assume that Monica, Rowena, and Laura, because of her underage status and need to submit to her mother's movements, meet up with him at some point after the novel concludes, even if neither of these former two characters ever specifies having this intention. In an earlier draft, John shoots Burle, is apprehended, and goes to jail to await trial during the novel's course. I made changes after discovering specific problems with this scenario, such as the perpetuation of greater violence and resulting blemish on the father's character. In my current draft, I chose to put John on the road much of the time as a way to make him an absent but well-intentioned, as opposed to absent but violent, presence. In the end, Monica, Laura, and even John, Shine's often best ally, rally around Rowena, to Shine's chagrin. Not until I rewrote the novel for the penultimate time did I discover the necessity of having Monica leave Atwater, and in doing so, leaving Shine, too. Monica, through

her exit, must choose, between her eldest two daughters, her “favorite.” As I reworked the novel’s last chapter, I felt surprised by Shine’s mother’s decision to leave, yet at the same time, her abandonment of Shine felt inevitable.

As Shine’s family members, Laura and Lucille also play necessary parts in the novel. The family’s youngest member, Laura, I made self-secure, scientific, and rational although she does follow her own brand of Freudian and flawed psychology. When in the past, workshop participants inevitably asked me which character I most resembled, I said none of them. Still, I align myself as author most with Laura. I admire her wit, intelligence, and ability to remain removed even when she is present for key scenes. In many ways, Laura is Shine’s polar opposite and attempts to act as an objective personality in the text in order to counteract Shine’s whimsicality. Lucille represents the character with whom Shine fears she is in some way linked. Lucille possesses the uncanny ability to make her presence felt, even though she is mortally ill in the book’s beginning and thereafter dead. Lucille resembles my older female relatives in her attempt to save trivial items and be grudgingly self-sustaining and whom I remember partly for their collecting of nick-knacks and hoarding of food. In the novel’s initial phase, Lucille played a larger role. In an early draft, she is alive, and Shine’s family visits her house. In this former scene, Monica plans on poisoning Lucille in order to receive sooner what she hopes will be her inheritance money. In past versions of “The Sisters,” Shine has more contact with Laura and has in-scene contact with Lucille. Although I have had to limit the time on the page these two members of Shine’s family take, their presence, if lessened in the current version, still reverberates in the novel.

Besides being a vehicle for exploring character, the novel as a subgenre of fiction provides the space in which I can show multiple settings within a small Illinois town and surrounding countryside, including a church, cemetery, and farm. Atwater is actually the name of a real town about seven miles outside of Carlinville, Illinois, but while I stole the name, this is not the town on which my novel is based. The village in “The Sisters” represents a smaller version of Carlinville, my hometown, population five thousand, seven hundred, with its town square, courthouse, and stone jail. Returning to a discussion of my influence from Poe, I constructed Shine’s house to facilitate the creepy atmosphere one finds in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” at least in view of unwilling visitors, such as Rowena. I based the actual layout and condition of Shine’s house on my paternal grandparents’ place, however. Both are rundown, surrounded by cornfields, and set apart from everything else. Shine’s pond echoes that of the Ushers’, even if in reality, it falls more along the lines of the one behind my parents’ house where I skated when winters were cold enough for the waters to freeze. In depicting Shine’s rural surroundings, I desired to portray nature neither as a place of lurking evil, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” nor as a barren landscape devoid of any spiritual or magical life, as in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, but to show country people interacting with their land even if their chances for profit seemed bleak. I am familiar with such rural types: My father and grandfathers, great grandfathers, and so forth were farmers. My father can trace the ancestry on his side back to the four Hembrough brothers, who moved from Stratford-on-Avon to Jacksonville, Illinois, in 1840. In “The Sisters,” place is important, as it connects to themes of the need to belong and the paradoxical urge to escape, so I have limited my novel’s setting to Atwater and Springfield as a means of focusing on this

space. Previous drafts, in contrast, contained whole chapters in which Shine was located outside of her hometown. In one, her family attends the circus, and Monica encounters the ringleader, who remembers her from her circus days. In another very early chapter, Remy and Shine take a honeymoon to Memphis, where they attack a woman who looks like Rowena, kill her and drink her blood, and set the motel on fire. I even wrote a chapter in which Arnold and Shine run away to Oklahoma, and the Atwater sheriff brings them back, a trip to which Shine refers only in passing in the current novel version. I deleted such chapters to prevent the novel from being bloated.

William Faulkner, in *Requiem for a Nun*, wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Act 2, sc.1). He is referring specifically to the situation of Tempest, a character who cannot seem to escape her violent past, even though after she has married and given birth. Yet these words, taken as an adage, reflect his theme, repeated in multiple novels, stories, and plays set in the town of Jefferson and Yokapatowapta County, of a personal and, furthered compounded, societal inability to let go. Faulkner’s proposal that people, individually or collectively, cling to the past, even when doing so proves detrimental, can likewise be found in “The Sisters.” I located the novel in 1978-1979 in a farming village as part of my decision to remain mostly disengaged from world events, such as the post-Vietnam War era, and secluded from the overarching influences of television and the mall as a conception of America’s mass consumerism. Atwater remains more in line with the 1940s and 1950s, as opposed to the 1970s. Few new people move into Atwater, and the elderly, keepers of the moral code, seem unwilling to die. Even people’s Depression-era mentality of saving everything and finding joy in the minute, daily actions contributing to their survival remains. In such an environment,

Shine, who is not necessarily materialistic, still yearns for what little others have. She theorizes that in order to acquire the acceptance of others, one must make a display of possessions. If Shine could gain such commodities as horses, dresses, and dinners out, she believes, her contemporaries would stop making fun of her.

In *The Sisters*, I wanted to present a village with a rigid class system and a people with a strong sense of their history and an intricate set of unspoken rules, even as I attempt to dispel the narrow, easy clichés some readers might have concerning those characters in the novel that remain, in the end, provincial. In making comparisons amongst novels to “*The Sisters*,” I want to call attention to Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* for its description of the importance of unspoken social rules. Lily is an orphan with no one to protect her, and Shine, even though she has a family, feels as if she has to make her own way, albeit without Lily’s social circle and looks. However, even if Shine feels removed, hopelessly unsophisticated, and economically desperate, happy moments for her do occur, especially when she looks to the past or dreams of the future. Fellow OSU fiction workshopper Jason Roberts compared my novel to a story by Maxine Swann called “*Flower Children*,” due to a similar portrayal of teenage girls, who are interested in boys, live in the country and ride horses, and attend school, where they take part in adolescent antics. Both sets of girls have a mother and father, who when the latter is present, get along intermittently. Swann’s story takes place in the 1960s in the East, while mine takes place a decade later in the Midwest. As authors, we both have worked to create an expansive and concrete picture of the, in some ways, ideal country life. But under this veneer, we remind the reader, amongst other messages, that conflicts stemming from those who embody small-town narrow-mindedness lurk.

As far as setting, I most admire Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* for its representation of the obsession a character feels for his or her home. Within "The Sisters," Shine is never lucky enough to have the option of leaving her town, but if she did, she would probably experience a situation similar to Wolfe's protagonist. George Webber finally realizes he may search all his life for a place where he may feel acceptance, but he can never overcome a sense of otherness in any given new location. Ironically, he discovers, when one leaves his childhood residence and then later returns to reconnect with relatives, a former best friend, and an old love interest, one may not feel an automatic affinity for place at that point either, even in the location of one's origin. Besides Wolfe's drawing of the character's need to identify with a group, I appreciate his illustration of the city's appeal in contrast to the dreariness of the dying village and his illustrations of how small-town cliques function by means of favoritism and nepotism in business and community affairs.

Similar to Wolfe in portraying the theme of the need for people to belong, Sherwood Anderson shows skill in penning *Winesburg, Ohio*, a short-story cycle allowing for multiple looks at the small-town person's sense of isolation. I identify the protagonist, twenty-seven-year-old Alice Hindmann, of the story, "Adventure," as an example of the kind of woman Shine might become if she remains during the coming years in Atwater, is thrown over by Remy, and never finds any other companion. For a short while, Alice dates a man, Ned Currie, who promises to marry her but who subsequently moves away and forgets her. She has declined the chance to go with him due to her resolve to take care of her father, a man who does not acknowledge her existence and who eventually dies and leaves her without purpose. At the story's climax,

Alice longs for freedom, romance, and stimulation so much that she takes off her clothes and runs outside. The only man she encounters is elderly, not to mention deaf, and cannot respond to her shouts, so Alice's best possible course of action seems to be to return mutely inside and continue suffering quietly. The towns of Winesburg and Atwater both represent narrow and confining places, yet I have tried to render my characters with more roundness than has Anderson. I resent his flat portrayal of small-town citizens as necessarily grotesque, zombie-like examples of every kind of vice and epic failure. Perhaps because Anderson was not an original resident of the Ohio town on which he based his short-story collection, he did not opt to show the same type of compassion for his characters as I think I do for mine.

In writing *The Sisters*, I found the creation of character, theme, and setting to be easy; my difficulty lay in composing a plot. I struggled with the premise of how to be original with my plot, until I realized I didn't necessarily have to come up with (and could not) a storyline of which no one had ever heard. In fiction, novelist and narratologist John Gardner wrote in his *The Art of Fiction*, two basic plots exist, ones from which all other plots branch: A new person arrives on the scene, and members of the opposite sex collide with each other. My novel contains both of these plots. Yet, Shine, as protagonist, is not the instigating figure in the first plot. To wit: Rowena makes the journey to Atwater and remains the star of the novel, at least in Shine's mind. It is Rowena, the antagonist, who with seemingly little effort captures both the town and the boy Shine most wants. Similar to Gardner with his theory of the stranger arriving in a new place, Northrop Frye, in his essay, "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," pinpoints the quest or journey as the primary or mono-myth to be found within the

narrative form, and within the realm of Classical, Renaissance, and Romantic literature, and W. H. Auden, in his book about the origins of mythology, *The Enchafed Flood*, proposes generally that “to leave the land and the city is the desire of every man of sensibility and honor” (13). Many heroes wish to depart from their original domains to explore and conquer the unknown, and I have been interested in stories and novels in which the protagonist leaves a dying homeland, goes abroad, and returns with a solution to his/her original location. But in conjunction with this quest motif, it is Rowena again, not Shine, who takes center stage. A few months after Rowena arrives in Atwater, she abruptly leaves town, perhaps to pursue more important goals, such as attending the dance academy, and takes Monica and Laura with her. Shine cannot seem to depart from Atwater, either in the company of her own family, or on her own. Her story represents not one of the venturing pioneer but of one who stays behind and makes the best of her situation. Shine’s decision, perhaps not necessarily a brave one, to accept this fate still necessitates the possession of a type of stoic courage and bleak determination to try to at least maintain the status quo and not fall lower yet. According to this reasoning, she might therefore be considered heroic in her own right. In addition, Atwater probably cannot and will not be saved, even if Shine does go away on a quest and return with some holy artifact, so perhaps she does best in not attempting a quest.

Because I wrote “The Sisters” over such a long time span, I had to revisit my focus often. At various intervals, I had to turn characters that had become major back into minor ones again, judge which scenes constituted tangents, and cut unnecessary subplots. I remember how during workshop at Texas State University, Tim O’Brien gave us students a few pieces of advice concerning the process of revision. First, he told us we

should summarize our stories or novels in no more than three sentences in order to discover their essence and to be able to stick to it. In writing “The Sisters,” whenever I found myself wondering whether or not a scene were necessary, I repeated that process and then made my decision. Although Graham Greene believes, “The hardest task facing the novelist is how to pass time” (qtd. in Livesey 96), I have seemingly never had problems in coming up with new scenarios in which my characters might engage. In my final draft of “The Sisters,” I cut various tangential but, to me, fun jaunts in order to keep on track and avoid overwhelming the reader with endless excursions and explorations. Second, O’Brien told us to think about what our protagonists wanted, to create obstacles blocking their paths in reaching those goals, and to make the characters act. Debra Monroe, during a workshop at TSU, put this instruction from O’Brien another way when she urged: “Throw trouble at your characters.” Similarly, narratologist Robert Caserio in his book *Plot, Story, and the Novel* argues that “action is the essential necessity of life. ‘The end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our action—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse’” (XIII). In composing “The Sisters,” I had to decide on Shine’s top priority, which was to halt the attention Rowena was receiving and claim it for herself, and focus on this ambition. Although Shine possesses many specific longings and desires, I discovered she most wanted attention, specifically from God, her mother, and Remy. I then had to make Shine take specific actions toward accomplishing her goal of receiving attention, as opposed to just sitting in a room and pontificating or philosophizing about her possibilities in life. In the same vein as Caserio, Lionel Trilling, in his “Critique of *A Passage of India*,” concludes, “The characters . . . are in the events, the events are not in them” (qtd. in

Livesy 93). Third, O'Brien warned students, as did Toni Graham, my advisor at Oklahoma State University, about the ramifications surrounding an author's use of violence. In past drafts, my novel contained more violent acts, but in the current edition, I made a point to limit the amount of violence in order to make those instances of it all the more noteworthy. For instance, in a former scene located in the conclusion, Monica hurts Shine not only emotionally via abandonment but also physically and perhaps even fatally by shooting her after Shine attacks Rowena. My revisions of the novel, which included an effort at generally refocusing it, pinpointing the protagonist's main desire and having her take action toward it, and curtailing unnecessary violence made the process of cutting pages and shaping the novel easier.

I, along with many writers, agree with Hemingway's adage that short-story writers should leave the majority of the iceberg underwater and allow only the tip to show. I made cuts to my novel not only at the universal level, such as in eliminating scenes, but also at the local and sentence level. Dagoberto Gilb, with whom I had a workshop at TSU, talked about what he called the "squish factor": If one reads a paragraph and finds unnecessary details and/or repetition, such as in the use of extra adverbs and adjectives, which make the prose bloated or ungainly, one should remove items those line by line as part of the final editing process. In relation to a discussion of the cutting process, Elizabeth Bowen gives writers an even sterner adage than does Hemingway: "The greatest sin in a novel is irrelevance" (qtd. in Livesy 89).

In revising my novel in conjunction with my goal of achieving a focus, I also learned to stay in the present time, what Gerard Genette calls the "historical time" of the novel, if not necessarily writing in present tense. Many writers are familiar with this maxim: A

writer cannot rely on backstory, or events that take place before the actual story of a novel begins, but he/she must make sure his/her piece of fiction contains forward motion or the creation of suspense in having the reader look toward coming events. Even though I knew I had to focus on the present action in *The Sisters*, I still experienced the urge to unravel each piece of string in Shine's ball-of-yarn past. I wanted to take Shine back to childhood, as does Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* via the Madeleine, even if in end of *The Sisters*, Shine refuses to eat anything at all and wishes to be rid of many of her memories. The fictional Marcel's past--his childhood visits with neighbors, adventures around town to survey the buildings and admire the church's architecture, and afternoons spent with family--seems more interesting than his current adult existence. Similarly, I felt the urge to detail Shine's past since she herself regards her memories of childhood outings with Arnold and Laura as the happiest moments in her life and shows fascination for stories about her family history. Characters as diverse as Shine, Rowena, and Monica use history, both invented and actual, to try to define their identities and construct plans for their futures. Shine, only fifteen, wants to return to a state of innocence and security, when she was friends with Arnold instead of engaged in a relationship full of sexual tension; when she believed Rowena was dead and, for Shine's purposes, might as well have never existed at all; and when Shine's father was present often. Yet for Shine, there is no returning to the past, and as I revised my work to put more of it in scene, limit the exposition, and condense the summary of events, in other words to "show, not tell," I was able to limit the amount of information about and scenarios from the past. In cutting, I not only strengthened the prose but also focused most on Shine's present situation.

Finding a point of introduction for “The Sisters” and mapping Shine’s path did not constitute difficult activities for me in writing the novel. In creating a novel draft, Faulkner was known for constructing a timeline of events on single eight by ten pieces of paper and taping them together on the wall above his desk to keep his plot straight. I followed a similar strategy by composing a five-sentence summary of each chapter’s events, so I could remember what happened as I continued to write and to be able to forge cause-and-effect relationships among my episodes, especially when I attempted to view them in relation to the novel as a whole. It was over the conclusion’s composition that I suffered. Tom Grimes, with whom I had a workshop at TSU, said about the novel writing process, in his article entitled “If I Could Be Like Mike,” that

Pressure builds as you approach the end of a novel. Unlike short stories, the chances are not that you will make a sudden wrong move and wreck everything. With novels, the likelihood is more that you won’t get everything in, you won’t catch every possible echo and reverberation. . . . So as I hurtle toward closure, I need to slow down at the same time. I desperately want the book to end; I never want the book to end. (62)

The earnest novelist plods ahead for months and even years. Then she suddenly sees the end in sight. She types furiously toward it. Changing direction, she slows down, due to her heart-stopping fear that she is missing instrumental details contributing to what James Joyce calls the protagonist’s epiphany. Yet soon, the novelist, excited, cannot help but speed up again. Finally, the novel does finish. The process of creating an initial draft is over, and the writer feels a mixture of exhilaration and loss. Then, the revision process

begins. Luckily for the novelist, there will always be new stories to discover the next time around.

During year two at OSU, I had left “The Sisters” on the backburner to work on a novel about which I had then become mesmerized, *Venus Flytrap*, and to which I plan to return. By the time I revisit my next book, I will have mastered the basic steps of writing a novel. Because I wrote “The Sisters” over an extraordinarily long, for me, time span, I had to rethink that novel too often. When a month passed during which I did not touch the text, such as the period during which I took my comprehensive exams, I had to re-evaluate the novel’s focus and decide specifically which characters and events to include and thus go backward in time instead of forward with the writing process. When I write a complete first draft of *Venus Flytrap*, I will attempt to do so within a six-month time frame in order to identify a specific number of characters, nail down a plotline, and decide on an ending to which all action must point. In following these steps, I will implement lessons I have learned in writing “The Sisters.”

CHAPTER 1

My fifteenth birthday party would begin soon, starting in less than half an hour, on what had turned out to be a rather cold December afternoon. Father had concocted various elaborate plans for the gathering: Buying crystal candlesticks with white tapers to place on the dining room's knife-notched table, paying a photographer to capture what would likely be the guests' well-contained glee, and hiring a string quartet to play the birthday song. My twelve-year-old sister, Laura, had joked I'd need to buy a ballroom dress and glass dancing shoes to round out the coming-of-age affair. In the end, everyone had agreed my party would have to be thrown in a more casual style. The small obstacle to having such a lavish affair was that Father, a man who gave expensive cards without remembering to sign his name, was scheduled to be on the road; the bigger one was that we were bankrupt and waiting for my great aunt to die for us to receive our inheritance and pay the mortgage.

At 1:30, I was standing at the kitchen counter and juggling a stack of chipped dessert plates, mismatched silverware, and wrinkled napkins when the unexpected guest arrived. My mother, a slim woman who held herself erect, worked beside me. She'd nearly finished spreading the icing thinly but evenly over my birthday cake. Father had wanted to buy a bakery-made cake, but Mother insisted she possessed equal skills. She'd arranged triangular, frosted pink arms and legs around a square torso and topped it with a

circular-shaped head to represent me. I had unblinking, green M&Ms eyes and a mass of black, licorice braid hair. The cake had only two flaws, on which my mother chose not to comment: The actual color of my eyes was brown, and I was lucky enough to possess all of my appendages, while the pastry doll's right foot was missing, as Laura, sneaky, had eaten it for breakfast. Still, as I watched Mother lick the knife after dabbing a sugary smile across my cake's face, I made an effort to ignore such small impediments and grin also.

To see this moment of self-satisfaction reflected back at me, I glanced at the windowpane, catching my form. Beyond the pattern of soft gray lines lay the yard. The farmhouse was L-shaped, and the kitchen, located in the front, contained a single window. Outside, the trees were black, and their tops were bare of leaves. Illinois boasted a large, blue sky, but today there was no sun, and the clouds looked heavy with snow. A flock of geese flew by in a "V" pattern and honked crazily. For a second, I wondered where they were going. The year was 1976, but the town of Atwater, with its two thousand residents proud of their long-established names, didn't encourage relocation or larger movement.

In the kitchen, I picked up the tarnished tray on which I'd placed the cutlery and china. Before I could turn away from the window, dull despite waxing, I spotted the speck of bright color. I found my eyeglasses in my reindeer sweater's pocket, slid them on, and squinted to make out the object. Mother said it was better for me to wear the glasses that covered my features than to grow cross-eyed, but I put them on only when necessary. My sight grew keen, and my eyes served as lookouts in a castle under siege. A tall girl with yellow hair tossed over her shoulders was standing at our driveway's far

end. Behind her, a middle-aged man in a ramshackle truck, one I'd never seen before, rolled down his window, drew back his sleeve to get a glimpse at what was probably his watch, and waved goodbye. The girl didn't turn around to acknowledge the exit of this man, who I presumed was her father. With the engine idling, he inched down the icy gravel road as if to give her time to change her mind. When she gave no sign of altering her course, the man must have tapped the gas pedal, for he picked up speed and soon passed beyond my range of sight.

The girl, shielding her eyes with one hand, looked toward our white clapboard, set on three sprawling acres, and reached out a bare hand to brush snow from the mailbox. She must have been looking for a last name, which meant she was from out of town. The girl, who looked a year or two older than I, didn't pause long to ascertain her location's specifics. She shook her head as if she weren't sure into what she'd gotten herself and followed the driveway's sporadic patches of rock, jutting from the snow, toward the porch. I wondered if the girl thought our house were ugly, and I felt the need to defend it, if to no one else but myself: While the attractiveness of the turn-of-the-century Victorian wasn't Father's concern, he had to be given credit for nailing new shingles to the roof last spring.

The girl was mounting the porch's bowed steps. She wore a short, lemon-colored dress, pale hose, and a matted rabbit coat that appeared as if it had been filched from some 1950's movie star's closet. I'd seen Mother wearing a similar fur in a high-school picture she kept tucked away. As the girl approached the door in her outrageously tall boots, I saw she carried a small red suitcase. It couldn't have held much, but she swung it back and forth rather gaily.

There was a knock on the door.

Mother, arranging cucumber sandwiches on a plate, asked me to answer it.

Cucumber sandwiches were the snack Father decided my finicky guests would like.

Mother had argued for hotdogs. I told my parents the Sunday School girls were skinny for a reason and would refuse to eat no matter what she prepared.

I ignored Mother's request to open the door. Instead of letting the visitor inside, I drew back the curtains and put my face as close to the glass as possible, with my nose touching, to get one good look at the girl as a means of recognizing her. My breath produced drops of condensation on the pane, and with pretended interest, I watched them slide down with varying speeds. She shivered, glanced toward the kitchen window, and tried her fist again. The girl must have sensed there were people inside the house and perhaps even that someone was watching her. She seemingly decided to ingratiate herself to an audience by smiling intensely. I refused to be taken in by such acting and continued to study her. The visitor rapped a third and fourth time and then crossed her arms to wait in the cold. All the while, the wind, blowing strands of hair across her face, didn't cease. I realized any attempt on my part to identify the girl was hopeless.

I took off my glasses and said to Mother, "Was someone else invited to my party?"

"No one." Mother washed her hands in the sink and dried them. She adjusted her wedding ring, a thin band that spun around her finger.

The girl knocked again. She was persistent. I wondered under what circumstances she'd found herself at my house. It lay three miles out of town. Atwater itself was located in the middle of nowhere, a fact my high-school history teacher pointed out when none of

us students could find it on the map. “The girl must be lost,” I said to Mother. “Or maybe she’s selling something. She’s holding a suitcase.”

“She might have a present for you,” Mother teased. “Birthdays bring surprises.”

“I hope we can get rid of her before everyone arrives.”

Mother, looking distracted and perhaps deciding to forgo answering me, departed the kitchen. She was undoubtedly agitated I’d failed to receive the visitor but unwilling to raise her voice to me. Her ring fell with a clink to the rug as she left. I was accustomed to her losing it in odd places. I shrugged and placed it in my pocket for safekeeping. Then, to dispel what I felt to be Mother’s mild but far-reaching displeasure, I ran ahead, passed her in the hall, and approached the door. As I strode down the worn carpet runner, I pulled in my abdomen, straightened my back, and smiled brightly, as if I liked playing hostess and were meeting an important guest. Despite my slow, practiced breathing, fully lengthened spine, and what Laura called my birthday glow, I’d never look as beautiful as the girl outside. Although I was wearing “new” clothes in contrast to her castaways, I didn’t even look fashionable. I’d donned my garish, holiday-patterned sweater and a Victorian style, ruffled blouse my dying Great Aunt Lucille bought and no one could have refused “without impunity,” Mother said. After this moment of self-evaluation, I felt in no mood to meet the girl and justified in removing the grin from my face. I pushed out my abdomen, and my pants felt tight across the waistband. When I uncurled my big toes, my Mary Janes pinched my feet’s sides.

The visitor resorted to kicking the door. Evidently, she meant to be rude. Even though the girl looked like the kind who might break a window, I slowed my pace to be perverse. I touched the knob and opened the door one inch at a time. The visitor couldn’t

be anyone noteworthy, I figured. Nevertheless, I hoped within the span of the door's arc, the girl might somehow magically disappear. When the dim light concealed behind the panel hit me with surprising force, she was there. Her fake smile was gone. She seemed mad as hell.

I glanced back at Mother in the foyer and registered her silence. She stepped forward to get a better look at the visitor, made her lips into an O, and cried, "Rowena?" Terror showed in Mother's eyes. Then she grew calm. Lastly, she made an exclamation of joy. Although she displayed a range of emotions, she neglected to provide an explanation. Mother seemed like a mad woman. I'd never seen her so animated. I'd never felt so forsaken.

My underarms were damp. I fingered the three telltale wrinkles etched into my forehead. Although I was confused about the appearance of this girl who possessed the uncanny ability to make my mother forget me, I recalled an offhand remark Mother made only this morning about my older sister, long dead.

From my room, I'd heard Mother making breakfast in the kitchen. I wiggled my toes beneath my thin quilt, swung my feet out of bed, and found my clothes in the darkness. I slid on two mismatched socks and buckled my Mary Janes in pain. I consoled myself only with the thought that the vice-grip shoes would keep my feet from growing larger. Despite any gains, each buckle left a square-shaped, red indentation on my skin, and I hoped this year, I'd receive slip-on shoes. Then I peered outside, beyond the snowdrifts, toward the empty road, wondered if anyone would come to my party, and decided on a different wish: the appearance of a guest. Last week, I couldn't claim to have any friends when Mother asked for names to put on the guest list, so Father selected a group of well-

off girls and boys from church, and I mailed each a discolored envelope sealed with a gold circle to invite them to the “event of the year.”

In the kitchen, Mother was sitting at the table and finishing a cup of coffee. I lifted the pot from the stove and poured the remainder into my chipped cup. The precocious Laura was naming famous people, mostly criminals, who shared my birthday, when Mother interrupted her: “This week marks the anniversary of Rowena’s and her pa, Burle’s, death.”

Laura and I knew Mother had been what Father called “previously involved” but had never considered what this statement meant. We, as most children would, assumed Mother’s life began with marriage and reached its climax with our births.

“The fire happened when I was visiting Lucille.” Mother explained that, after her parents died, she’d lived as a child with her aunt. Lucille forbade Mother, seventeen, to travel with a circus, “live openly with a vagrant,” and ride the show ponies. When threats didn’t work, Lucille attempted to prevent Mother’s departure with a beating.

She remarked she wished she possessed the letter from the ringleader describing her lover’s and infant’s deaths. “I read it once. Lucille threw it away to prevent me from becoming ‘obsessed.’”

I catalogued this newest complaint against my great aunt. Every Sunday afternoon from 4 to 6 p. m. for as long as I could remember, my family had visited her, lately at the hospital. We were not well intentioned; we were waiting for her to die. She was on schedule to go any time and leave a big inheritance. The terrifying Lucille, whose only good deed, according to Laura and me, was bringing Mother and Father together, I knew

well. But I couldn't wait to ask a thousand questions about Rowena. Mother pointed to a pile of dishes. This chore had blocked any probing.

As I remembered Mother's disclosure, I figured she'd somehow conflated our visitor, this girl who shined and sparkled on the step, with her oldest daughter. I put aside questions of the girl's identity, at least in relation to us, and felt a stab of sorrow between my ribs. Obviously, Mother had never gotten over her loss.

Still, what did this visitor want? I looked at the girl and admired what everyone, including Mother, might notice if lucky enough to get this close: Along with height and hair, she possessed a face with high cheekbones and sun-touched skin. My own face was round, and my skin was white and tinted faintly blue by a network of veins. I had a "porcelain complexion" but never believed there was anything pleasing about this trait, one shared with girls who fainted in Aunt Lucille's nineteenth-century romance novels.

I turned away from the visitor and whispered, "Mother, I've never seen this girl before." I was about to dismiss her despite my lingering curiosity and lack of permission. I'd suggest Mother help me to set the dining-room table. Something happened. Mother forsook any warmth the house provided and pushed past me onto the porch. She hopped up and down three or four times and shouted Rowena's name into the wind. The girl gave a cool but positive affirmation of her identity and looked at me as if to ascertain, for her own assurance, whether or not Mother were insane.

"Do you remember me, Rowena?" Mother said.

"I seem to recall the morning you left. I wasn't two years old." Rowena opened up as she talked, as if she enjoyed the fact someone, anyone, was interested in listening.

“I’ve dreamed of your essence—is that the word?—even if I forgot what you looked like.”

“It’s been a long time,” Mother said, “but I sensed you were alive.” She concluded aloud Lucille must have written that letter about the fire, to trick her into staying. Indirectly, Mother was obviously apologizing. Rowena didn’t respond. Mother might have failed to reply or begged on hands and knees in the snow for forgiveness; the result would probably have been the same. Rowena didn’t seem to want to pardon Mother.

“You could have come back to check.” Rowena pulled at a hangnail, winced when she saw her own blood, and sucked her finger. The girl’s teeth were small, even, and white. While waiting for Mother’s response, she seemed to have forgotten about me, if she’d even seen me at all, and I felt the need to get her attention. I wished she’d journeyed here to meet me as much as to know Mother. I yearned to press her injured finger against my own tongue, taste her blood, and bond with her in this way forever, if sisters we were to be, loving and hating, for better or for worse. I thought about reaching out and touching Rowena but restrained myself. She would probably hit me for such an intrusion, and perhaps I’d slap her face or worse yet hug her, and that would be the end.

Mother patted Rowena’s arm and held her injured hand. The girl softened momentarily. My sister was most beautiful when she revealed herself in an off moment. Before Rowena could detach herself and pull away, Mother said, “I wanted to find you.” She, seemingly overcome with emotion, lunged toward Rowena. Rowena didn’t move, not with a cry, a hug, or fists bent on malice. She simply stood and let Mother come. While she held my sister, Rowena kept her arms at her sides, perhaps to contain a sense

of triumph. I looked first at one and then the other family member. I knew Mother loved Rowena best and probably always had. They even complemented each other physically with their slender waists and fair hair. I, with my sure frame and unruly locks, looked like my father. Such was what my science teacher, condemned for being an atheist, called the contradictory and inexplicable ways of the universe.

Mother urged me to come outside and meet Rowena. Unlike Mother, who'd propelled herself forward without pride, I shrank back. My face felt hot, and if I went to the mirror, I might notice my cheeks were flushed, as Father's grew when angered. Although I wanted Rowena to like me, I'd long been the oldest child. I said to her, "I don't understand. So many years have gone by, why come now?"

"I had to wait until Pa brought me. He's slow in acting," Rowena said. "But why do you care?" Her eyes seemed light at first. Upon second look, I saw they'd turned darker, like water at the bottom of a well. I wanted to ask Rowena what color her eyes were but refrained from showing interest. Instead of posing complimentary questions, I spread my arms out casually, put my palms against the door frame, and decided to be business-like in my approach. "You've waited this long; you probably won't mind waiting a little longer. There's a party starting. Could you come back later?"

"I like parties." Rowena returned to her original tactic of being pleasant. She placed a hand on mine and murmured she'd be glad to share my birthday with me. I hadn't mentioned the occasion. Still, I might have let her enter at this point, for I couldn't bear to be mean to anyone who was nice, even as a pretense. Rowena seemingly decided civility would take too long, and force was necessary. Any possible moment of connection between us passed. She ducked to see if she could slide beneath my arm and

through the door. I lowered my elbow and blocked her. She set down her suitcase, stood back up, and pushed against my shoulders with her hands.

“What’s wrong with you, Shine?” Mother said, but I couldn’t allow my concentration to be broken. I kept my focus by looking at Rowena’s boots and considering whether I should ruin the suede by mashing her toes. I refrained; nice shoes were difficult to come by.

Rowena’s forehead touched mine as she made a last push. My sister might be taller, but I was solid like a mountain. She let go of my shoulders. “I want to come in,” she said. “This weather is giving me a cold.” The girl issued a series of exaggerated, painful-sounding coughs and looked at Mother. By the shocked look on her face, I determined she was considering numerous comments. Each time, She pressed her lips shut before speaking.

“Mother might have birthed you, but she has a new family,” I said to Rowena.

“Why should I care?” Rowena, fidgeting, fastened and unfastened the top button of her coat, as if she were ready to enter and take it off. “I don’t even know you.”

“Can’t you guess who I am? I’m your sister,” I said slowly, wanting to be sure of my words.

“Half-sister, although I don’t like one-fourth of you.”

Mother stepped forward. “Don’t pay any attention to Shine, Rowena. What matters is you’re here now.” The last moment in which I might have prevented them from cementing their relationship passed. I felt my knees go soft; my sister would soon be inside. “Come in then,” I said. But before I reached my statement’s end, Rowena seemed

to have grown tired of me and moved on. She wanted more details about “this party,” she said.

In the foyer, Rowena handed me her suitcase. Polite under any circumstance, I put it in the corner, close to the door, and hoped the girl brought her own toothbrush. For a second, Mother looked at me standing in the door, as if I were someone she knew but couldn’t identify. Then she blinked, as if her dream world and reality had collided but weren’t yet one in the same.

Rowena agreed to remove her coat, which Mother placed in a closet, and smoothed the wrinkles from her sweater, which clung to her torso. Since Rowena was about five foot eight, the sweater’s sleeves were also too short. Her breasts were medium sized, but the prominence of her collarbone made her what my health teacher called “unhealthily thin.” I felt Rowena’s gaze as she ran her eyes down my own body. After what Father referred to as my growth spurt, I measured five foot four. My weight charted average, but at the higher end of the scale, the teacher said. Rowena’s eyes didn’t linger long in assessing what the woman dubbed my “curviness.” We followed Mother down the hall and to the parlor. Rowena, now she’d managed to get in, turned her head, and took a quick and seemingly disappointed inventory of the furnishings: antique chairs too rickety to sit on, a piano forever out of tune, and some faded paintings. The fire was lit. She hurried to take the seat on the sofa near the hearth. Mother asked me to entertain Rowena. She had to finish the party preparations and left. When I heard her go to the hall closet and move a suitcase, I guessed she was still in the practice of hiding presents and smiled. Rowena patted the sofa, as if offering me a seat in my own house. I sat beside her while leaving a foot of space. “When’s your pa coming back?”

“I don’t know.” Rowena’s face showed a lack of concern.

“He didn’t tell you?” I said.

“No.” Rowena looked surprised at my question. “Only this week he decided I was old enough to come. That and he managed to get his truck running. I could have taught myself to drive and stolen Pa’s truck, but I knew if I waited, he’d come around. It would have been too much to ask for details.”

I wondered if I’d heard Rowena correctly. “I don’t understand.”

She shrugged and put her boots on the table. “I don’t know Pa will come back.”

“He left you here?” I said.

“What are you, a tape recorder? Pa doesn’t like things to be complicated. He’ll pick me up eventually, or I’ll leave on my own in a few months.” Rowena adjusted the pillow behind her back and sighed as if she’d exerted unnecessary energy in revealing her plan.

For a second, I felt worried about Rowena. “Where will you go when you do leave?”

“Come May, I’ll attend the dance academy.”

I pictured myself at age seven taking ballet lessons. Mother had enrolled me in the class for the season, but I’d taken two lessons before realizing I’d never jump high, point my toes straight, or round out my arms enough to please the teacher.

“I prefer the ground to the tightrope,” Rowena said. “I’m scared of heights.”

“The circus still sounds exciting. I’ve never been.”

“That’s where Mother and Pa met,” Rowena said. “He took care of the animals.”

“It’s hard to believe she was interested in someone like him,” I said. From what Mother said, growing up, she was well-off, well-mannered, and meant for better things.

“That’s what Pa said, too,” Rowena said. “What could she have wanted with someone who didn’t have money, looks, or even long-term plans? Then again, the circus life does have a kind of excitement.”

Rowena fantasized aloud about Mother’s decision to attend the big-top proceedings that particular Saturday. She bought a cheap ticket, climbed the bleachers, and divided her attention amongst the three rings. Dancing bears stood on their hind legs and waved their paws. Clowns with water guns sprayed the front row, and babies howled. A fearless man dove into a tank, and the crowd ooh-ed and ah-ed. Mother consumed every type of treat imaginable: a leopard-blood snow cone, salted pretzel, Polish sausage with burnt black lines, and taffy pull. Her stomach hurt. The show was over, and the sun was going down. As families departed, hawkers offered the strings of colored balloons to fussy children. One tyke let loose his balloon, perhaps to see it fly. His father chased the globe as it rose higher and floated over the prairie. Mother told her friends goodbye and assured them she’d find her own way home. She wanted to see the animals. She lingered outside the big cats’ tent and observed Burle leading a tiger into its cage.

“Sunday night, when the men were pulling down the poles, folding up the canvas tents, and making preparations to travel to the next town, Mother said she was going, too,” Rowena proposed.

“Then?” I said.

“Mother became the girl with the trick pony. I’ll bet she fed him cotton candy and tied ribbons in his tail.”

“Before meeting Burle, Mother had never left the county,” I said.

“She probably made up her mind in the first five minutes. She chose to go with Burle.”

“So? She probably thought of her relationship with him as a fling,” I said.

“It lasted long enough for her to get pregnant.”

“You’re illegitimate,” I said. “How can you be proud of that?”

“Mother loved Burle. When she married your father, she effectively ended her life. It was suicide.”

“You think you know.” Even though Rowena made me angry, I couldn’t prove her wrong. All I could argue was Father came along, according to Mother, at the “best” time. Father began to attend church to see her. Too shy to talk, he sat a few rows back from her family’s pew and left before the benediction. One day, Lucille pointed out to Mother that Father had a farm, house, and dog. That week, he drove Mother in the flatbed Ford to see the growing rows of corn, wheat, and soybeans. Probably the road was bumpy, the air was full of dust, and Father spoke in his usual monotone voice, but Lucille convinced Mother if she married, she’d wear new shoes and have a house with air-conditioning. The two tied the knot. Lucille rented Father the farm and hinted he’d inherit it one day. Mother got a set of dishes and honeymoon to the Wisconsin Dells.

Rowena, looking bored after hearing the tale of my parents’ courtship, meandered over to a photo arrangement on the wall. Perhaps she was searching for her own face amongst the childhood portraits. The year I was seven, Lucille sewed Pilgrim costumes for us kids at Halloween. Laura and I wore black dresses with white aprons. My second cousin, Arnold, a year older, boasted a matching vest, tie, and hat. That day, the

photographer grew tired of arranging Laura's feet on the carpet slab, dusty with other kids' shoe-prints, and telling turtle-crossing-the-road jokes. Arnold and I wouldn't stop pinching each other, and Laura had managed to wiggle out of the lens' view. Father joked he was the only one who liked this picture: He said we kids looked like model citizens.

Rowena fished in her drawstring purse to retrieve her own photo. "I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

"I have something even better than the story of my parents' meeting. This picture proves Burle and Mother were happy together."

I walked over to take a look. The picture featured a younger version of the thin man in the pickup truck and his family. Burle, sporting a striped shirt and jeans, wore his dishwasher hair parted to one side. Mother was wearing a pants suit, and a panel of sunshine hit her leg. Although the photo was faded, Mother's hair seemed auburn, a shade brighter than her ordinary brown. She held up a baby, Rowena. I stopped breathing and felt the desire to crumple the picture into a ball. Rowena grabbed it from my hands.

I'd never have fit in Rowena's picture and wondered how we laid claim to the same mother. I gathered Rowena was pondering the same question, so I defended myself before she could ask: "Even if Mother and I don't look alike, I've seen her nearly every day of my life. Can you say that?"

Rowena didn't reply. I felt a twinge of guilt. She returned her gaze to the photo, its background a garden landscape. The season was spring, and the foliage would have been bright green if the photo had been processed in color. That day, Mother must not

have wanted to leave, but the picture had a crease down the middle, signaling to me the family's impending separation.

Rowena kissed the photo as if to memorialize the brief moment captured and put her finger over each person's head. I asked her what she, or anyone for that matter, could truly surmise from the fuzzy outlines about her parents' states of mind.

"I could tell you, but it would take a thousand words, and your party is about to start." Rowena stole a thumbtack from the pigeon-hole-styled desk and pinned her picture to the wall.

"I don't want you at my party, no matter what Mom says."

"You're lucky to be having one at all."

"Father has a job, even if he's in debt," I snapped. Last summer, he sold his land but didn't get what he'd expected. "It's no one's fault," Mother had said.

"No, you misunderstand what I'm saying about birthdays," Rowena said. "I mean, you were lucky to be born at all."

"That's true," I said. "Mother barely got to the hospital in time, and the doctor saved me. How did you know?"

"You're still not getting what I mean!" Rowena said. "Why would Mother need another family? She had us. From what I can see, she only married your father because of some ruse."

"You seem to know a lot about Mother after twenty minutes," I said, "but you'll never make up for the fact she hasn't been in your life."

"I will."

"How?" I said.

“You’ll have to wait and see. Don’t you like suspense?”

“I don’t believe you; Mother’s too busy to give you the kind of time you’re demanding.” Still, what if I were wrong in my estimations? A sense of panic overwhelmed me. I imagined dragging Rowena by her long rope of hair to the door. Before I could act, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward her. I looked and saw she possessed blue-gray eyes; I knew their color now for sure. Her paint-flecked nails dug into my flesh. Flecks of spit hit my face as she spoke: “Mother’s going to be involved in my life, and if you don’t watch out, I’ll make her forget she was ever interested in yours.”

I feared Rowena possessed this capability. When she saw I wasn’t going to reply, she let go of my wrist. Her fingernails had made red, half-moon marks on my skin. I turned away to rub them and make their magic disappear. The realization hit me: I’d received my birthday wish for a guest--here was Rowena, returned from the dead.

My sister resumed talking again, pleasantly, as if her violent act signified only a pause in the conversation. “So, now you know about my past. Do you have any more stories?”

“Well . . . ,” I said. The doorbell rang.

“Never mind, Shine. Someone’s at the door.”

CHAPTER 2

I felt a sense of relief sweep over me as I leapt from the sofa and skipped toward the door: Rowena's pa had returned sooner than I expected. He'd probably been driving down the road and considering his decision to leave my sister with "strangers" when he saw the chance to make a U-turn. My relief was replaced by a sense of despair. I hoped Burle wouldn't want to enter the house, but that if he did, both he and my sister would be gone before my party. As I opened the door, I was taken aback. The person on the step wasn't Burle at all. Instead, the guests from the Sunday School class were already arriving. They gave me their coats and then walked past me without speaking. The kids didn't seem grateful for the invitation, pink envelope or not. The richest girl, who, as rumors went, read mystery novels in the flower garden surrounding her house and stayed Julys in a bed-and-breakfast on Mackinaw Island, didn't even look my way. (If I were going to be unseen, I wished suddenly to have the advantage of being totally transparent.) She carried a purse, stuffed with chocolates and rolls of one-dollar bills, which, with the carelessness of the rich, she hadn't bothered to shut. I guessed her gift to me would be as small but insignificant as politely possible.

My cousin Arnold and his friend, Tubby, the two boys attending my party, were what Mother would call less "behaved" but easier for me to deal with. They jostled each other and stopped to stare at me at the door. Arnold tossed a hastily wrapped package into

the air. As I caught it without much coordination, Tubby, the banker's son, said, "Hey, have your boobs grown since I saw you?"

I told him his comment wasn't an example of what the health teacher called "positive reinforcement." He snickered. Tubby's real name was Thomas. Because of his balloon-like abdomen, he'd been stuck with this nickname since fifth grade. My father owed him a great deal of money, and due to this circumstance and the fact he was a bully, Tubby continuously looked for new ways to harass me. I fixed on my lips what I hoped was a permanent grin, and hoped my altered countenance could deflect both his comments and gaze. I looked at Arnold to defend me, but he turned away and peered around the corners of the house as if he'd never been there before. I'd never understand why Arnold chose the piggiest boy in tenth grade over me to be his new best friend.

Arnold and I had been together since we were little. One summer stood out, hotter than the rest. Father brought home a six-foot-round cattle trough to use as a swimming pool. Arnold, Tubby, and I plunged in and performed cannonballs. Our teeth chattering, we weren't able to wait an extra day for the water to warm. When Mother wasn't looking, Arnold stuck the snaky green hose in his swim-shorts. Water venom sprayed from his thighs. Afterwards, although we were clean, Mother made us bathe. Three abreast in our rowboat tub, I wrote a poem on a soap cake with my toothbrush handle. Arnold pushed Tubby's head beneath the spout to see if he'd do the dead man's float.

Last August, Arnold got his driver's permit and used to take me on drives in the middle of the night. I ran out the door, jumped off the porch, met him at the mailbox, and opened the truck's door. But since he received his license in October, he'd changed. Even if Arnold stood a lanky five foot eleven and was still too small for football, he became

fascinated with girls, weightlifting, and rebuilding his Chevy. Today, I wished Arnold would have ignored the party invitation.

The boys sprinted down the hall and into the dining room as if practicing for the two-hundred-yard dash. The girls paraded after them, and then they curled up their noses like finicky cats when Mother offered everyone a spread of stale chips, tea, and triangular-cut sandwiches. The girls sat down, said one or two words of greeting to one another, and cast sideways glances at Rowena out of the corners of their eyes. She remained apart, standing in the doorway. I leaned against the wall across from her. From the girls' murmuring, I learned they had nothing to say about me, not even anything mean. They were concerned only with her identity.

Tubby made no pretense about watching Rowena. Even Arnold, who seemed to prefer the flat, grainy images of women in magazines to the girls in class, seemed to find her attractive. He blushed beneath his freckles. As if she knew she were on display, Rowena flipped her hair with its highlights of the color of ocean sand off her shoulders and felt along her neck bone for a string of fake pearls. She shifted her weight in her boots and blew a stream of air through her nose to seemingly show her self-satisfaction.

Rowena ran her eyes over the guests' forehead as if to memorize them without bothering about further facial details, cleared her throat, and announced she was Mother's firstborn, even though the day was mine. I was feeling suffocated and left Rowena's side next to the floor vent. The heater was sending out a blast of air, a "luxury" Mother had decided to allow, but there didn't seem to be enough oxygen in the room for both of us. I felt about to faint. Mother frowned at me and cracked a window. Through the lace

curtains, the sun shone the brightest it had all day. I made a point to find a chair at the table in the shade.

Arnold was sitting beside me. I playfully touched a curl of what he called his “hateful,” rust-colored hair. He tensed up, as if I’d been his mother making a public demonstration of love, and scooted his chair away. Then he said, “Rowena is beautiful; are you sure she’s your sister?”

“Satan was a shining star of light, too,” I said, repeating my Sunday School teacher’s favorite phrase. “I wish someone would throw her out.”

“It won’t be me.” Tubby reached over, punched Arnold in the shoulder, and said there was nothing wrong with kissing cousins. He was probably referencing last week’s history lesson on Egypt. The teacher, pausing in his speech about shifting sand, had had to warn the boys not to hoot about the photo of the sphinx with its missing nose or the pictograph showing Ramses marrying his sister. Even though the teacher explained incest was unnatural if not illegal in today’s world, I’d looked over at my cousin and found I wasn’t ashamed of my attraction for him. Arnold was a geek. His breath held a stale smell, and he liked to spit on the ground, despite the location, even church. Still, his scowl and the way he bit his lower lip--characteristics my aunt had tried to correct--intrigued me, and I imagined us alone in his house. Arnold folded back his race-car blanket, and we lay on his bed. He rolled onto his abdomen, and I connected the moles on his back with a magic marker like playing dot to dot in a child’s activity book. He, half-asleep, submitted. Then whatever was supposed to happen would. My daydream grew clouded with pink smoke, and then there was the sound of piano playing fast and loud.

Today, sitting at the dining room table, Arnold and Tubby huddled together and whispered. They tried to guess whether Rowena were a virgin. “She has a certain edge,” Tubby concluded loudly. Unlike my sister, who probably had “experience,” as the boys said, I hadn’t even been kissed.

The time everyone was waiting for had come. Mother, carrying my cake, entered the dining room. The guests sang their half-hearted tribute of a birthday song and waited for me to blow out the candles. When I hung my head and was too slow to act, Laura puffed and blew my chance to make another birthday wish to replace the first concerning an interesting guest. The guests indicated what appendages from my doll cake they wanted to consume. Mother leaned over the pastry, cut my neck with her sticky, guillotine knife, and removed my head first as a piece for Rowena. I clutched the table’s dusty underside to steady myself and then ran my finger across my jugular, as if I might trace a line of blood. As she took her first bite, Rowena gave me a weird look. Laura handed me her napkin and advised me to wipe the trail of dirt from my chin.

Fifteen endless minutes passed. The partygoers ate their pieces of spongy cake and ribbons of melted Neapolitan ice cream. One girl was “allergic” to a bowl of nuts, which Mother removed from the table, and another refused to drink her cup of generic soda after one sip. At least Tubby, the boy with feet the size of toasters, was easy to please. He ate everything, even the cucumber sandwiches, until they were gone. Laura, with a sudden burst of energy, was tearing streamers off the walls and popping the sagging balloons when Mother called for everyone’s attention and announced the main attraction.

I winced as she attempted to excite the guests with an activity suitable for six-year-olds: the breaking of a piñata. She'd taken construction paper and created some animal previously unknown to God, a cross between a donkey and fox. She'd then filled the piñata with clothespins, cheap candy, and toys found in cereal boxes, and hung it from the parlor's chandelier. Tubby seemed excited by the violence involved in breaking the piñata but was, he said seemingly sadly, too full to take part in it himself. The picky girl, as if expecting more, stared at Mother and drank her forsaken soda with the fizz gone out. The rest of the group yawned. Arnold told Tubby he'd like to find a pack of cigarettes and play truth or dare. The Sunday School girls would probably have preferred sitting and doing crochet work.

To crack open the piñata, Laura represented the candidate closest in age “although not in intellect,” she reminded Mother. She blindfolded her. Her hits—tap, tap--were as quick and light as the beating of hummingbird wings. The contraption broke immediately. The donkey fox's intestines burst. Laura called out the names of candy and useless objects as they rained on her head.

Afterward Mother led us back to the parlor to unwrap presents. Rowena sat on a chair with her legs sprawled. But as I unwrapped my first gift, and shreds of colored paper fell to the floor, I realized it was my underwear on display. Mother had embroidered the days of the week on pairs of panties. At her prompting, I held up “Sunday.” Arnold grabbed Thursday's drawers and ran around with them on his head. Even though the health teacher insisted torment from boys was part of growing up, I folded my hands on my lap, leaned forward, and tilted my head toward my knees to avoid an oncoming headache.

The rich girl bought me a hair-straightening iron. Before I could thank her, Mother told her to take it back, as we couldn't afford the electricity. Laura presented me with a rock with yellow splashes, which she used as a Rorschach inkblot test. First, I saw the yellow bricks of Rowena's road on the journey back to her original home. Then, I detected the gold coins of Lucille's treasure and a bright day ahead.

After I'd unwrapped my gifts, including a stuffed snake named Curly Fry, which Father had left for me in his absence, and the guests had enjoyed themselves to whatever limits the party offered, Mother congratulated me on its success and then retreated to the kitchen. I was going to help her clean up by collecting the dirty dishes when Tubby raised his glass of root beer to make a toast, "Here's to living another year, Shine. Avoid walking by those wells."

I was taken aback. "You don't know what you're talking about," I said. "Mother didn't jump. She fell in the well. She couldn't see past her abdomen. You might face a similar situation, except that instead of being pregnant, you're fat and not worth saving."

"You're fabulous, Shine." Tubby guffawed. Due to his size, he displayed his emotions in great proportions, and somehow this made the grin on his face all the more hateful. I'd disliked Tubby since the time I was five, and we played Wink-Um with Arnold in a blackened closet. When I turned on my flashlight and lit up my face, I'd tried hard to make my status as killer look innocent. I selected Tubby as the first victim of my winking eye. But he cheated and wouldn't die even after I murdered him.

Even though I'd never forgotten the rumor surrounding my birth, I hadn't thought anyone would bring up an event from fifteen years ago this afternoon. How did Tubby know anyway? Arnold must have told him how Father forgot to slide the cover over the

well. One girl giggled. Another seemingly forgot about blowing her nose and crumpled her tissue in her hand. I knew they'd repeat everything they heard as soon as they left. Rowena walked over to join us. Once she heard Tubby's version of the tale, one I'd wanted to tell her myself, I'd be ruined. Tubby ate handfuls of pretzels out of the bag he carried. "Why change the story at this point?" he said with his mouth full.

"It's the truth," I said.

Tubby's eyes showed momentary compassion. "Your mother tried to kill you, Shine."

Arnold placed his hand on my shoulder. My stomach felt sickly, as if I'd eaten a cup of grainy sugar from the kitchen canister. Laura appeared in the parlor, and he let go as if unconcerned. She announced the guests' parents were waiting outside.

"Time for me to go." Tubby pulled me toward him and put me in a headlock. The smell of his underarm mixed with that of his shirt's starch. He told everyone he'd finish the story later and released me from his hold.

At that moment, Arnold grabbed my chin and gave me a kiss on the lips. "I didn't have time to get a present today," he said and thrust me back. Tubby and the girls began to laugh. I ran to the bathroom to hide the fact I was crying but had liked the kiss. When I felt calm, I brushed my teeth. Now that I'd been kissed, I might be approached for a repeat anytime.

My cousin, who seemed befuddled by the fact his action was considered anything more than a joke, had seemingly left the house before I could return.

Winter was the season of hats, gloves, and mittens. The guests gathered their things, put on their coats, and exited in a small procession. Outside, the sky darkened, and

the clouds bulged with snow.

“Well, the party was fun,” Rowena said. “What now?”

Tears formed in my eyes, and a lump like a wad of Silly Putty lodged in my throat. I curled my fingers and stared at the wallpaper; its horizontal pattern of bars was maddening. From the table, I picked up the cake knife, turned it over in my hands, and licked off the icing. I imagined Rowena, with her smooth skin, cold lips, and a severed throat, lying on a slab.

* * * * *

Rowena wanted to stretch her legs. Laura suggested to me taking a walk to show her around. From the kitchen, Mother opened the window and called, “Laura, put on that stocking cap, the one stuffed in your pocket.”

We sisters made our way through the backyard. We were surrounded by farmland; behind us, the house’s turrets pricked the sky. Rowena looked around. “I bet there are more steers than people around here,” she said. “What’s there to do?”

“You could go to the gas station,” I said. “That’s where everyone hangs out.”

“How’s she going to get there?” Laura said. “It would take more than an hour to walk.”

“I don’t mind hitchhiking,” Rowena said.

“What about escaped convicts?” I said.

“That’s the movies,” Rowena said. “Besides, you’re the dangerous one.”

“Eighty-five percent of violence is domestic-related,” Laura agreed. “A study conducted in 1975 of rural families concluded--”

I cut her off. “Stay in your place, Rowena, and you’ll be fine.”

“I’ll ask Arnold to drive me,” she said, “unless that would get in the way of your special time together.”

“I don’t care if you ask him. He’s your cousin, too, I guess.”

“So many places to go, and I end up here.” Rowena talked about traveling to locations beyond the horizon. She spoke of the dance academy in Chicago. Even though she’d never been to the city, she described its deep-crust pizza, the traffic on Lake Shore Drive, and the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the United States.

We meandered over the hill and through the stand of evergreens Father planted as a windbreak. One tree dropped a pinecone from a fifteen-foot-high bough, and I picked it up. In my bedroom, I’d lined up these cones on my chest of drawers, promises of things to come, new life on a gigantic scale. To the west, the orchard hadn’t fared as well. Its pears were small and apples bitter, with insides crunchy as bones. The peach tree bloomed once. Only the blackberry bushes, growing in the ditches, ripened in May and were full of birds and fruit.

Rowena strode ahead. “How far does your property go?”

“Father still owns three acres,” I said. “Don’t go over there.”

“This is the place, isn’t it?”

I’d hoped Rowena had forgotten Tubby’s story. She headed toward the well, the remaining indication of a homestead. Laura and I caught up. We all stared at the concrete slab covering the hole. “Look at that,” Laura said and pointed out the palm print. When I was five, Father took my hand and stuck it in the soft cement. Beside the handprint, he scrawled my name--spelling it wrong, without the “e,” so it read “shin”--and the date. Mother didn’t come out of the house to participate in the ceremony, but when I returned,

she examined my hands, saw the grit caked under my fingernails, and scrubbed them until they were white.

Laura stuck her own palm on my mark. I snatched her fingers away, and she almost fell. She snuffled, and I wiped the trickle of snot coming from her nose with my glove.

“How nice, you must come here often,” Rowena said.

“Yes, it’s a great picnic spot,” I said. During storms, Laura liked to stand on the porch and watch the rain hit the roof and run into the guttering. Rainwater tasted better than city water, spilling from an arc, in the school fountain. Yet I didn’t like to think of how, inside the cistern, water collected continuously, and the level rose.

Laura said I suffered from paranoia. She’d once jumped from the bridge into the river on a dare. “Mother never takes long showers, and Shine doesn’t like the idea of getting wet at all,” she told Rowena.

“I don’t get dirty.” I couldn’t let Rowena know I was afraid of water, anything more than would fill a glass.

Rowena put one boot on the slab and then pushed her foot it off. “I believe the story Mother jumped. But what made her do it? Why was she down here?”

“She never--” I said.

“Shine’s watched that *Little House on the Prairie* episode, the one where blind Mary stumbles over her shoelace and goes pell mell into the well, too many times,” Laura interrupted. “I’ll explain to you what happened.” She talked on, giving Rowena some false, third-hand version of events. After a few minutes, I ceased to hear her speak.

I remembered when I heard the tale for myself: That Christmas Eve, I was eleven.

Arnold and I were playing a game of hide-and-go-seek. Arnold had just found me in a prime spot behind the trash can in the pantry closet when Aunt Lucille and his mother, Virginia, strode into the kitchen to take the baked ham from the oven. He and I, not wanting the adults to ask us to set the table, decided to stay put. Lucille grabbed a potholder and said, “Virgie, you have your faults, but you’re not the one with the reputation.”

I popped up and saw Virginia, listening, twirl her earring. She appeared to be willing to be paid a compliment via another’s degradation. In the ensuing conversation, Mother’s name came up. I started paying attention. Lucille described a baby floating in its mother’s womb. After a moment, I understood she was speaking of me. According to Lucille, Mother became pregnant by Father and had grown depressed with her circumstances. She’d devoted herself to her new husband and lied if asked questions about her former life. But she dreaded bearing a child who would reveal her dependence on deceit and sense of disgust for Father. Meanwhile, a parasite, I was growing within the space of my mother’s belly. Not caring about the pain I was causing, I sucked with delight whatever she provided me via the umbilical cord and thrust my legs away from my body; she’d feel the kicking even if she never addressed me.

In the middle of Lucille’s story, I looked over. Arnold had covered his mouth to keep from laughing. I sniffed back tears. Despite our differing reactions, we whispered to each other that her tale had to be real. Lucille proposed in the eighth month, Mother, sitting at the table with shaky hands, dropped her coffee cup. The black liquid scalded her lips and shocked her into considering the future. During the night, she refused Father’s soft words and gentle caresses. In the morning, Mother sat in the rocking chair, thought

about her fate, and hoped to die. At nine months, she got up the courage. Alone in the house, she bunched her skirts over her thighs and lowered herself over a knitting needle. She'd burst the globe containing me. Beads of sweat gathered on the back of her neck. Her legs shook as she hovered, but she couldn't bring herself to crouch. I was sleeping inside my circle and about to be impaled. Maybe, like Virginia suggested, I dreamed of my fate and wondered if the needle would tickle. Or perhaps I pulled my feet to my head, squeezed my stubs of developing toes, waited for the stab. Either way, Mother was disturbed by an itch in her nose and sneezed. The needle fell to the floor. She urinated on the carpet and dropped her skirts in the puddle. Outside, a train railed past. Mother lifted a finger and numbered the days, as endless as a string of boxcars, since Burle and Rowena had been gone. She couldn't believe they were dead.

The afternoon reached its peak, and Mother thought the sky looked like rain. She needed to hurry now. Mother wandered past the yard and found the pond. She pitched in five or six stones; they sank with the weight of newborn puppies. There was little splash, but she watched the rings of water expand and enlarge on the surface. Mother thought of the pond's murky bottom. She took a breath, measured and slow, and held it. She could hold her breath a long time and was a good swimmer. She removed the stones from her jacket's pockets and dropped them with a plunk to the ground.

Thunder clapped. Lightning forked. Trudging up the path to the house, Mother had almost given up hope of finding death. Nearby, the well was going dry. Father had taken off the lid to gauge the water level. She hauled up a bucket to check it herself. The water mixed with mud smelled sour like one's breath after not having eaten for days. Mother wanted to make an end, and the well seemed a sure bet. Even if she grew frantic,

she wouldn't paddle long in the dank liquid before going down. She wouldn't pull steadily for the weedy shore while unlacing her shoes. My mother jumped in the well. No, this wasn't right. She would have had to climb in left foot, right foot, knees bent, knees straight: It was a narrow plunge to death. Her head was large and round and full of madness, but not as big as her abdomen, which, containing me, bumped against the well's sides.

"A lot of nerve Monica had," Virginia said, as if talking about the time Mother ran over the perennials planted next to the driveway. "John had picked out names, at least for a boy."

When I thought I couldn't take the story anymore and rose to leave my hiding place, Arnold pulled me back. The tale would brighten with the prospect of Mother's rescue, I hoped. The cleaning lady arrived to my mother's house, twenty minutes late and drunk. She'd gone out to burn the rubbish in a barrel when she heard the screams. Mother was taken to the hospital. When Father was informed, he went home, packed her a bag of clothes, and drove there as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Ready for birth, I tried to leave Mother's womb as if jumping off a ship rail and into the ocean. I paddled toward the light. Yet my mother's tightly staid loins held me trapped halfway down the canal: She, determined either to lock me in or retain her figure, had worn a girdle through pregnancy. Mother Titanica, I pleaded, release your cargo from the hull; Father and I would have loved you had you weighed a thousand pounds. Freed, I swam through the tide of blood and salt, swallowed it down, and came up, gasping for air but with no land in sight. My mother refused to help me. No, I made that long, dark passage alone, to end shipwrecked.

The lights went out during the storm. No source of brightness under which the doctor could examine me existed but a janitor's flashlight. I must have thought it was the moon. Mother would have felt faint, but Father was having troubles of his own. "What a shame," he said as the nurse presented me. "I can't even see my daughter clearly."

The nurse was concerned with practicalities only. "What's the name?" she said, holding pen and clipboard. "Did you say Shana? Or Sheena? I prefer Shirley myself."

In the background, the doctor cursed and shook the flashlight in one hand. The nurse wrote the name "Shine" on the certificate.

In the pantry, the smell of rotten tomatoes and discarded pig intestines had grown intense, but I listened for the rest of the story. Lucille and Virginia, despite having the dispositions of ink-spouting octopuses, were sure to mention Mother loved me even if she didn't show it. But there was no time. The kitchen grew quiet. I peeked from the pantry and saw Mother had entered the room.

Virginia finished carving the ham. She held the electric knife in her hand. "Dinner's ready," she said. "Call everyone, Monica. Where are the kids hiding?"

CHAPTER 3

The doorbell rang for a third time that afternoon, and I felt a jolt. Burle's reappearance no longer seemed like a positive event. I remembered how halfway through my party, Mother had disappeared. In the bedroom, I found her recombining her hair and staring at the beginnings of crow's feet in the mirror. More outfits lay spread on her bed than she could have possibly tried on as choices for the party. I hadn't understood why she was worried about what my friends thought, but maybe she'd been thinking of someone else all along.

When I opened the door with a whoosh, Burle wasn't there, and I felt relieved. I saw a boy instead. He possessed eyes, a nose, and mouth—the same features as other boys—but on him, they gained new importance. The boy didn't look like anyone I knew in town; he didn't look like anyone from this earth. Arnold had light, darting eyes, and a face displaying a different expression at any given moment. This boy was different. With his face full of shadows, he appeared wan. His skin was pale, even whiter than mine. His eyes shone green, like jewels set within a Chinese dragon mask, and I remembered how my history teacher showed the class a picture of an emperor from some memorable but hard-to-spell dynasty lying inert but seemingly wide eyed in his tomb. Against the boy's jade eyes, his long hair and overcoat presented a contrasting black. He'd donned a red silk shirt and wore ripped blue jeans with threads hanging from the cuffs.

Laura, who sneaked up behind me, whispered he looked like the lone survivor of some thirteenth-century plague. “Black death,” she said and clutched my hand as if to seek protection. Two weeks ago at a church service, I’d seen Remy, and at the time, thought he seemed weird, too. When we sang the closing hymn, he tilted his head in my direction and gave me chills. After the service ended, I altered my path and rushed down a side aisle and out the door to avoid him even if though meant waiting in the cold for Father to unlock the Newport. But today, as the boy stood on my doorstep and addressed me with an unexplainable familiarity, I felt comfortable, as if I’d known him all my life. I didn’t feel afraid, even if I should have. The boy’s look was upsettingly attractive. I told Laura to go away and stop being dramatic.

He said his name was Rembrandt, and I recalled the church ladies’ rumors. He was two years older than I and new to Atwater. His father, the undertaker, had bought a house and taken his late father’s place. The funeral business was good. The elderly, a majority of Atwater’s population, were dying, and even Lucille might soon condescend to take her turn. The hearse Remy drove on errands was parked outside.

He stepped inside. His shoes held the scent of wet dirt. Later that week, Mother, cleaning the rug, would probably wrinkle her nose and complain he should have thrown off his grave clothes before visiting anyone. But Remy’s own mother was dead, I knew, and perhaps no one had taught him such protocol. People said ten years ago, Remy’s father embalmed and placed her body on display. He refused to bury her for two months. Finally, a court ruled against his claim “life is short, but death can be a beautiful alternative,” and the police took the corpse away. The man had never remarried. Besides

the undertaker, Remy had a sister in a St. Louis girl's school. He himself took correspondence courses.

Rembrandt was practiced at applying makeup to faces with eyes that no longer gazed in mirrors; he dug graves, hefted boxes, and carved tombstones and statuettes for a select clientele. Remy didn't work on cars, play sports, or date girls. I doubted he had any friends his own age. He was familiar with the other-worldly but didn't wear a watch to monitor what time he had allotted. To me, these details, provided to me by the town, accounted for his mystery.

Despite Mother's probable irritation and Laura's fear, I'd have let him enter the house if he'd been the Devil. In a polite, low voice, he told me the news: Lucille was dead.

"I don't care," I said. "She caused us to suffer for a long time."

Remy didn't act surprised at my attitude. He smiled with a sense of professional courtesy, as if he'd seen all kinds. Grief was the least of the emotions I felt, and after a moment, thoughts of Lucille departed from my mind. Rembrandt took my breath away; it was as if someone had laid hands around my neck and choked me. I felt dizzy but vowed, unlike the women in Lucille's romance novels who were always standing by couches, not to faint. Rembrandt produced a gold-embossed pen from his pocket and held out a leather folder. He asked me to fetch Mother to view pictures of coffins. By this point, she'd come to the door and invited the boy to stay and have a piece of cake. She agreed to look over the samples even though, according to Remy, Virginia would have the last say about funeral arrangements.

Mother led the way into the parlor. Third in line, I didn't take my eyes off Rembrandt. He was tall and muscled but ethereal; he weighed a fair amount, yet his feet didn't seem to touch the floor. A strong emotion, like a bird with giant black wings, swept over me, and I loved Remy at once. Yet he didn't seem human. I wondered how I could possess him at all. I pushed back a row of bangle bracelets squeezing my wrist and extended my fingers. Maybe it would be enough to just touch his hand. At the thought, my chest tightened up, my stomach rolled, and my bladder pinched. I could almost feel the release of urine and the wetness of it running down my leg.

We reached the parlor, and I lost my chance to make contact. The way I was staring at Remy was probably rude. But I wasn't the only one with eyes. Rowena appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Rembrandt's wrist. I knew that like a crocodile that would use all its tricks, including the death roll, she wouldn't let go of him. Rowena pulled Remy beside her on the couch, patted his hand, and offered me a wink. Her dimples showed like red apples plucked from the tree. Remy looked Rowena and then me up and down. His slow, sure gaze seemed creepy if professionally detached. He withdrew his arm, as if we were already present at Lucille's funeral, and he wanted to remain part of the backdrop. I, sitting in a chair across from them, thought I'd lost Remy to the dictates of form when he turned to Mother and me and whispered, "There's a crazy one in every family."

Rowena perked up. "Crazy?" she laughed. "I always know exactly what I'm doing."

"I see," Rembrandt said. "Someone has to run the show."

Rowena held Mother in her grasp--the two of them were already intimate--but if Rowena hadn't yet bewitched Remy, I might have a chance. I couldn't allow her to take this ghost boy, too. If Rowena wanted a toy, I desired to be with him on equal terms. Yet was my decision rash? What did I really know about him? I tried to hold myself back from giving way, but the draw was irresistible. I compared Arnold to Remy, but my cousin with his big plans, such as gutting the basement to build a bowling alley, and abandoned projects, such as breeding rabbits, fell short. (When he tired of the bunnies, he let them loose; tame, they refused to leave the yard.) Arnold was bound to do nothing important. I wanted to have faith in Remy. The townspeople claimed although he went to church like the rest of us, curiosity was his dark religion. Very well, if he were knowledgeable about the afterlife, he must know something important about the present one.

Mother poured Remy some tea and served him a piece of my caricature cake, one depicting in icing my red heart. Remy broke off a piece with his fork and placed it in his mouth. "This is better than the dried-up scone I got yesterday." He returned his eyes to me, and the walls of my heart crumbled, collapsed, and came tumbling down like the bricks of Jericho wall. I didn't want to give Rembrandt the chance to hurt me, but I couldn't handle the thought of letting him go.

At the table, I took a first napkin from a stack, folded it into a triangle, and placed it in the holder. I considered the situation's various angles: Even if Rembrandt liked Rowena, this didn't mean he didn't like me, too, for I wanted him. But of what did such desire consist: love, lust, the need to experience pain? At this point, I had a choice in the

matter. I could retreat or strike. Would a relationship with Remy be worth the chance for pain?

“I didn’t know I was coming to a party, but I have a present for you, Shine,” Remy said.

“But you don’t even know me.” I felt suspicious of him but also wondered what the present could be. I bit my bottom lip. Pieces of hair fell forward into my face and hid my eyes. I couldn’t look at Rembrandt but wondered if he heard my pulse pounding at the point below my chin. Despite the admiration I felt for him, we’d never been introduced before today. My ears rang, as I waited for Remy to repeat my name.

“Shine, don’t you want to see the present?” Remy said.

“It can’t be as good as what Father gave her,” Laura said, pointing to my shoulders. She was calling attention to the stuffed snake wound around my neck from Father. The reptile’s red felt tongue hung out in a long hiss. Father had probably decided on such a gift at a truck stop.

“I’ll take a present from you any day, Rembrandt,” Rowena interrupted.

Remy ignored her and reached his hand into an inner pocket of his trench. I thought, with apprehension, he was going to pull out a gun. Instead, he held out something shiny and metal and perhaps equally as dangerous. The ruby ring sparkled and represented a symbol of the power I wanted. Was Remy really talking to me in my kitchen and giving me this precious gift? I rose from my chair in a flurry. Too much excitement always caused me to vomit. But before I could run to the bathroom and hide, Remy took my hand. A tingle traveled up the back of my neck, returned down the path of my spine, and branched out through my ribs, as if I were a patient in the children’s game

of Operation. My shoulders shook. My teeth clinked together. Remy reached across the table and grasped my left hand, as if to tell me my fate. He put his pointer finger atop my palm, traced its lines, and appeared perplexed but seemingly pleased to find my path unwritten, open. Remy slipped the ring on my hand before I could refuse it. I gasped at its beauty, breathed shallowly, and hiccupped. The three rubies glinted with strange and perhaps fatal romance.

Mother herself breathed in quickly. I couldn't decide if she were reacting with surprise to the ring's beauty or was bothered by the proceedings. She asked me to hold up my hand. When I complied, she pushed my hand back into my lap. Laura had been studying the ruby setting, too, and unexpectedly laughed.

I grew disturbed. The moment of ecstasy had worn off, and I had a bad feeling in my stomach, even worse than before. I tasted bile in my mouth. Something wasn't right. Never mind his bent toward unbuttoned lyricism and wide eyes, Remy was "the stranger," as in Lucille's novels, and he could cause me to lose control. Who knew, even if Remy and I bound ourselves together and didn't hurt anyone, he still might not make my life better. In the end, he might not even remain mine. I saw him gaze at Rowena and changed my mind about the ring. I didn't hesitate. I tugged and pulled on the band, but my finger was too big, and the fit was tight. I couldn't remove the ring meant for a smaller woman. I panicked but rejected the extreme of cutting off my finger at the bottom joint with Father's table saw.

I began to get up from my chair. Rembrandt pulled me back. "Leave the ring on. It suits you," he said as if speaking to a child. "Soon enough, wearing it will be second nature." He must have guessed I'd never owned jewelry before, but I thought I identified

a greater significance in his words, a meaning reflected in his eyes. I felt a struggle in my mind; I didn't want to be with someone who believed as Remy might: that in the end, one must do whatever one wanted, good or wicked, since we all die--falling flat on our faces, breaking our noses, and cracking our skulls--the same. But what if he were right?

Rembrandt took my hand. The ring pinched the flap of skin between my fingers. I ignored the sensation. I knew I shouldn't give myself to Remy this soon, but I'd begun to get used to the ring's feel, even if it shut off my blood circulation. I ran my finger over the rubies, arranged like the petals of a flower and inset with sharp, thorn-like prongs, and wondered when I'd see Remy again.

Outside, the heaven was full of snow, and it fell in small globes. Despite the spots of white, the darkness was almost complete. Remy opened the front door, and his long coat blew out behind him and caught wind like a black flag. I stepped on the porch to watch him leave. As Remy walked, his feet failed to break through the snow's crust; I wondered if he could climb walls or crawl across the ceiling. The boy seemed to hail from a place far away, even though he lived in town. Perhaps Remy would take me on a drive someday. He climbed into the hearse, parked discreetly behind a bush. The car's motor made a low, barely discernible hum. There was no clanking or rattling:

Presentation was everything; people didn't like death, otherwise terrible in every way, to be noisy.

As Remy drove away, the car's red taillights flickered. Rowena and Laura had followed me into the yard. I said to them, "From the tree, we can watch Remy leave." We girls ignored the cold and climbed the big elm by the kitchen window. When Rowena swung herself up by grabbing the branch before me, I saw a flash of gold encircling her

finger. We rose quickly, weaving our feet among the thin branches. Rowena moved from limb to limb and did not seem to worry about the height. After she'd taken a highest spot in the tree, and Laura had chosen a lower one, I said to Rowena, "Where did you get that ring?"

"You've seen it before?" Rowena pushed her hand into her pocket and contracted her body by pulling her knees into her coat, ostensibly to warm herself.

"Yes, I have." By this point, the chilly air had cleared my head even if I'd decided to use my stuffed snake as a scarf. "That's Mother's ring on your finger. Where did you get it?"

"She gave it to me," Rowena said. I didn't believe her. She removed her hand from her pocket and held out her palm, fingers spread, so I could get a better look. She gestured toward my ring and asked if I wanted to trade.

"No. You have to give yours back anyway. It's Mother's wedding ring," I said. Rowena must have stolen it from Mother's jewelry box.

"Hand me that Remy's ring," Rowena insisted. "It's old and garish. You don't want it."

"I do."

"Can I just try it on?" Rowena leaned from her perch. She stretched her arm toward me with fingers outspread.

"No." I shook the fingers of my left hand in the air as if to tease her but then decided not to fight any more at this point. She'd be leaving soon. For one moment, I felt warmly toward her. If Rowena wanted to keep Mother's ring as a reminder, I wouldn't even tell.

“Stop harping on your stupid rings,” Laura said to us. This year her teachers confirmed she was a certified genius. I attempted to distract Rowena from being envious of me by telling her this additional fact: “Laura is a scholar of psychology.”

“You say that like it’s a big deal,” Laura said.

“Tell us something you learned from your books,” I said.

She held up one wet mitten. “Shine, I can inform you first you’ll never be like Rowena. You need to figure out who you really are—or establish the perimeters of who you could be, even if such a self is fictitious.”

“Laura has been reading a book on schizophrenia,” I told Rowena to clarify the matter.

“And you fit the conditions,” Laura said to me.

“Part of me agrees with your diagnosis and part of me doesn’t,” I said in fun. Laura was half right in her assessment. When I was a child, I’d wanted to be a mannequin—a perfect plastic person with synthetic blonde hair, a beige face, and a thin, hollow body. But now I wished to be rid of Rowena, as much as be like her.

“What about me, Laura?” Rowena didn’t seem to want to be left out of the discussion. “What’s my diagnosis?”

Laura raised her head and mentioned she could see up Rowena’s dress. Her tights were actually knee highs. “Do you see red in your dreams? The fact you wear crimson drawers is probably important.”

“No, the truth is Granny only stole what was on sale. She told me not to be choosy; that was when one got caught.”

“Your underwear’s not overly relevant, and many people have been raised by superstitious grandparents. What I can say after knowing you for two hours is your id has overpowered your ego,” Laura said.

“Cool. Where did you learn that?” Rowena said.

“From the comic book *Freud and Friends*.” Laura had a year’s subscription from Germany. Like any child, she obviously preferred books with pictures.

“And so?” Rowena sat on her branch and swung her feet back and forth.

“So, lesson number one, you can’t have everything you want, girls.” Laura boasted no ring at all, and her pair of mittens was covered with grime. I ignored her.

My nose itched. I sneezed and rocked the limb on which I was sitting. As I lost my balance, I remembered childhood experiments with Newton and gravity. These involved pumping my legs and sailing high on the swings in the park and then jumping off in midair and landing on the ground. Laura, even at that age, had her scientific theories. Afterward, with my head blazing, I lay in the dirt while she finished her notebook entry: Actions have consequences.

Today, I managed not to fall even if Rowena jumped to another fork to redistribute the weight of our three bodies, and Laura wrapped her arms around the trunk and complained I was large and bumbling. I was safe until I felt another sneeze coming on and reached up my hand to grab an upper branch. Rowena stepped on my fingers.

I let go of it, managed to grab a higher limb, and yelled, “You barely missed smashing my ring!”

“Stop fighting over that gaudy piece of jewelry,” Laura said. “You’re both creepy. Don’t you realize where the undertaker’s son got it?”

“Where?” Rowena said.

“Lucille’s dead body.”

“You’re wrong,” I said.

“Denial is stage one,” Laura said.

“How do you know the ring was Lucille’s?” Rowena said.

“I saw it on her hand at the hospital,” Laura said. Remy had obviously meant to return Lucille’s personal (“and trifling,” added Laura,) effects to Mother. He’d given me the ring as a joke. As before, I compared him with Arnold. My cousin spoke without thinking. He had his fun by playing pranks on others. Rembrandt was calm and spoke with foresight if he spoke at all. But what he’d done was no small joke.

I could no longer feel my fingers; they’d become so cold. I hung onto the limb for another second before letting go. I should have retained my seat on my branch, but it shook and cracked. I heard a shriek from somewhere close; it sounded as if it resonated from my own mouth. I was falling from the tree. Even worse on my list of problems, Remy had given me a ring from Lucille, the woman who manipulated others and forgot her promises. The day’s last rays of sunshine broke through the branches and blinded me. I closed my eyes and waited. If my landing could have been divided into its individual parts, I might have watched myself and observed how the hairs on my head touched the grass first. My elbow and back next made contact. Finally, my head hit. Rowena flung Curly Fry, the snake Laura called a “phallic symbol,” in a spiral after me. Fortunately, a pile of snow provided us with a soft landing.

* * * * *

Two days passed. I'd spent the time in bed with a concussion. When I awoke in my room on the third day, I needed to get up. Despite the pain in my temples and sense of disorientation, I looked at my hand first to make sure the ring hadn't been lost. Rowena had tried to pull it off my finger when she'd helped Mother and Laura carry me inside the house. Then later that night, Rowena attempted to steal the ring as I lay half asleep in bed. Even though Remy played a horrific joke by giving it to me and not mentioning it had belonged to Lucille, I no longer felt angry at him. I'd convinced myself he'd felt some strange impulse in making the present to make me feel special, that and nothing else. I twisted the band around my finger. I didn't know what to do with the ring but no longer thought of taking it off. If I did, Rowena would find the ring in no time. The safest place was on my finger.

In fact, Rowena, in her tight jeans and off-the-shoulder sweater, was sitting now on the bench in front of the dresser, combing her hair, and watching me in the mirror's reflection. I wished she were somewhere else. There were two bedrooms on the second floor. Yet on my birthday, when Laura took Rowena up a flight of stairs to show them to her, Laura had agreed with Rowena the rooms were too cold for anyone to inhabit. She then opened a closet door and let a mouse run over Rowena's boot, and that was the end of the discussion. Rowena chose to stay with me. Mother wouldn't listen to my input. She said she wanted us girls to get to know each other, as if we might become close. The only person either of us sisters wished to know better was Rembrandt.

I'd never slept with anyone else in my room before, and Rowena wasn't the most pleasant of mates. Her tiny suitcase, when she'd opened it on the bed, was half empty-- Rowena owned three changes of clothes, underwear, and a large makeup bag--but her

stuff had taken over the entire room. She even ignored the spare wire hangers in the closet and took my clothes off the plastic ones. But that was only the beginning.

Last night, Rowena fell asleep facing away from me. Eventually she rolled over, edged onto my side, and put her icy cold feet against mine. I lay on my back, shivered, and tried to push her off. She sighed and pressed her body into mine. Finally, I began to feel warm. Rowena, wide awake, didn't like anyone to touch her, but asleep, she seemed different. I flipped on my side, faced her, and put my hand across her shoulder to prevent any more of her restless shifting. I, feeling brave, moved closer, felt the pounding of Rowena's heart against my chest, and listened to see if my own beat in a similar pattern. Rowena sighed, and I flung myself away, terrified at what she'd say if she awoke. My heart was pounding much too fast now to keep time with Rowena's. I lay in bed and thought about the narrator of that Poe story my English teacher liked, the one about a pulsing heart, crazy person tiptoeing through a dark room, and murder. The teacher had said the story's theme was obsession, and the narrator was single-minded in his pursuit. I wondered whether my feelings of desire were greatest not for Remy but for Rowena. When I rose to use the bathroom later, she stole my pillow and left me with only Curly Fry's coils as comfort. I had the worst trouble going to sleep.

But this was a new day. I had awakened, and things had to get better. I heard Father making coffee in the kitchen and imagined the daily scenario. He opened a canister, ground a cup of beans, and poured water in the pot. I heard it boil. Soon there came a faint but pleasant smell. Father opened the cabinet to get a mug and fiddled through the mismatched silverware for a spoon. He was making more noise than necessary, probably a way to let everyone know he hadn't decided what to do about the

new living arrangements but wasn't pleased. Ever since Father had shifted his cab into first gear, turned with a wide arc into our driveway, and entered the house, he'd had reason to be in shock. He found more than the remains of a typical party mess—floury cake crumbs mashed into the carpet and a blood smear on the chair from a boy who'd hit his nose in a game of Red Rover. To my disbelief, Father hardly questioned Mother about Burle; instead he seemed fascinated by Rowena, who stayed out of his way.

I raised my hands over my head in a stretch, found my robe, shoved to the closet's rear, and put it on. Laura entered the bedroom. "Rowena, will you comb my hair?" she said.

Rowena sighed at this probably unexpected chore. I took the comb instead. It seemed as if Laura purposely made knots for others to untangle. But she wasn't going to let Rowena off the hook easily; Laura wanted to be made up with Rowena's coveted twenty-color eye-shadow kit. I told Rowena Father didn't allow "Indian paint," but she replied she didn't want to hear the rules; that way, she wouldn't know when she broke them. Laura interrupted our bickering to inform Rowena she'd picked out three colors for her lids: yellow, green, and black. "Remember Lucille? I want to look as good as any dead person." The funeral was scheduled to take place the following afternoon.

"You're going to look more like a boxer who got hit in the eye, Laura," I said.

"I'll wear whatever Rowena thinks," she said. Laura's arms were covered with freckles. When she was five, I used to put my wrist next to hers and say, "Look, the freckles on my arm are jumping onto yours. There they go."

"No," Laura would scream. "I don't want any new spots."

Now Rowena seemed to create a wedge between us and prevent such silliness.

I told my sisters we should go to the kitchen for breakfast. Rowena begged for me to bring it to her in bed. I understood her fear of what Mother called Father's "sudden temper." But really his sense of anger had built over the years. The more Father planned, toiled, and worked without holiday, the more the weather and market went awry.

Mother opened the door, stepped in to say good morning, and said she'd help us find something to eat. Rowena put on my slippers. I followed her barefoot out of the room, down the hall, and into the kitchen. At the table, Father unfolded his newspaper and spread it across the cloth. He was used to driving more than double the legal eight hours without rest, but today he wiped his eyes. Father was a compact man with a firm look and even features. But this morning, he appeared harried. His hair stood on end, as if combed too many times, and random porcupine quills grew from his chin. Father picked up his mug. I went to the stove, leaned over the burner, and watched a pan of water for the first bubbles. No one had made a move yet to pull out a chair.

Mother tied her robe as she paced between the table and window, and Laura compared our parents' dead-end pattern to her circle, its beginning and end the same.

Father didn't seem interested in Mother's parade or Laura's theoretical discussion. He seemed most interested in the person outside the family, looked Rowena up and down as if to search her for characteristics similar to Mother's, and asked Rowena why she'd come.

"I thought it would be a good vacation spot."

Father said she couldn't stay. Rowena gazed at him. "Weather's not the best anyway, and my room doesn't overlook the ocean."

I wasn't buying her bluff. Rowena clearly didn't want to leave unless she chose to.

Father picked up the Sunday paper. He flipped through until he spotted a dog-eared page, which he seemed prepared to show us. "Let's go to the circus. What does everyone think?" The advertisement announced an afternoon of "fun under the Big Top." I studied the rearing elephant and growling lion with one paw outstretched. These colorful, garish figures were festooned with a grainy banner calling one, calling all to witness death-defying acts. Father reasoned since his trucking assignment had been postponed until the weather improved, we had time for both recreation and a funeral. He set the newspaper on the table. The ad touched Rowena's hand, and she drew her fingers back. I saw an awful look on Mother's face.

Father declared we'd finish breakfast (no one else had started) and leave in twenty minutes. Mother grabbed Rowena's arm as if to hold herself up. "You and the girls go, John, I'll stay and vacuum."

I expected Father to chuckle. Everyone knew Mother hated cleaning. He avoided her eye. "We'll have a swell time," he said.

No longer as much scared and intrigued as hungry, Laura and I scrounged up the usual what-ever-one could find breakfast. With one hand planted on the counter, I stood on tiptoe to reach the top shelf. Laura pointed in the direction of a jar of bouillon cubes. To the right lay a can of celery salt. She said, "Is there anything else?"

My parents had consumed the box of donuts sneaked from the bank lobby when Father visited but been unable to pay his debt, and there was no orange juice. I told my

sisters to choose among a combination of peanut butter, sardines, and canned mushrooms, which I'd place on slices of bread for sandwiches.

"Is the peanut butter the crunchy kind?" Rowena said.

Laura told her she was free to leave anytime--she wasn't a paying guest--but refused my culinary offerings, too. Early this morning, she'd eaten the last piece of birthday cake "for good luck," she announced.

"Whose luck?" I said.

"Mine."

"Then why would you want to eat breakfast again?"

"Breakfast is the most important meal," Laura said. "I prefer to eat it twice."

Finished with my attempts at foraging and failed at my efforts to pacify my sisters, I discovered there was no more hot water. I put a teaspoon of orange drink on my tongue. The powder was acidic. Spittle formed in my mouth. Too late to be of service, Mother offered to boil more water. Tang was what the astronauts drank on the way to the moon. They carried jars and jars of it. But I didn't understand why the drink had become so popular. As soon as those men zoomed away in their rocket ship, they must have felt lonely for Earth's effects.

Mother, her head down, had agreed to go the circus with Father on the condition she could wait in the car. "Without the motor running, to save gas," she added. The rest of us could file inside the stadium where it was a few degrees warmer and attend the Biggest Show on Earth.

"You can't wait in the Newport, Monica." The kitchen was small, but Father seemed to feel the need to shout.

At the table, Rowena kept her face deadpan. I looked to see if she were crying. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and gave a haughty sniff. While earlier I'd waited for Father to avenge me for my failed party, I now felt sorry for Rowena. For a moment, I forgot whose side I was on. She and I had probably both felt the fear of being unwanted. Hers was substantiated: Mother left Rowena in the beginning, Burle abandoned her this week, and now Father meant to make her go. Even if Rowena must leave, it seemed a shame. We were getting to know each other. Rowena might teach me things. She shaved her legs and smoked. She could dance the rumba and French kiss. Rowena was my sister, and even if I hadn't liked her much of the time over the past four days, Father shouldn't be able to drive her away like a stray dog.

I waited for her to blow up at him like a worn tire on a road full of potholes, but she didn't. She seemingly only wanted to annoy him. Thwap-thwap-thwap--Rowena tapped one slippared foot against the linoleum. She obviously wanted to see whether Father would tell her to stop. Mother took this opportunity to complain since she'd performed in the circus, nothing today could entertain her. He put one finger in his ear and turned to address her. "What's there to be afraid of? You think you'll see someone you know?"

For a second, Rowena's foot stopped. It appeared as if she were asking this question for herself. She glanced at the advertisement. Then her smile grew, traveling from her mouth to eyes. My sister stuck out her lip, as if she were a cunning trout that might possibly be hooked. Father said to Rowena, "You're going to the circus, too. You don't have a choice."

Rowena shrugged and made her way to our bedroom, where she painted her features, mysterious as those of the Sphinx, sprayed her hair with her head hung upside down, and combed her rabbit coat to prepare to attend what Laura called the “Barnum and Bumpkin” Circus.

Father was the first one out the front door. Under other circumstances, this morning would have been the start to a good day. The sun revealed its face as a marigold, and the slowly falling snowflakes didn't have time to amass on the windshield as he drove toward the highway. Despite the fair weather, I was bothered by the storms building on my parents' separated fronts, as apart wide as the Continental Divide. I looked at the back of Mother's and Father's heads, thought of how my parents pulled further apart day by day, and wondered how long their rubber-band-like relationship could stretch before it snapped in two. Father, obviously intent on his mission, drove without looking at the scenery, and Mother found her dark glasses in the glove box. We sisters huddled together in the backseat. The trip would take an hour. Father drove fast, keeping an eye on the speedometer wavering around fifty-seven miles per hour. Mother found an aspirin in her purse.

In the car, we were silent. Mother didn't bother to make small talk. Father unclenched one hand from the steering wheel and switched on the radio. Rowena took a yellow marker from her purse and colored advertisements in an old phonebook, which she found on the floor. She began in the A section and filled in ads for abortions, ambulances, and auctions, and her facial muscles relaxed. Laura proofread the newest edition of *Psychiatry Today* and complained the editors never offered anything new in the

line of mental disorders. With a red pen, she slashed through an “error” she’d located about the practice of diagnosing megalomania and, seemingly tired, slumped in her seat.

I watched the sections of land pass. Along the road, trees reached their branches into the sky and entangled them in the wooly clouds. Cattle nosed in ponds and chewed bales of hay strewn over the snow. A billboard read, “The Chamber of Commerce welcomes you to the Heartland.” My eyes took in other signs--miles and miles of words, strung together like baling wire, with their various promises.

Laura woke up, borrowed Rowena’s lipstick, and splayed fish lips on the window pane. An old couple in a station wagon Father was passing waved. Rowena stopped coloring, and I saw my chance to ask her questions, such as what she’d do when she returned to the circus. At this moment, Father hit a pothole, and the Newport jolted. Rowena steadied herself by placing a hand on my lap and then turned away. She pressed her back at an angle against my shoulder and was lost to the world. Would Rowena hug me before she left? Would she allow me to kiss her on the cheek? She laid her head against the seat, closed her eyes fully, and grew limp. Her head was tilted back and nose upturned. Rowena’s mouth fell open. She seemed helpless. My sister appeared fragile, innocent, and sweet, but I knew this was a facade. I wanted to shake Rowena awake. Even though I couldn’t admit it aloud, I wanted us to open our wrists with razors and mix the blood. With one finger, I touched her wrist and drew my finger up her arm. She began to snore.

Laura closed her journal and climbed over Rowena to sit between us. She produced a pencil and little notebook from her jeans’ pocket and proposed to conduct a study. My job was to look out the window. I kept track of the opposite lane to see if it

remained parallel with ours or whether, after miles and miles of the car's ongoing motion, the lanes might merge and oncoming traffic veer into Father's lane. I peered out the window at the northbound traffic and confirmed the presence of an approaching semi. When it passed, Laura drew a series of lines beside a physics equation, frowned with seeming disappointment, and noted the improbability of a crash.

"I guess Rowena will have to go back," I said.

Forty minutes passed. We saw the sign Springfield, five miles. Laura began to sing: "B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, and Bingo was his name-o."

"No more," Mother said. "I need quiet."

But Laura didn't stop. I couldn't concentrate on the fact Rowena would soon be gone either. I touched Mother's shoulder and suggested a round of stump the chump. "If most car accidents occur within five miles of home, why don't people move ten miles away?"

Mother turned. "I wish I could get away from you."

"Just me?" I pulled back.

"Everyone except Rowena." Mother cleared her throat. She'd had difficulty swallowing a second aspirin without water. "She's the only one who understands me."

"Maybe I should leave you and Rowena at the circus together," Father said.

"No," I said, "you can't do that." But no one was paying attention to me. Father swerved but hit the dead possum in the road, and Laura's singing rose to a shout.

Mother yanked off her sunglasses and looked as if she were going to bawl. Eight years ago, she'd suffered similar crying attacks. She'd visited a doctor, who blamed them on stress. "Let me out of the car. I can walk home."

“Don’t be crazy,” Father said. The car grew silent. I waited for Mother to gain her composure and hoped Father would give her time to tell Rowena goodbye.

We arrived at the grandstand outside city limits. The grounds looked deserted. Father drove through the unattended gate and around the perimeter of the parking lot.

“Where’s the circus?” I said, asking the question everyone obviously had in mind. Mother looked back at Rowena. She lifted her chin almost imperceptibly. Mother placed her head against the rest. Her tears dried up. I saw the grin she was trying to hide and wondered what was going on.

Father checked his watch. “We’re about on time.”

“The problem isn’t that you’re early,” Rowena said. “It’s that you’re late.”

“What do you mean?” Father rummaged through the newspapers on the floorboard. Although Mother seemed timid, she obviously couldn’t help herself when she found the paper. “Here it is, last week’s news.” She had a habit of saving papers while Father was on the road.

On the return home, Father swore he’d drive Rowena back to the circus no matter what the distance. Mother advised him the season would resume in May.

“To where should I drive her then?” Father said.

Rowena said her pa had sold her grandmother’s house after she died and could be anywhere. Father grunted. For a while, no one dared to say anything. But we couldn’t be silent forever. Mother seemed quietly ecstatic, Rowena openly pleased, and Laura disappointed she wouldn’t get to see the circus. I, surprising myself, felt relieved Rowena wouldn’t be leaving today.

CHAPTER 4

For the funeral, Rowena dressed razzle dazzle. Her dress was short and pink. With her boots, she wore fishnet stockings. Her perfume was strong enough to give the old people headaches, Laura warned. Father frowned at my sister's appearance, and Mother blinked. Neither made her change her attire, ostensibly for fear of being late. Some boy was sure to feel woozy over the sight of Rowena's knees or grow blank after gazing into her amethyst-gray eyes. Mother told me to keep Rowena in sight.

We arrived at the church and filed inside. The funeral wasn't scheduled to begin for another thirty minutes, so Arnold, already present, offered to show Rowena a view of the town from atop the church. The founding fathers built the Second Baptist in 1860. No one knew what happened to the First. The stained glass windows from Vienna had always frightened me. The largest contained a larger-than-life John the Baptist. Unlike Jesus, meek and mild, John wielded a sword. He wore a cloak corded with a gold belt and held a cluster of seven stars in his hand. He stood on a globe, and his feet glowed orange. Below him lay a scroll unrolled with indecipherable writing. The window portrayed a scene from Revelation: I wasn't sure what had been uncovered, but it didn't seem good. I imagined I heard the four horsemen on their mounts of various colors leaving the barn and racing across the plains. I feared these men would find me unacceptable.

We kids left the adults to attend to funeral details and slipped out the sanctuary and down a corridor. We found the narrow door leading to the bell tower, climbed the

spiral staircase, and opened the trap door. I entered the small, open room atop first. Laura touched the ropes, unraveled and rotting, hanging from the four bells. The deacons had rung them each Sunday for as long as I could remember. The largest was cracked and its clapper rusted. Despite this damage and the falling fence surrounding the lot, the Second Baptist Church, a tall, brick structure, with ten-foot, kaleidoscope-colored windows, remained grand.

One by one, we climbed over the shoulder-high wall and onto the church's roof. I hadn't wanted to invite Rowena to this secret residence higher than any tree house Father built, but she'd seemed mildly excited by the prospect. I hoped she'd be impressed enough to refrain from telling Mother and getting us into trouble. The last one over the wall, Arnold seemingly embarrassed himself by sliding. The concrete encasing the bricks crumbled beneath his heels. On the roof, he crawled on all fours until he reached Laura. I yelled back, "Slowpoke, you took long enough." But there'd be plenty of time before we had to see Lucille, made up, her hideous silver-blue hair finessed to the texture of cotton candy, for the crowd.

Hands resting on my knees and fingers curled downward, I perched atop the roof and fancied myself a gargoyle. Even in December, I preferred alighting on the nearly vertical roof to remaining earthbound. But there seemed nothing for a gargoyle to protect, and my calves ached from their extended preparation for flight. The demons had arrived days before to snatch Lucille's soul, and they were welcome to it. On the roof, the wind blew fiercely and prevented us from making conversation. I held my dress to prevent the gusts from whipping up my Gunne Sax dress' skirt. The neck was made of black lace, bodice of gathered velvet, and sleeves of flowing cotton. I brushed a blowing leaf from

my antiquated dress and realized I looked ridiculous. At breakfast, my appearance in the Victorian-style garment had made Laura laugh. At least the cut accentuated my waist, Mother pointed out, which was her way of saying the dress fit me.

To my rear, Laura squatted and allowed me to act as a wind block. She also used my hair to wipe her nose. When I looked back, out of all of us, only Rowena didn't appear disheveled. She'd knotted her hair into a bun, probably to get it out of her face. The blonde ends protruded like the tassels of a drapery. Arnold sat behind her, ostensibly to point out Atwater's buildings. She called out now we were safe: the line of people didn't spy us as they hurried into the sanctuary. Rowena, now we were out of danger of being caught, seemed bored. "You and your churches, Shine," she said in her deflating way. She stood up, stepped over Laura and me, made her legs as straight as arrows, and pointed her feet. Against the bird-dotted, blue expanse, Rowena balanced her arms and walked along the roof's ridge as if on a tightrope. She performed a series of Rockette kicks and caught her foot in her hand. The wind swirled the folds of her skirt between her legs. She saw we were watching. I wondered if she expected applause. I prayed no one on the main drag, which divided town, would spot her pink tulip of a body. Even more, knowing I'd be blamed, I hoped she wouldn't slip and fall. I pleaded with Rowena to sit for a spell. Seemingly in a trance, she didn't listen. Arnold, although he was giving her his attention, said nothing either. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and bit the ends; I dared not shout. She shut her eyes against the glare of the sun, opened them, and finally took her seat.

"I'm glad I didn't miss this. Jesus' home provides a great view," Rowena said. Together, we studied the town. The few visitors who discovered Atwater described it as

“quaint.” The courthouse lay surrounded by trees. The adjacent block, known as “the square,” boasted a pavilion surrounded by department stores. Two buildings lay empty, and the bank’s placard needed painting. Outside the barbershop during fair weather, old men played dominoes while waiting to receive haircuts. An old woman, whose hands danced with liver spots, hummed a jew’s harp. Anchored to the ground, a red and white pole like a candy cane twisted with the revolution of days.

“If you could escape, where would you go?” Rowena said.

“I don’t know.” I’d never considered the idea even though Father had mentioned all county roads merged with the highway.

Rowena tapped a fingernail against her teeth and then began to talk. She’d visited St. Louis and floated on a riverboat. I’d been no further than Jacksonville, with its Ferris wheel, which took one high but returned her soon to her original destination. Rowena continued the narrative, one she’d begun on my birthday, about her future. She wanted to be a dancer at a place like Radio City Music Hall: She hoped to be well-known, wear high heels, and have her picture taken in some signature glittery gown. “Famous and nothing less,” she said. I, sitting on the church, didn’t ask permission to accompany her. She looked at me and begged to borrow my gloves. I felt an unexpected rush of love when I saw her hands were white with chill, almost as pale as mine, and gave up my gloves. I guessed the bones under our skin were the same color, too. Rowena sighed, probably at the gloves’ pre-warmed state, and turned away.

I decided to share Arnold’s job of being a guide and indicated the school’s location. I reached into my puffy, orange ski-coat, which looked untoward with my dress, and found my glasses. When they slipped down my nose, I took them off.

“Why bother, Shine?” Rowena argued no warm-blooded boy would kiss a girl like me. “Except maybe your cousin.”

Arnold, from where he sat, leaned back and ripped loose a chain of icicles from the bell tower’s rim. He broke apart the spears and tossed them at me one by one. As I ducked, I watched his face to see if he’d show any emotion. His eyes avoided mine. The glass weapons shattered harmlessly on the roof. Arnold reached over Rowena and Laura, who let out a squeal, and grabbed the glasses from my hand. He popped out one lens. The sphere dropped, bouncing from one shingle to the next, until I no longer saw it descending. “Ping,” Rowena whispered, as if able to discern the moment in which the lens hit the ground.

“You robber,” I said. Last week’s Sunday School lesson concerned the two thieves crucified with Christ. They deserved to die, but one was forgiven and would meet Jesus that day in Paradise. Arnold didn’t make an apology. Instead, he bent my glasses’ wire frame. I turned, got on my knees, and lunged toward him. Laura thrust me back. “Watch it. You won’t be going to the hospital if you fall. You’ll be going to the morgue.”

Rowena pinched my side, as if to distract me. “Can we see our house from here?”

“Our home? You’re a visitor.”

“In some localities, one gains squatter’s rights upon--” Laura began.

“There.” I pointed. My eyes felt weak, but if I squinted, the blurry outlines came into view. I could seemingly see for miles and miles and miles. Surrounding the downtown lay dollhouses filled with play furniture. Beyond these lay the prairie, and the stand of trees and pond marking the house.

Snow started to fall. I observed each flake as a unique, floating cut-out, like those I'd made with paper and scissors in kindergarten. I caught one; it melted on my tongue. Laura put on her "dorky" stocking cap with its yarn ball. Rowena hugged her knees and shivered. I imagined the coming spring. April, the yellow susans sprinkled in the fields would open their black eyes, blink, and sing to the music of Bach, about whom I wrote a report in class. "Imagine," I said, describing the scene. Mother would have inherited Lucille's fortune and Father ceased his twenty-four hour drives. Rowena smiled too. She pointed out by May, she'd be gone.

On Atwater's west side lay the park. The swings, gymnast rings, and seesaws were clustered in one corner. In the center, the founding fathers had erected a monument to a hero in the "Indian Wars." The rusted statue stood on a pedestal rising from the fountain. In the surrounding pool of dirty water, the 4-H'ers had dumped snapping turtles. I thought I saw one raise its head to bite at the air. The horny beast crawled up the basin and fell with a splash.

A boy in a suit appeared with a stick. Tubby's father must have made him walk to the funeral in an effort to make him overcome his laziness. Tubby was what the high-school principal called "capricious," which meant "unthinking." He poked at the turtle's shell. In the fountain, the animal was unable to swim away. I let out a scream. Besides the monument, Atwater's other tourist attractions included the three-celled jail.

Tubby made his way across the street, searched the bushes, as if he were looking for a place to pee, and happened to look up. He pointed at Rowena. "Kingdom come," he shouted, an expression our pastor used, "there's an angel on the roof."

Arnold guffawed. I ignored the boys and gazed into the sky. But Tubby and Arnold weren't done having their fun. Arnold yelled at us to pay attention. He called out especially to me, "Shine, look, God's face in the sun."

I searched the sky. Having a vision seemed impossible, even if this is what I'd secretly waited for atop the church. I'd nearly given up even if the Second Baptist, the loftiest point in the village, was the most likely stopping spot for a being Most Holy. Of all the persons in the Trinity, I desired to have a vision of Jesus. Still my doubts remained. Arnold was wearing his white suit from a wedding, which made him appear to be a good guy, but with his wavering finger, he seemed untrustworthy. His face stretched from side to side, yet his expression came closer to a grimace than euphoria. I'd told him of my yearning to be special, selected, set apart, and now I hoped he wouldn't advantage by knowing my secrets.

I didn't possess the guts to tell Arnold to go to hell, since we were located on a church, but Rowena appeared to grow curious. She got to her feet and rose on tiptoes into the atmosphere. She searched the sky from one side to the other and then focused on the sun. She backed up a step to steady herself. "Appears to be the same old ball of butter to me."

I looked up, despite the glare, to be sure. Wait a second, the Heavenly Father, almost as good as the Son, in my mind, had appeared. He'd come in the blink of an eye; his image was superimposed on earth's star. I tilted my chin; Laura remarked my pupils shrank from the light. Although I didn't have on my glasses, I could still make out what had to be His Majesty's image. God in the sun burned down on my head and lifted His hand toward me. I threw up my own palms. He waved goodbye.

“There’s nothing there.” Laura slapped my back. “Stop listening to the boys’ jokes.”

“You didn’t see anything?” I checked the sky. Rowena loosened her hair and tossed it over her shoulder. “I was taken for a moment, but you must be stupid.”

“No, she’s just easy.” Arnold shook his chin, seemingly not surprised by his prank’s success.

Rowena leaned back and placed her head against his shoulder. Arnold, probably pleased, said into her ear, “Let me tell you a secret. Last August, Shine stayed up here for hours. She might have passed out from heat stroke. I’ve never known anyone who wanted attention so bad.” Arnold used to attend baseball practice. The diamond lay in the park, and he, donning a muddy jersey, singing songs, and carrying his cleats home, would look up at me and wave as he passed.

“But to be granted one look,” I argued. “To be elected.”

“You better not talk about visions at all,” Laura said. My stomach sank. Atop the gathers of my dress, I rubbed my bellybutton. Not that I didn’t believe God was real and could manifest Himself physically, at any place, any time. But the question was, when had He last appeared? And if He did choose to show His face to someone, why would He elect me?

“Don’t feel dumb, Shine,” Rowena said in a way that seemed tender. “So what if you’re not a ‘chosen one’? When I leave, you still have this.” She spread out her hands to envelop the town. My head hurt. There was the guilt of being bested by my sister, the anger of losing face to my cousin, and the pain of having fallen to the ground that day of my party when the angels could have caught me in their hands.

* * * * *

For the funeral, the curious came out like rats. Soon the whole town had appeared. The Sunday School girls crossed the street, ahead of their mothers, who probably lingered at the confectioner's shop to drink cappuccinos and eat sugar-cruled date bars. Together the mothers and daughters would make a quick but respectable viewing before pursuing other activities. The richest girl, in her fine black coat and jodhpurs tucked into English riding boots, would have riding lessons on her high-strung mount. This girl was so expensive in her tastes, Rowena rummaged through her ratty purse for a tube of lip gloss.

The sound of harsh whistling caught my attention. I turned. Behind the church lay a cemetery. I bent and watched Rembrandt approach. I'd been keeping an eye out for him. Most of me didn't want to see Remy again; the rest of me did. So graceful that his feet didn't seem to light on the ground, the boy with the overcast face floated toward the door. The tails of his overcoat spread behind him like the feathers of a black bird. Rembrandt looked up and saw us on the roof. He stared at me and called out, "That your favorite pastime, traipsing on top of churches?"

I didn't answer. Some gesture of my heart propelled me to lean forward, but my coat's zipper cut into my neck. My dress with its tied sash felt confining. At least modernity had disposed of the corset. Had I been a true gargoyle with wings, I would have flown to Remy.

"Churches," Remy continued. "Unless there are pretty girls during service, I'd rather avoid them myself." He pointed at the door to signal the funeral was about to begin.

“Who is this boy really?” I said to the others.

“You seem like the authority on the subject, Shine, but if I were religious, I’d say those who can see Jesus can see the Devil also,” Laura said.

Arnold agreed but on a less serious note. “You’ve had your sighting after all.”

Rowena extended one leg. She complained the blood in her feet had stopped circulating. Arnold questioned whether we were ready to descend. I pulled the fabric of my dress from my crotch and stood. Laura stretched, cracked the bumpy line of vertebrae in her back, and rose. We navigated our way across the roof and paused to study the sagging trees. Getting down was the hard part. Rowena gyrated her hips as in a hula-hoop contest. “I don’t want to die,” she said, having seemingly forgotten her high-wire skills. I felt her breath on my cheek. She pulled my arm around her waist. As Rowena drew close, her profile grew fuzzy. I told my sister of cases in the Old Testament, as with Elijah, where a person didn’t pass on at all. God might appear and take us in a chariot of fire to be with Him.

“We’d glide over the clouds, encompassed in glory, with Mr. Sacred Heart Himself and escape the funeral.” Rowena laughed and pushed her way out of my hold. “Give it a rest.”

Arnold shook the maple nearest to the roof; the tree resounded with the squawks of birds. A haphazardly constructed nest fell from a crook in the limbs, and the air was full of noise and feathers. Rowena grabbed a single brown leaf and shredded it until an outline of veins remained. The tree seemed more or less safe to shimmy down, as if we had a choice in the matter.

The first to reach the ground safely, Rowena peered through the church's window at the dull crowd inside. She wanted to sneak to the back entrance, take off her shoes, and try the "Jacuzzi," which was really the baptismal. I attempted to dissuade her from this idea. For years, Father insisted I be immersed as a sign of having joined the church. He pointed out the Sunday School girls had gone through with the bargain by age eight, and there was no possibility of drowning in public. In baptism, one was buried with Christ to be raised again. Such acts of dying and rebirth took time. The problem was, I told Father, I couldn't hold my breath more than three minutes.

Tubby joined us at the window and seconded Rowena's idea. Arnold insisted he knew how to turn on the baptismal's water, and we'd have privacy; a curtain would separate us from the crowd. Rowena whispered we all could get naked. Tubby's mouth hung open; it seemed to take him awhile to picture this. He grinned and said he'd never met a girl like her.

Conscious of playing the prim girl, I interrupted I wasn't going in the water. Tubby said, "You don't bathe, do you?" He stepped closer and made a point of sniffing my hair, ears, and neck. Even at school, the teachers permitted him do what he wanted. Recently, his father paid for a faculty lounge.

"Don't let Tubby paw you, Shine," Rowena said. I didn't possess the power to stop him, as he'd seemingly gained Arnold's unspoken permission.

"I bet Shine would like to see you naked," Tubby said to my cousin. I grew red and held up my hand decorated with Remy's ring as a defense. I didn't admit I'd already seen Arnold without his clothes. Two summers ago, we went frog gigging in a river by his house. He'd disrobed, and I'd told him to turn while I took off my clothes. We

jumped in quickly; water covered us. The current thrust us toward the middle where we paddled to stay afloat. When I accidentally kicked Arnold's thigh, he darted away. That day, his thin body seemed inconsequential, and my own was a vehicle with which to swim. We might have been no more than fish.

"Shine loves Arnold, it's true, but there's someone else we'd both prefer seeing naked." Rowena ran her fingertip over my ring and, when I withdrew my hand, pushed my shoulder. She was always testing me to see how far she could go. I'd feel like a bully for fighting over something I possessed, an attachment to Remy, and couldn't hit her. Rembrandt was a boy, Laura reminded us sisters, like any other. "Your excitement about seeing him unclothed is overrated."

Maybe she was right. This year the health teacher hadn't made me excited about the prospect of seeing any of my male classmates nude. She'd explained sex by pointing out a drawing in our book of a naked boy and girl standing together without expression. A few girls giggled, but the textbook couple seemed unaware of each other's presence. Their hands rested comfortably at their sides. The girl drawn with a few flat lines gazed straight ahead. The teacher shut her book. The smartest girl in class, a Catholic, raised her hand to ask what would be on the test. The teacher explained we should be familiar with the names of reproductive parts. We needed learn no more until marriage. My next class of the day was home economics, where there were more important things to cover, like the temperature at which poultry needs to be cooked and for how many minutes.

At this point, Rembrandt opened the door from inside the church, walked out, and headed around back. I wanted to call out to him, but he was obviously making the preparations regarding the plot. For the moment, Remy seemed as much a stranger as

before we'd met, and I took my mind off him. Like Arnold and Tubby, I preferred most to see my sister unclothed. Except for the strawberry birthmark on her back, she was almost perfect with the way her eyes alternated between the two colors of the sea. Rowena presented herself with more freedom and less "modesty" than the girl in my health-book drawing. Beads of sweat gathered on my nape. I decided I might take my dress off and enter the vestibule's water after all.

But the ceremony had begun. Father called for us to come in and held the heavy door. Rowena dropped my gloves on the ground and waltzed in. Arnold stepped, Tubby stomped, and Laura strode after her. I bent to retrieve my gloves, and the door swung shut. When I gained entrance, Mother, in her new black dress, stood in the sanctuary's center. She was introducing Rowena to everyone, as if she were a visiting member of royalty and not a girl with no birthright. My sister, with a look of disgust, gave her hand to one old man to be kissed. Whispers followed Rowena wherever she and Mother travelled. Virginia frowned and pointed out to me, in the manner grownups give unsolicited information, we sisters didn't look alike. Laura said something about nature and survival of the fittest. I, feeling foolish, left and stood at the side.

In church, Father fiddled with his tie, which he'd tied and retied to get the perfect knot. Father hadn't wanted Rowena to attend the funeral in the first place, but Mother argued Rowena was a blood relation with a reason to be present. As guests crowded in, Father, in his brown suit donned for church services, weddings, and class reunions alike, moved away with a self-effacing air. Laura and I joined him. He remarked, "A funeral is like a birthday party, except the host, dead, gives out the spankings and gifts."

"Let's hope Lucille has something good to distribute," Laura said. Although she

was too old for such an outfit, Mother had agreed to let her wear a pair of sweatpants under her dress and a spangly headband. The stars on the band became a whirl as Laura giggled.

I curtsied for Lucille's sisters, taller and shorter versions of the woman herself, as they passed us in polyester. The first, a sapphire-haired broad, banged around the room with her walker; the second gave Arnold lipstick-laced kisses. The pair, of indeterminate age, seemed as sly as their predecessor. The sisters would probably live forever, holding out their fortunes like carrots before our noses.

Rowena and Mother, who continued to make their own circle, didn't stop long enough for anyone to extend condolences or offer a wad of tissues to dab dry eyes. Rowena looked tired of what Laura called the "external gestures associated with the grieving process." I heard Rowena complain to Mother, "When can we leave?"

"Soon," she said.

"Even though there's a dead person present, at least the sanctuary is warm," Rowena conceded. In fact, the room was hot. Old men wiped their heads with handkerchiefs; their wives, wearing silk blouses and skirts, cleared their throats and offered one another cough drops.

Lucille's older sister, the one with the creased eye shadow, remarked to the younger, with an abdomen bulging like a cheap pillow beneath her filmy blouse, that Mother had "forgotten she was an orphan and overestimated her importance to Lucille."

Rowena left Mother and wandered over to the rest of us. She looked pointedly at Father. "I know Lucille ruined Mother's life, but I haven't seen how she could have been any worse than you."

“I don’t have to take you back to your pa,” Father said. “You could just walk to the highway now.” Although this warning might have been more for the relatives’ ears, he demanded Rowena show some respect for the woman who’d acted as Mother’s mother. Since Father could grab Rowena’s arm and escort her to the door at any moment, Mother hurried over to intervene in the discussion. Mother suggested Rowena and I go sit in a pew. We made our way up the aisle and took a seat in the third row. The older guests, waiting in line to view Lucille in her casket, parted to let us through.

Those under forty seemed less purposeful in their grieving. The men didn’t know what to do with themselves. In high school, they’d played football, baseball, or run track. They’d since taken up competitive smoking. They stood in a corner together and looked as if they’d have enjoyed setting up a card table and playing poker. The women commented on each others’ hairstyles and gossiped about children. Arnold and Tubby were the least ceremonious. They found a collection plate and sailed it back and forth across the sanctuary like a Frisbee before the pastor, shaking people’s hands, signaled with a raised forefinger for them to desist. No one talked about death, but the telltale air smelled of embalming fluid, fresh shoe polish, and jasmine perfume. The organ music, played by a woman with a hearing aid, was loud enough to thump Lucille out of her higher-end coffin. It was as if the organist thought Lucille might be listening from the next world to give a recommendation.

I sat on the pew’s edge, with its ninety-degree-angled back, and fingered my dress’ scalloped trim. One Sunday School girl turned away her eyes as she passed me in line. The dress really belonged to Virginia; she’d worn it as a Halloween costume. Yet maybe Remy liked such a look. I untied my belt, cinched it back tightly, and looked

around. Now Rowena and I were alone, I'd tell her about Lucille. "My great aunt wasn't popular."

"Kind of like you, Shine?"

I smiled as if this were a compliment and pushed my shoulders back. "Lucille was strong-willed."

Rowena laced her hands together, and I continued the story, inventing and expanding as necessary: "Once Mother was told Burle and Rowena were dead, she stayed in Lucille's mansion. Mother slept in her room, left the same as when she went away. Even if she awoke some mornings and wanted to leave, where would she have gone? Lucille looked for opportunities for Mother to meet men. The woman took her to funerals to meet out-of-town relatives. When winter, the season of dying, was over, spring arrived with its opportunity for natural disasters. Uncle Ben drove Mother to Red Cross emergencies, like when the Mississippi rose over the levies. In the middle of such panic, he believed his niece would meet a National Guardsman. Mother agreed to stand close to the swollen waters, so a Guardsman might have the opportunity to save her life."

"Maybe Mother considered jumping in," Rowena said.

"Maybe so." Unlike me, Mother never had a fear of water.

In any event, Lucille seemed ready to go to any extreme to make a match. Perhaps she wasn't hard-hearted; perhaps she wished to see her niece happy. But Mother grew tired of dressing up and being badgered to make her choice among the scant collection of men. When Uncle made plans to introduce her to the new deputy, a man who bred fighting dogs, she gave in. Mother agreed to marry Father, the man with a friendly smile under his wide-brimmed hat. She took action before Virginia decided to get hitched. If

Mother hadn't married first, she'd have had to wear an altered, cast-off wedding dress.

Rowena inspected her rabbit coat for loose hair. "Mother detested wearing a used dress so much she planned her life around it?" She couldn't have guessed how much Mother adored her. She'd allowed Rowena to keep this possession.

"She probably decided living with a stranger was better than remaining with Lucille."

"He's like a stranger still," Rowena said.

"He had attributes." Father was a farmer, and in those years, there had been no drought. It was a time when a man's work ethic was as valuable as his machines for planting and harvesting.

"What happened after Mother got married? Finish the story," Rowena said.

"That's it. She's been happy the whole time," I said. Rowena reached over and pinched the hairs on my lower arm. Each pull produced a separate tingle. I was about to get up and leave when Mother approached and told us the time had come. Rowena gripped the pew in front of her until her knuckles turned white. I pulled her to her feet.

"I get to see the hag who stole Mother away from Pa and me."

"Your pa is a vagrant. She wasn't leaving much."

"Is your father, who's mad all the time, any better?"

At the front, we readied ourselves to view Lucille's coffin. Mother removed her shawl and laid it on the altar. Lucille's sisters shook their heads, and one piloted the three stairs and made a point of dropping the shawl on the floor. Mother seemed to pay no attention. What was she thinking about: life, death, what to fix for supper that night?

"Do you think Mother would want to go back to the circus?" Rowena said.

“Why?” I said. “She’s old.”

“She could do something else besides ride.”

“She has her clothes, her furniture, her house. After this week, when she becomes rich, the church ladies will talk to her, too.”

“As if such things matter.”

I tiptoed to the coffin. Arnold guarded it like a centurion. Beside him stood the undertaker, a well preserved man with an ingratiating smile. He had no visible lines on his face. I grew disconcerted by the idea he might be wearing the same pancake foundation as the corpse. In a solemn voice, he was careful not to talk about death and the departed in fatal terms. I smiled. He’d needed not take such pains with us. Father seemed reluctant to accept the man’s automatic handshake. Virginia, standing among the mismatched flower arrangements and bawling like a hired mourner, clasped Mother’s stiff body to her. They rocked across the platform, as if doing a dance in which no one took the lead. Virginia could allow herself to wallow in grief as a result of her financial security, Father muttered.

I paid my respects (although Lucille was the one who owed us) and looked at my great aunt with forced affection. Laura touched the bumps on Lucille’s head as the practice of phrenology. I too was interested in Lucille’s mental capacities and the complex ways in which she’d rearranged my family members’ lives.

Laura told Father even though she was not superstitious, she hoped Lucille stayed a corpse. Virginia warned Laura, “Don’t say that so loud.” Lucille’s younger sister turned to stare at us. I paid no attention to Virginia’s admonishment or Lucille’s sisters’ evil eyes and replied, “You never know what can happen with dead people. Lazarus was

raised after two days. He came back in a state of confusion and nakedness. His sisters, Mary and Martha, didn't get their inheritance check."

Virginia put a hand on my shoulder and slid it up my neck. She seemed to burn me with her touch. I moved away, only to be forced back toward Lucille. I fingered the satiny fabric of her bed and observed she wore a new paisley dress decorated with a brooch. I grew jealous of such waste until I observed how her hands were arranged crookedly over her abdomen. I turned over one hand and saw Lucille's ring finger was swollen, as if someone had broken it. I studied my ring. I could return it now without anyone seeing. I closed my fingers into a fist instead. My aunt, with the worms stirring beneath her skin, had no use for further adornment.

I couldn't help but get closer to Lucille. I bent and peered into the face of the woman so many had wished dead, for she'd bought up people's businesses and farmers' land when they failed. Lucille was short for Lucifer. The mole on her cheek looked like a pin in a cushion, and her lips were covered with a persimmon-colored paste meant to be lipstick. Her ash-colored hair was parted down the middle and arranged in a greasy knot. I fantasized Lucille hadn't really passed on and would never stop making trouble for my family. Only the fact she smelled not of blood but of something more potent, like bleach, stopped me from reconsidering my dream as reality. Rowena, standing beside Arnold, whispered something in his ear. Before I knew it, he pushed my head down and forced me to kiss my aunt one last time. My lips hit hers, and I jerked my neck back.

"Did you like giving your aunt a smooch?" Rowena said.

"The only reason Lucille let her is because the dead can't complain," Arnold said.

"Now Shine's had practice, she'll want to kiss you, Arnold," Rowena said.

Father grabbed my arm and told me I'd finished with my turn of showing reverence. Mother, trying not to laugh, buried her face in a bouquet of lilies. With an abrupt thud, the undertaker closed the casket after the last viewers. Father let go of me. Remy strolled up to the platform. Although I'd thought of him every day since my party, this was the second time I'd seen him close. He couldn't be considered handsome in any normal way, but the image of his face wouldn't settle in my mind. Remy's eyes were beautiful unto themselves but, in the manner of a Picasso painting, didn't match his face. Rembrandt said he guessed Lucille looked a little scary. He whispered he used crazy glue to stick her ears against her head and thread to sew her mouth shut to cover her protruding teeth.

I smiled.

"You're wearing the ring."

"Yes, I want to know if it means something."

"What do you want it to mean?" he said.

"I want the ring to be special. To unite us." At that moment, I knew I loved Remy. I couldn't doubt myself.

"I see." Remy's voice seemed to come out of a void if still directed at me. When he spoke, his eyes glinted with changing patterns, a thousand of them.

"Kiss me," I said. I was drawn in by Remy's presence. He gave me a peck on the cheek. I knew everyone was watching but wanted more. "So," I tried. "Is it too soon to ask? Do you love me?" Others might think I sounded melodramatic, like the actress who wore heavy black eyeliner and a red wig in Virginia's favorite soap opera, but I needed an answer.

He stuttered. "I'm not sure. I haven't thought about it. Have you?"

I tried to pull off the ring. It wouldn't go over my knuckle.

"Wait. I've never loved anyone. I might--try." He seemed embarrassed and pulled me toward the vestibule where no one would overhear us "declare our undying passion," as Lucille's novels called it.

"Forget it," I said. Why had Remy hesitated? Was there someone else, like Rowena, he wanted instead? He couldn't want to be alone in the world.

"Don't take off the ring here," Remy said. "You might lose it."

"So are we engaged then?" I blurted out.

"Engaged?" he repeated.

"Do you want to marry me?" I held up the ring, so he could see it clearly.

"When did you get the idea of marriage? I didn't mention it."

"Promise," I said. "Promise we'll be together."

"How long do you want to be together?" he said as if I'd made a joke. "Forever?"

"Yes or at least until the end." Soon we'd be married, I thought, and Remy too would wear a ring. We'd be bound. I wondered what dress I'd wear, where we'd live, and what Mother would say. She herself had run away at a young age if only to tragedy. Most importantly, I imagined Rowena would curse and wish she'd gotten him first. "What do you say?"

"Being with me isn't going to solve your problems."

"What makes you think I have problems?"

"Everyone has problems."

Remy looked at the room full of guests and changed the subject. "This is the happiest group of mourners I've seen. I've got to see about the number of pallbearers." Like a teasing apparition, he floated away. When I located Remy again with my eyes, he was chatting with Rowena. She must have worked her own magic, a type I hoped wouldn't cancel out mine, for she hung on his arm. The girl who'd taken over my party was the darling of the funeral. In Atwater, a town where everyone knew everyone else, and all people were distantly related, the guests had called Rowena a spectacular girl; in reality, she was a mercenary.

Laura joined me. She said I should never have told Remy my name. She advised me to avoid him.

"People aren't what they seem," I said.

"They are what they seem. They're just not who you want them to be."

Laura was being dramatic; she'd never held a boy's hand. If she were a year older, she'd have fallen under Remy's spell as well. Arnold stepped up and gestured toward the coffin. He said Lucille might have been unlikable, but I'd seen nothing yet. If I didn't stay away from Remy, I'd know real darkness.

"You're a joker," I said, not to be fooled as with his so-called sighting of God in the sun. Closing my eyes, I tried to recall the Father now; the image grew weak.

"I'm telling the truth." Arnold said I needed to listen.

"How gullible do you think I am?"

"Too gullible for bad influences," he said.

The pastor, helping a woman with a cane off the stage, warned us funerals were no place for religious arguments. After he'd passed, Arnold raised his arms to mimic the

man and his stories of wizened-faced prophets but left without another word about the boy who he must have guessed represented his competition. Arnold walked away without looking back, apparently finished with his attempt to save me from Remy.

The undertaker waved his hand at the crowd and mentioned an additional pallbearer was needed. When Lucille's blood relatives seemed loath to carry the coffin, Father volunteered. The pallbearers gathered on the platform, lifted the body off the stand, but not so carefully they might not drop it. Lucille couldn't have weighed more than one hundred and ten pounds, but the men grunted and strained their shoulders in carrying the box out the door and to the hearse. The vehicle was sleek and showy, but why Virginia had considered the car necessary to make the one-sixteenth of a mile trip today, no one knew. Even Lucille's youngest sister muttered about the overflow of flowers and fanfare. The crowd, led by the pastor, followed on foot. Already at the spot, the undertaker got out of the car and opened the back door. The pallbearers, hefting the casket from the vehicle, juggled it down the incline to the rectangular hole.

Remy had removed the tarp and stood holding his shovel. I studied his profile. When the wind blew back the folds of his duster, his clothing was revealed: a black vest, cream shirt, red tie, and pants with perfect creases. I was impressed by this last detail; I always let the iron grow too hot and scorched my clothes. Rembrandt's black boots shined despite the sludge. The men who were gathered around him eyed the pit. Remy, probably guessing what they were thinking, explained the ground was frozen and the relatives' pockets shallow. At three feet deep, Lucille's grave was a mere dip. The men didn't dare venture any comments about the one-man job or the possible illegality of the hole's dimensions. Yet Remy did accept assistance in lowering Lucille's casket. When

this process was finished, and Remy was coiling the ropes, Mother broke the silence and asked if he didn't detest having to wear nice clothes under such circumstances.

"It's part of the job, sweat and all," he said. "I don't mind burying the bad woman."

Virginia, who'd seemingly been careful not to socialize with a worker, said, "How can you say such things about someone you don't know?"

"Oh, but we spent last night together."

"My mother was noble, broad-minded, and magnanimous, the last in the generation of great citizens." Virginia was no orator. She'd written these words for the bulletin.

The pastor cleared his throat and spoke of our "loss" with attempted sincerity. His eulogy was circuitous and everlasting, as if Lucille wrote the words herself to torture us. Last year, she composed a list of those in the town who'd enter heaven. The pastor's name lay at the top, after Lucille herself.

Rowena hummed to the music apparently only in her mind. Her boot heels sank into the soft ground as she swayed. She lifted one and kicked a spray of dirt on my shoe. I placed my knee against the back of her leg and nudged her away. Rowena might have been a dancer, but down she fell. Even if placing my hands against her back and shoving her felt good, I hadn't meant for Rowena to disappear into the abyss. Mother cried out. Rowena screamed as she tumbled and landed on her behind. She lay sprawled with one arm bent behind her and the other reaching up toward us.

My feet felt large, stuffed into my Mary Jane shoes. Lucille's sisters stepped forward, stood at the rim, and stared into the hole. Mother looked in my direction as if

she knew me to be the cause. Yet now Rowena sat in the dark, I wanted her to stay there. I held up my hand to display the way the light glinted off my ring. I needed Remy to make a commitment. Despite Rowena's plea for rescue, his pledge of allegiance to me was urgent. Remy waved me back, crouched, and reached for her. Their fingertips touched. I pulled away his arm. He gave me an icy smile as if to confirm his opinion of me: I was capable of low acts. Rembrandt seemed prepared to launch himself into the grave even if he sprained his ankle. Father beat him to it. He linked his fingers and made a step. Rowena placed one of her boots in his hands. The undertaker got on his knees, as if such an action were a regular part of his job, reached into the grave his white gloved hand, and pulled out Rowena. She was sobbing. Rowena's boots were filled with mud, dress stained, and rabbit coat spotted with mud. I felt afraid I'd lose Remy as she stepped forward, wound her arms around him, and created a circle to unite them nearly as impossible to break as my ring. After a minute, Rowena shifted her gaze away from her romantic interest; her eyes found me. I saw the hatred.

The weather was too cold for the guests to stand outside; the minister ended the ceremony. Laura had found some nightshade and placed it in a limp bouquet of dandelions and thistles. She threw this into the dirt. Everyone walked back to the church, but I didn't want to leave before I had a chance to talk to Remy. Rowena, standing some distance away, seemed to have the same intent.

"Remy and I got engaged today." I fingered my ring and smiled at her. I'd told a lie but thought Remy was almost ready to commit. Rowena pointed out Remy and I weren't hitched yet, and a lot could change in the next weeks.

My sister might try, but I wouldn't let her hurt me now. "Rowena, you have Mother."

"You're her daughter, too," Rowena said.

"She loves you more," I admitted.

Rowena didn't dispute my statement. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I want something from you."

"Go ahead." She seemed to like having the power to grant favors.

"I'm in love with Remy."

To my surprise, Rowena looked concerned. "Don't you know it's not safe to love anyone except yourself?"

"That's easy for you to say."

"You think everyone loves me?"

"I know. Can't you just leave Remy alone?" I said.

"I'm having fun."

"Since you came to town, you've ruined everything."

"I'm sorry. Remy's mine. He has been since your birthday."

I opened and closed my fists. I couldn't compete with Rowena, not in looks or arguments.

"There's always Arnold," she said.

I felt myself flush. "He's like a brother."

"That sort of arrangement seems acceptable around here."

"It's none of your business." I grabbed Rowena. We stood face to face.

"You take everything so seriously. You act as if those two boys make a difference

in the bigger picture of life.” We grew quiet as we watched Remy put down his shovel and wander over to us. His father said he hoped he’d see us again. “But such encounters involve someone dying.” His lack of emotion made me unsure if he were serious or joking.

“How often do people croak around here?” Rowena said.

“Not often enough.” I hoped the next person would be Rowena and then felt frightened I could think such a thought. Remy seemed like someone could guess people’s intentions, and I imagined my body in an x-ray machine. The soul trapped in my ribcage was a gray cloud. My heart revealed its shape through thin, white bars.

Rowena might be leaving, but she wasn’t wasting the time she had in Atwater, she told me. She took the opportunity to invite Remy to the reading the following day.

“The reading’s not a party,” I reminded her.

Remy replied his father and he had finished their work, and lawyers dealt with such activities. Rowena sighed at her seeming lack of diversion. She dismissed herself by saying she was going to remove her stockings and clean her bloody knees in the restroom.

Remy laid his hand on my back and studied me as if he didn’t know such penetrating looks were indecent. “Don’t sisters protect each other?”

I felt the bile in my stomach rise and burn my throat. “Protect Rowena? She’s the one out to get me.”

Death was a usual occurrence for Remy, but a macabre thought ran through my mind. I wished Rowena would simply be gone. According to my English teacher, Poe

wrote the death of a beautiful woman was the most poetic subject. He might have been picturing Rowena, for she'd make a pretty corpse.

CHAPTER 5

Three days had passed since the funeral. Early light, I relinquished my blanket and climbed out of bed. I hurried to dress, not taking time to choose my attire: a white button-up shirt, sweater vest, and plaid pants too short in the crotch. The ghost boy, if he saw me today, would have to look into my soul to find something of beauty. Rowena, leaving for the kitchen, was wearing a blue leather skirt and a cashmere shawl. She carried her purse protectively under her arm. I already knew, from having searched her wallet, she kept one-dollar bills stolen from Father's toll-road jar; the black and white print capturing Mother, Burle, and her as a baby; and Laura's precisely cut school photo. (Rowena hadn't asked for a picture of me.) The main compartment contained lemon drops, bent cigarettes, and the corner of a crinkled, mud-stained bulletin from Lucille's funeral. Rowena claimed the paper was stamped with Remy's fingerprint. It looked like a dirty smudge to me. Either way, why I should be so jealous of this guarded fragment, when I wore Remy's ring, was a mystery.

I wandered toward the kitchen, stood in the door, and yawned. Father, sitting in his chair beside the others, wished me good morning. Today was the reading of Lucille's will. Outside, the mailman passed with a zoom. I threw on my coat and ventured out to see what he'd brought. The box was filled with envelopes. I carried two stacks of them in

my coat pockets to the kitchen. Mother tore open the contents and observed the bouquets embossed on flimsy cards. Laura sneezed as though allergic to the paper floral arrangements and read aloud the Hallmark clichés. My English teacher would have called them “purple prose.” The personal inscriptions were varied and bizarre, such as this one: “Lucille’s death was tragic, but we’re glad it finally happened.”

Inside the flap of the family Bible, Mother recorded the names of people sending their sympathy. One even rendered condolences for Burle’s “unfortunate disappearance.” She rose, wiped her eyes, and left the room to move the laundry from the washer to dryer. Father got up to pour himself another cup of coffee. Before he sat down, he swept the cards into a pile and tossed them into the trash. Thin tombstone sheets piled on top of one another in the garbage can. Mother would be angry Father disposed of her “promises of being remembered in a time of sorrow,” I said.

“Now maybe Mother’ll pay attention to us instead of concentrating on a dead person.” Father generated his own clutter by producing pencils, a calculator, ruler, and county map from a grocery bag. He spread out the map and circled various acres of mortgaged land he hoped to pay off with Lucille’s former funds. Father told us after the reading, we’d never have to worry about money again. He clapped his hands and promised to take us to the local steak restaurant.

“According to Maslow’s pyramid of the hierarchy of needs, people who remain fixated on food and shelter never achieve self-actualization,” Laura said.

Father said the restaurant served pie.

Laura and I pursued breakfast. She shuffled to the refrigerator, opened its door, and shook the empty milk jug. The cereal was nearly gone, but that was her fault, I said.

Following a visit to Lucille in the hospital, Laura consumed most of the box for lunch. She'd pushed up her sleeves and stuck her arms in, two at a time, and grabbed handfuls of Lucky Charms without bothering to put them in a bowl. This morning, I offered to mix up some baby formula to moisten the crumbs. Laura grudgingly accepted. The formula had been included in the box reserved for "special cases" Mother found at church.

Breakfast was over. Father left his place at the table, stood at the sink, glanced out the window, and began talking to himself. He explained the family's living situation to an unknown and unseen third party: The bills mounted faster than he was able to pay them. The trucking business had slowed; Father hadn't worked more than twenty hours since my birthday. Today his troubles would come to an end. He'd pay off the semi and was glad he'd bought a new instead of used one, with its grill dulled by layers of dead insects. Father nodded; the man in the window pane agreed. Father made a "thumbs up" gesture.

With Lucille dead, we'd live in luxury beyond anyone's wildest wishes. Laura, helping me clean up, expressed her desire for packets of muffin mix, a set of fifteen pastel-colored markers, and a diamond tiara. She handed me her cereal bowl and looked disgusted as I drank the milk before placing it in the sink water.

Mother, pulling fuzzies off her sweater, returned. "You all do remember the money is mine," she said. "Before I pay off any debts, I'm going to splurge on something for myself."

We girls were silent. Father turned on the AM radio to hear the weather.

"I want to buy a dress for the reading." Mother sidled up to Father and snaked her body around his as if to seek permission. He'd been fumbling with the antenna and trying

to catch the price of soybeans. He stopped and kissed her. My parents clung together, but since they were wearing long sleeves, their skin didn't touch. "I'd prefer a red one."

Father picked up the yardstick and pointed it at Mother. "That black dress will be fine."

"Everyone saw it at the funeral." Mother looked as if she might not give in.

"We're not going to a party," Father said. "Still, I wouldn't care except we don't have the money."

For a second, I thought Mother would fly to pieces. What was stopping her from taking her inheritance and jilting us? My heart beat fast: I'd never been separated from her for more than two days. Outside the window, two deer appeared. Soon the doe bounded away. The fawn trailed behind, unsure whether to follow its mother or to venture out on its own. Whatever the fawn decided in its foraging efforts, it would find little grass beneath the snow.

"Money's not the only problem I have," Mother said.

"You're right. I'm not going to put up with suitors." Father declared he'd have followed and beaten Burle if he'd have come home that day. Mother turned away. Her eyes grew wet. Father offered no apology. Rowena obviously wasn't going to let the matter go so easily. She had something to say, too. "I understand why you're worried about Pa. Mother said you and she haven't had sex in six months."

"You told Rowena that, Monica?" Father's face deepened in color.

Mother put a hand to her mouth. She'd obviously not thought Rowena would mention a secret like this. "It's not anyone's fault, Rowena. John's on the road a lot, and

when he comes home, he's tired, or I have a headache. I feel sick now," she said and left the room.

* * * * *

In the kitchen, the skit was Laura's idea. For the past five minutes, Rowena had lain in an empty box and pretended to be dead. Laura, the mourner, was supposed to file past, look at her body, and murmur a mixture of niceties and curses, as visitors had done with Lucille. Laura giggled when the dead Rowena, not opening her eyes, put her hand over her nose and sneezed. I acted as pastor. After giving a talk, I shut the tabbed lid of the cardboard coffin and said I'd find my shovel. Laura suggested cutting the corpse into pieces with a chainsaw and disposing of them separately to avoid putting a strain on our backs. Rowena shrieked and jumped from the box. Although it wasn't right to sacrifice her, I'd attend another funeral if it meant spending time with Remy.

When it was time to go, Mother appeared in her black dress for the reading. She refused to speak to Father after he advised her to transfer the grief she felt over Burle's absence to Lucille but said we girls didn't mind playing actresses' parts for the relatives' benefit. Ready for the real show, we hopped into the Delta '88, which had taken us to various important places lately: the hospital to watch Lucille die and church to see her buried. The last ride we needed to take was to Lucille's house to get the loot. Mother turned on the radio: "An ice storm is being predicted In other news, a bank receptionist became alarmed when a woman sat inside her vehicle for fifteen minutes and talked to herself. When police arrived, the woman was listening to a motivational tape Three-year-olds reported riding Big Wheels at the intersection of White and Sparrow had left the scene when police got there"

“Maybe we can buy a new car,” Father mused. He’d neglected to bring the calculator to gauge the cost of gas for the seven-mile trip.

When we arrived, Virginia met us at the door. She seemed nervous and had developed a limp, one of her odd, temporary handicaps. Virginia grinned broadly, an expression accentuating her double chin, and lurched over to shake Mother’s hand. I saw Virginia wouldn’t have an emotional outburst as at the funeral and hug her today. My relatives—the tree extending to fourth and fifth branches—crowded inside the parlor or flowed into surrounding rooms. The coal miners, farmers, butchers, ranchers, and railroad workers had gathered with luster to stake their claims. I heard the men discuss wildly their chances of buying fishing boats, stereo consoles, and hunting dogs. The women described plans for linoleum flooring and patio furniture. They approached us girls to make jokes about our “boyfriends.” Afterwards, we stayed close to Mother. Virginia circulated, nodded as if she were Mrs. Claus upon hearing such requests, and held a Kleenex over her face as if assuring everyone she’d been bleary eyed.

Virginia got the crowd’s attention for lunch. In the midst of these relations whose names I couldn’t remember, I spotted Arnold and Tubby. Arnold, with his blaze of girl curls and instigator eyes, suggested Rowena, Laura, and I sit with him. Virginia traveled like a waitress among the cardboard tables and poured cups of non-sweetened iced tea, coffee, and hot cider. My relatives ate slowly and ploddingly like sheep. Father searched for the salt and pepper shakers to flavor the overcooked and bland food: flat yeast rolls, mashed potatoes topped with lumpy butter, and macaroni with a brown skin of cheese. He complimented Virginia on the repast.

After gorging themselves, my family members could hardly walk. But they

obviously meant to get all to which they were entitled, even if they had no use for it: canned tomatoes filling basement shelves, swatches of material, seed packets, and empty soda bottles connected by a series of intricate cobwebs. They carried Lucille's scraps in boxes to their vehicles as if this were a necessary part of mourning. Some obviously weren't satisfied only with items deserving to be thrown away. Dolls disappeared from a cabinet, a fountain pen lost its place on the desk, and an ashtray would find a new home beside the bathroom counter. I watched this treasure hunt without envy and thought of the new items my family would purchase.

Before lunch, Mother asked us girls to sit with her during the reading. But Laura promised we'd miss nothing. We shook off our stupor created by the food settling in our stomachs and decided to play a game. Virginia suggested Monopoly, but Lucille hadn't been interested in games; she'd pursued the real properties and accrued genuine assets. We discovered in the drawer nothing but a pack of bent cards and a mousetrap. Tubby voted for tag, which made me laugh. I'd never seen him run. We decided on hide-and-go-seek. Since we couldn't streak through the house screaming, which was the whole point, we decided the best place was outside. Tubby was it. This meant the game would last for a long time. The rest of us bolted in all directions. Rowena, who seemingly couldn't decide where to hide on her own, pursued me. We kids weren't supposed to play inside the barn--there were loose boards, but I ignored the possibility of needing a tetanus shot. We two climbed the ladder and stood among the loft's musty hay bales. Although the weather was chilly, I removed my Mary Janes and, barefoot, sat in the window. Perhaps God didn't appear to those who perched on roofs, but the Sunday School teacher did say Jesus was born in a manger.

Arnold, standing below me outside, pointed up. Tubby spotted me. I needed to find a new place to hide. Arnold was scurrying around the clusters of raccoon poop and up the ladder. On the loft's opposite side, the floor gave way to open space, where a farmer dropped bales of hay to cattle. Arnold skipped up and poked me in the back. "I could shove you off, Shine, to see how loud you yell."

I felt a thrill at the sound of his voice and hoped he might try to carry out his threat. He would have to put his hands on me. Remy hadn't shown up at the reading. I didn't remember what he looked like, and I didn't know when I'd see him again. Giddy, I turned and grabbed Arnold. Our bodies twisted. He, acting as Tubby's agent, tagged me. I was out of the game, but I wouldn't turn dead. He wrestled me to the ground. We got too close to the edge and pushed ourselves up. Arnold's lower arm had been slashed. Feeling a rush of elation at our close call, I kissed the blood off the spot. Arnold made puking sounds and wiped the remainder of it on my dress. I hoped the stain would set, that Mother wouldn't be able to wash it away. Arnold studied me as if I were someone he couldn't understand. "You're as gross as Lucille."

"Does cannibalism run in the family?" Rowena said.

Laura said she should try to appreciate taboos associated with primitive cultures. Rowena had to agree, "We are in the country."

Arnold, who should have remained repulsed, seemed aroused by my behavior. He squeezed his arm with his fingers and looked my direction. Perhaps he thought more blood would tempt me. Laura, perhaps sensing the strange romantic undercurrent among us, suggested we go inside and eat any remaining dessert. I could hear Tubby climbing the ladder. He breathed heavily as he ascended. When he reached the top, Arnold told

him to turn and go back down.

Arnold proposed the rest of us go ahead of him. "Except you, Shine." He said he wanted to teach me a lesson. I didn't know what he'd do. My cousin had never hit me. I must have crossed some line. Rowena sidetracked Arnold by hooking an arm through his and leading him away like a manager with his prize fighter. I thought she was looking out for my welfare until I heard her ask if something odd happened to me as a child. Arnold chuckled.

The cattle in the pasture lowed and stamped their feet. I, unable to hear anything, left the duo to their private conversation. In two groups, we hurried to the house.

At the kitchen counter, we ate pieces of lemon meringue pie while standing. The table was cluttered with casserole dishes, stacks of plates, and greasy utensils. The reading was taking place in the library, and it was too late to enter at this point. We continued our game with renewed energy.

My first mistake was to remain in the house. I was slow in finding a hiding place, and in trying to get away from Arnold, I opened the laundry chute door and jumped in head first. This seemed a perfect idea in the abstract. Arnold feared tight spaces. He wouldn't follow, and I'd slide to the basement, exit out the back door, and make my escape. Diving down, I gained seven or eight feet, but my body, I discovered, was bigger than it used to be. The funnel-shaped opening narrowed at my shoulders. Halfway down, halfway up, I was stuck fast. At first, I hung there calmly, poised like a bat in the passage. The Sunday School teacher promised God would help us; we had to have patience. On the other hand, she said to our Maker, a moment and a million years were one in the same.

The blood drained to my head. My ears pulsed like crazy. I flailed my arms caught in front of me. I wiggled to the left and right but become more entrenched. My hips, the widest part of my body, were caught. Outraged, I thumped the tube with my noggin and waited for the results. Someone had to hear me. Nothing. The reading must be over. I could detect the presence of feet shuffling overhead. I wondered if any of the steps belonged to my parents and hoped Mother would be happy with her lot. There was movement in the kitchen. The grown-ups, returning to their places at the table, scratched their chairs over the wood floor. From what I could hear, someone seemed to have found the pack of cards I'd left out. The group began a game of skidoo. I imagined Virginia cutting the deck and heard her complain about the difficulty of winning a hand due to the problem of missing cards. Her whining voice had an ecstatic quality, and I assumed she must have received the largest portion of Lucille's estate. Virginia wouldn't be playing a game if she thought she'd gotten anything less than what she deserved. The other relatives joked bitterly they'd driven to the house for very little: checks for one hundred dollars. The conversation was heating up. A man farted, laughed as if to excuse himself, and deflated the tension.

"You got to see your kin and have a meal," Virginia said to someone. "You may not have gotten what you wanted, but you received more than Monica."

"You're right," Uncle Henry, Virginia's husband, replied. "After all Monica did, she got a lousy twenty-dollar bill inside a thank-you card."

"Monica was never submissive. I knew Mother would punish her." Virginia sniffed. "Mother didn't have to do anything for Monica at all."

"She didn't," Henry said.

“It’s not as if Monica were Lucille’s child,” Lucille’s older sister said. Suddenly, everyone stopped talking. Perhaps Mother had walked past the door.

So, I thought, after meeting Lucille’s every need, Mother was getting nothing. I felt a sense of shock. My family had been tricked. I knocked my head against the chute angrily even if this action would cause brain damage.

“What was that?” Henry said.

“I heard something,” said Lucille’s younger sister.

“Must be termites,” the farting man joked.

“Or rats in the walls,” said Lucille’s older sister. “I hate rodents.”

“I didn’t detect anything,” Virginia said.

“You sure heard the lawyer list your assets,” the man said.

“What will you do with Lucille’s house anyway, Virginia?” Lucille’s older sister said.

“I have good memories of the place.” Virginia admitted she felt sentimental about it. She grew reminiscent in the way some adults recalled their high-school days and wished to return to them. Mother once told us Virginia married at seventeen to get away from Lucille.

“Surely you won’t move here.”

“I’ll sell the house,” Virginia said.

“You should give it to Monica,” Henry said.

“Give it to her?” Virginia acted as if she’d never heard anything so ridiculous.

I sneezed and hit my head on the chute’s top.

“Listen. There it is again,” Lucille’s younger sister said. “That noise.”

I heard someone get up, pace around the kitchen, and stop to listen in different locations for the noise. I was quiet. Lucille's older sister advised Virginia to take the money, buy a beach house in Clearwater, and leave Atwater. "Shoot, I'd move there among the rich and famous."

Virginia made no reply, which meant she probably felt satisfied with the attention paid her. She announced she'd saved a second pecan pie, one we kids hadn't found in the refrigerator. I pictured the relatives rearranging their bottoms on the chair cushions, tapping their teeth with their forks, and scraping the pie tin clean.

"How can you be eating pie when I'm dying?" I slammed my head again. The pain returned with greater intensity.

"Whatever it is, it's big, like a raccoon," Lucille's older sister said.

Virginia let out a squeal and promised she'd take up the matter with an exterminator.

My tunnel remained dark. After what seemed like an hour, someone opened the chute. I saw a glint of light and felt eyes fascinated with my predicament settle on me. Arnold laughed and asked what I was doing.

"Shine's having a hard time. She probably needs another birthday kiss," Tubby offered. I heard a thump. There began a scuffle. Tubby was probably shoving Arnold against the chest and pushing him into the wall. Arnold, apparently confident of his alpha male status, said to Tubby, "If you don't get out of my face, I'm going to pound you."

"Arnold threw me in here; I couldn't get away." I lied, not wanting to appear stupid. My dress was gathered around my waist. I tried unsuccessfully to pull it over my underwear.

“I never touched you, Shine,” Arnold said.

“He’s right. Arnold’s been chasing me,” Rowena concurred.

“Help me, someone,” I said.

“Shine, you’re not hurt,” Rowena said. “Don’t let these two fight over you.”

Laura asked Rowena to pick her up, so she could look down the chute. “I don’t know. I’ll see if I can work out an equation in my notebook.”

“I can’t wait that long,” I said.

Tubby tried to reach down the passageway and pull me up by the feet, but his shoulders were too wide. He could fit only one beefy arm at a time. Rowena told Tubby to quit grunting. She argued there’d be no use in him, a big boy, getting stuck as well. The voices became confused; my concentration blurred. I was feeling hot and light-headed. I might have been in Lucille’s coffin. What I wanted was for Remy to appear, wiggle up the chute from below, wedge his body in with mine, and stick his tongue in my mouth.

Arnold decided he was the one for the job, gripped my ankles, and pulled. The metal passage, as mysterious as a pyramid’s catacombs, skimmed off a scab on my knee. He let go. I remained trapped within the mysterious space and recalled how one pharaoh had the architect of his tomb’s hands and tongue cut out, and his eyes plucked. The creator could never disclose the monument’s inner construction.

“Shine’s too large,” Rowena said. “This isn’t going to work.” She told Arnold to go to the basement and check how much further I had to fall. Sighing, my cousin clomped down the stairs. Just when I thought no one would rescue me, there he stood. I squinted at him. He reached his hands up. I stretched out my arms; my fingers could

almost reach his.

“What’s taking so long?” Laura yelled. I felt like I’d been wedged in the chute for days. Arnold raised himself on tiptoe, grabbed one of my hands, and jerked so hard my shoulder popped. I felt like a victim of the rack. His breath was stale with onions. Laura declared she’d finished her equation: The answer was the hole had to be bigger than my butt. Rowena commented when she was a child, her pa read her the story of Winnie the Pooh. The bear got himself stuck halfway inside a tree hole after eating too much honey and had to wait months until he’d grown skinny enough to go free.

If I couldn’t scoot down, Laura would have to get Mother, she warned.

“The construction workers will have to tear down the house to reach you, Shine. Bulldozers and all. It’s late though. You’ll lie here till tomorrow.” Rowena laughed.

Arnold objected Virginia would never allow anyone to damage to her new property.

“We need some lubricant,” Laura said. Tubby, probably trying to help, shot one down the chute before she could prevent it, she advised me. The goober slid over my foot. Or maybe it was a crawling roach. I kicked the chute’s side with my toes. I blinked; a tear inched from the corner of my eye but stayed put. I could see the end; I didn’t have too far to fall.

“You have the right idea, Tubby.” Laura commanded him to get the garden hose, open the door, and loop it through the house. I heard him crawl on elbows and knees, past the kitchen, like a renegade. He returned with the same loud, clumsy motions and stretched the hose through the hall. “Cold water or hot?”

From what I understood from the conversation, the hose wasn’t long enough to

reach the hatch. Rowena let out a shriek when Tubby squirted her to test the water strength. I heard feet running into the kitchen.

“What are you kids doing?” Virginia said. Laura told her not to worry about anything.

“Rowena’s dress is wet. And why do you have the Crisco?”

“I need it for this summer. To get a tan.” Laura must have been beaming. Virginia chuckled and said Laura was full of schemes. “I shouldn’t let you take that, but it’s too cold to think about sunburns.”

My sisters must have left the room. In the hall, I heard whispering. The laundry door opened. Tubby dumped in the contents of the Crisco bottle. With a whoosh, a stream of oil flooded the chute. It leaked into my underwear, filled my socks, and squished in my shoes. Oil ran across my forehead and stuck to my eyelashes. I tried to wipe a trickle off my ear, but my hand couldn’t bend and reach. Laura asked Arnold to see if this method had worked. He trudged back to the basement, looked up at me, grabbed my hands, yanked until he could grab my shoulders, and tugged my torso down. I slid a few inches. “Why are you so much trouble?” he said.

Dizzy, I didn’t reply. The last two feet seemed like a long way to go. Arnold caught me in his arms and dropped me into a pile of Lucille’s underwear and socks, yellow with age and now drenched with oil. We sat on our knees. I hugged him as a way of saying thank you. I was happy he’d been my rescuer, after having made fun of me at the funeral and reading. When I drew back from his arms, I bumped his nose. He leaned forward. I aimed for his cheek but kissed him on the lips. I felt an electric shock, as if I’d grabbed an eel’s tail, and pulled back instinctively. Arnold didn’t respond. I was glad to

be rescued by my cousin. I tried to act nonchalantly, stretching out one cramped leg and making a joke. “Looks like your mother inherited a bunch of old laundry along with everything else.”

“I’m sure she’ll let you have these things. You need to change your clothes.”

“I guess so.”

Arnold threw a dirty towel in my lap. I wiped the oil from my face, hair, and neck. He informed me Virginia had decided to keep the house but said Mother was welcome to haul away any furniture. Upstairs, our relatives were shouting. Lucille’s older sister said to Mother, “You shouldn’t have run away when you were young and worried Lucille.”

“I’m tired of being unappreciated.” Mother raised her voice. “I wish I’d never returned!”

“You did, but it doesn’t mean you get one penny more for your trouble.”

I heard the sound of breaking glass against the wall. Mother must have flung her drink from her hand. I was silent in anticipation of hearing any last words. I peered at Arnold to get his reaction; he should be sympathetic to the fact Mother wasn’t going to be exonerated. But my cousin wasn’t paying attention to what was happening upstairs.

He had this look in his eyes, one boys in gym class gave me when I wore my tank top, shorts, and knee socks. He said a strange thing: He was tired of being a virgin. He remained the last of his friends to be so. Arnold said even Tubby had gotten laid by a bank teller at one of his father’s appreciation parties. I began to laugh when I imagined this. Arnold didn’t smile. He ran his eyes over my body and unzipped his pants.

“Wait, what does your status have to do with me?” I said. He admitted he had a crush on Rowena, but she was unapproachable. On the other hand, I always appeared at his side, next to him, ready, he said. Arnold whispered it sickened him to find me flirting with and kissing him in the barn. “But I’ll give you what you want.” He knelt in the pile of laundry and touched my chest. Arnold tugged at his pants and unhitched his belt.

“No. I never meant anything in the barn.” I pushed myself back on my hands like a crab looking for a hole in the sand. “Leave me alone.” I was sure Arnold understood the logic of my request. I told him we should go upstairs; the others were waiting. He promised we’d go soon. First there was something he needed to do. He stuttered I was to be his first, but I’d have to do.

“Get away,” I said. “You’re not thinking.”

He was overcome by some animal power. His eyes appeared small and set deep in his face. In the weird light emanating from the chute, his skin glowed green like the Incredible Hulk.

Arnold was on top of me. The vegetable oil on my abdomen made our bodies slide. I didn’t scream. I didn’t make a sound. Everything was happening too fast. My mind searched for answers. It was clear this was an emergency, but what was the protocol? I imagined the flames of a fire and knew in such cases, I should stop, drop, and roll. If there were a tornado, I should go to an inside closet and kneel. Lost, I should stay in one place, and I’d be found. In the case of a bear attack, I’d play dead. I must stay still, even if it meant being mauled. Was rape to be treated the same way, as an animal attack?

A minute passed, two minutes, three. Arnold and I were alone, the only two people in the world. My cousin pushed inside me. I thought of standing by the well with

Rowena and reliving the story of Mother's descent. I'd been inside her at the time. We'd disappeared into a hole below the ground. Today, I felt as if I were still falling.

Arnold's face pressed against mine. Our eyelashes touched. I embraced his back to soften the thrusts. There was pain, like the feeling of the dentist drilling a tooth and going too deep, but I hung on. I sucked in air, clung to Arnold's neck, and waited to see if he'd touch the nerve again. Where were my sisters and Tubby? Where was Father? I hoped for a savior without expecting one. Mother, in the midst of her own problems, would never find me, and there was no time for the arrival of the jade-eyed boy with the weird name. I thought I heard steps on the stairs and grew afraid. Arnold lifted his head too, but no one was there. That was fine with me. I didn't want anyone to see my cousin and me locked in this awkward position.

"Stop, Arnold. Think about who I am." I recalled when we were children, playing Robin Hood and his Merry Men in the woods, throwing rocks at a settling vulture, and taunting a bull that liked to charge us. When we came out of the brush, I pulled the ticks from his scalp and squished them against a rock to remove all evidence of the day.

Arnold climbed off of his own volition. I stayed on my back, too afraid to move, even if the rape was over. He lay panting next to me. I realized someone else was there. Tubby came closer and then shuffled back up the stairs. He'd whistled tunelessly to alert us to his presence and, I saw, possessed a look of panic on his face as he ascended. By now, Arnold had become himself again. He looked at me as if he didn't know how I, half naked, had gotten there next to him. He whipped a sheet from the laundry pile over my body as if I shouldn't be displaying myself. Then, he pulled up his pants and fumbled with the buttons as if he'd never seen them before. Arnold, clothed and seemingly

innocent, got up. I adjusted my dress, gathered at the waist, and after a minute of searching found my underwear, torn and slightly bloody.

“Is everyone okay?” Tubby had returned with a procession. My sisters filed down the stairs behind him. Rowena averted her eyes. Laura reached out her hand to help me off the floor. “I’m glad you got out of the chute unhurt. We were worried.” Despite her talk of Freud, she didn’t know what sex looked like.

“I *am* hurt.” I tried to stand. Arnold, not seeming to want to touch me, hurried to take my other hand. “Everything will be all right,” he said. “I’m sorry I tickled you so hard you cried. Try not to think about it anymore.”

“Right, because you won’t,” I said.

Tubby, looking as if he didn’t want to linger and be part of any discussion, said he wanted to go upstairs and see if there were any buttered rolls left. “Tell Arnold he’s your hero and stop bellyaching. You’re free now.” His mind appeared stuck on the previous project of ejecting me from the chute. There was no hint of understanding in his face, even after he’d witnessed the crime itself.

As I followed the others upstairs, I adjusted my dress’ neckline and scratched at what I hoped looked like a wasp sting on my neck. The mark was where Arnold bit me. My long dress covered the rest of the mess. Tubby and Arnold laughed as they pummeled each other and raced down the hall, probably to find Virginia. I headed for the bathroom and hoped Mother, who unlike Virginia, wasn’t using the kitchen as a throne room, hadn’t locked herself in. She and Father were talking in Lucille’s bedroom. Lucille, besides willing Mother an insulting sum of money, had also given her a mattress. Father seemed excited about this present. In Lucille’s room, Mother stripped the bed sheets.

Father knelt and ran his hand along the mattress' side. He didn't feel any holes into which he could stick his fingers or detect any signs of stitching, he said. He picked up the mattress, tipped it off the bed, and made the same careful inspection of the box springs. Seemingly impatient, he drew his pocket knife, slashed, and ruined the set altogether. Mother kept quiet.

“Where's the money?” Father said.

She must have guessed the joke early on. The mattresses held no secrets—they represented only the pad on which Lucille slept.

Father left in a fury. Mother, perhaps too disgusted to clean up the mess, closed the door behind her. She'd hoped and prayed and gotten her measly inheritance, she said. With all the bills, the money was already gone.

“I have to tell you something,” I said.

“Not now,” Mother said.

I considered showing her my wounds but knew she couldn't stand the sight of trauma. I left her and shut myself in the bathroom, observed myself naked in the mirror, found the scratches and traced them with my finger, and modestly smoothed down my patch of pubic hair. Arnold forced me to lie on the concrete floor, and the skin on my back was red and raw; the top layer had been being rubbed off. On my shoulder blade was a welt that looked like a cigarette burn.

The health teacher warned a penalty existed for those who didn't practice safe sex. There was no use taking chances. I ran water in the sink at the hottest temperature possible and rubbed the bar of soap over my abdomen. Suds ran down my legs. When I'd finished, the rug was soaked. I found a towel to dry the sink. Afterward, I opened the

cabinet beneath the sink and discovered a collection of cleaning agents. I considered spraying tile cleaner on my private parts and flinched as I pictured myself then using a Brillo pad to scrub inside. Someone pounded on the door to hurry me up. “What are you doing in there?” a man said loudly. “Don’t you know people are waiting?”

I imagined he put his ear to the door to see if he could hear my secret movements. When I said nothing, he cursed and wiggled the knob. “It’s been seven minutes.”

I pulled on my ripped panties, tried a smile in the mirror, opened the door, and pretended everything was in order. My insides burned as if they’d never stop.

“Are you done? I was getting a screwdriver.” He glared at me and shoved his way past. I apologized there was no toilet paper.

CHAPTER 6

After cleaning up the bathroom, I fled to the car to avoid an encounter with Arnold or anyone else. When I looked back to make sure he hadn't followed me, I noted Lucille's upstairs windows looked like watching eyes. I jumped into the backseat. The leather was cold. Sometime later--the passage of time wasn't important now—my family showed up. Mother might have thought it strange I was lying in the backseat, but didn't say anything. Father seemed relieved I was present and accounted for.

That night Mother asked me if I were in a “bad mood” and, when I didn't answer her, ordered me to bed at 6 p.m. I slept little, turning, flipping, and wallowing in the sheets. Rowena got up, left, and went to sleep with Laura. I wandered to my bookshelf, perused the selections, and found the book Father bought me, along with the stuffed snake, from the clearance rack. He'd seemingly decided to splurge this year. I located my flashlight, scrambled back in bed, and observed the title: *Monsters*. I shook my head, wondered why Father had selected such a text, and opened it to the Table of Contents: Witches and Warlocks, Ghosts, Werewolves, Vampires, and Zombies. I turned to the section on the undead and questioned what we had in common. Routes to vampirism included failing to receive a proper burial, suicide, dying unbaptized, witchcraft, drinking wine left in old skins, and eating meat during Lent. Being the sixth son of the sixth son or the illegitimate child of two illegitimate children would result also in Nosferatu. Laura

would deem such village superstitions a joke, but I understood being a vampire meant being rejected. The book gave this quip, “Vampires and teenagers are alike: They’re both misunderstood.”

I’d never fit in. The Halloween I was seven, Mother sewed me a vampire cape. I wore it to class for months. I hid it in my book bag until I was on the bus and could pull the cape over my shoulders and assume my identity. I wished never to grow tall or old. One morning, the bus driver discovered, the ways adults always do, the girl in my seat had pulled a scab off her knee, and I’d sucked the blood cleanly from the wound. The woman called me a “rabid bat.” That day, I knew I’d never be an angel, faced with the painful prospect of earning wings and wearing a tinsel halo that fell in my eyes. The pastor said, “By grace are we saved through faith,” but I’d felt lost ever since. Whatever it was I was supposed to find, I didn’t know. Heaven was a marvelous place, the pastor promised, but there were different levels, according to one’s dedication. I guessed my gown would be black, torn, and dotted with blood. A horde of flies would buzz around my head and enter my mouth if I dared open it to explain myself while I hung around the tall gates and waited until no one was watching to climb over.

I couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to read anymore about rejection. I got out of bed. I wandered down the hall, looked at the pictures in the parlor, and arranged the sofa pillows. Mother and Father had gone to hear a special evangelist. If he prayed for everyone and people passed out, the service could last until 10 p.m. In the kitchen, the radio played low. In a country ballad, a man’s voice crescendoed and decrescendoed. The DJ interrupted for a report: Police were called to Hedge Street, where an elderly woman had looked out the window and mistaken a piece of wood in her yard for a human leg.

In Laura's room, my sisters were asleep. I tiptoed to the bathroom and flipped on the light. A bulb in the chandelier popped and burned out. Laura, yawning, appeared beside me in the mirror and frightened me. I said, "You should go back to bed. You don't want to see this."

She perched on the bathtub and complained the most interesting things happened when she was asleep. I gazed at my shadow face in the mirror, fixed the stopper, and filled the sink. Father's razor lay in the top cabinet. As any teenager, I knew how to do the operation. I pushed up my nightgown sleeve, made six short strokes at an angle, and retraced the swathes. My sister, looking disturbed, informed me my scientific theory about the best way to commit suicide was one already proven. I held my wrist. Laura said my priorities were misplaced: "No more evidence is needed about the procedure of killing oneself. You could have shaved your legs instead."

I might have laughed if my arm didn't hurt so much. I grabbed her hand and urged her to follow me. I didn't want the blood to drip down my hand and fall on Mother's rug. We dashed outside. The moon hung like a knob on the black-door sky. A mist lay over the ground. Laura had been smart enough to put on shoes. I stepped with my bare feet off the porch and into the snow and began to run. The sting from my wrist settled into my feet. We vaulted through the backyard, passed the corral, up the hill, and through the pines. The trees flailed me with needles long and brown like a broom's wisps. Laura stood atop the crest. I knelt and pressed my mangled wrist on the snowy ground. I couldn't tell if I were losing blood but lay with my head on my arm to dispel the pounding. The beginning drops of rain caught in my hair, collected and ran in streams down my face, and pooled in my ear facing the sky.

The pain was electrifying, but I wasn't going to die. Shaking with cold, I could return to the bathroom, clean up, and pretend as if nothing happened. But I'd gone past that point in which acting could suffice. Laura stood over my body and panted. She wanted to know if our race was part of the experiment, whether I'd timed it, and how much blood I'd lost through the addition of exercise.

I stood and brushed off the pine needles. Through a breach in the trees, I saw a light. It grew stronger. Then, the black sky exploded with gold: A stairway began to form. Steps were built and strewn with jazz and glitter. A hand railing curved up the structure. I saw God in the sun standing at the top and beckoning. I ran down the hill to get closer. Laura followed and yelled, "Where are you going now?"

I looked up, stared at the sky, blinked, and saw nothing. The stairway was gone. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"An escalator to the afterlife."

Laura announced my experiment had yielded its intended result: A girl could go crazy from a slight loss of blood. The sky grew opaque. I pressed three fingers on my wrist. The wound was no longer bleeding. I could have cried in frustration, but tears would have been hard to stop. There'd been so many lately--the water had jetted from my eyes like a spout filling a tub, and I'd been afraid of drowning.

Tires rolled into the slushy driveway. I saw the Newport sliding up to the house. Laura and I ran. She slipped in the door and jetted to bed. I fled to the bathroom, undressed, and looked at myself in the mirror. I hadn't bled to death after having sex, and I couldn't pass on by opening new pathways in my skin now.

I heard someone open the front door. Mother, identifiable by her shoe-clacking steps, stopped into the hall. She said to Father, “Someone didn’t wipe her feet. This isn’t a motel, and I’m not a maid.” The veins must have been popping out of her head. I tried not to make any noise as I turned on the water, wet the edge of a towel, and washed my wrist. With my fingernail, I swirled the last drops of blood on the marble sink. I rinsed the razor blade, found one of Father’s socks in the laundry basket, and wrapped the smelly cotton around my arm. Naked and carrying my clothes in my hands, I zipped to my room. Mother hadn’t seen me nude since the days when she bathed me, and she wouldn’t now.

* * * * *

The day after the rape passed slowly. I woke up and remembered immediately what Arnold and I did and said. I didn’t leave my room that morning. I didn’t even get out of bed. At noon, I heard Mother open the door and call my name. I half shut my eyes and played dead like Father’s hit possum. She studied me and obviously decided what she had to say wasn’t worth the bother. The door closed.

In Atwater, classmates seemed to consider me as interesting as their wallpaper. With my party, I’d hoped to gain attention; now I prayed no one would notice my existence when I returned to school. If someone did, he’d be shocked to see I’d split in two, myself and somebody else.

It was easy to ignore the need to eat. My stomach grumbled, bowels rolled, and mouth grew parched. Yet with my hunger came a sense of clarity. I lay, feeling disembodied and light as a helium balloon, on the bed, stared at the ceiling, and identified newly important aspects of my environment. The paint was white and unvaried in aspect,

but there appeared to be a shoeprint. Someone wearing a size eight must have walked on the ceiling; I shook my foot beneath the covers to reinstate my own blood flow. I wished I had such supernatural powers as Spiderman. If Arnold burst in now, he'd think I was waiting for him in bed. My feet, full of pins and needles, were too numb to hit the floor and run.

I sat up and crawled to the mattress' edge. I leaned to check in the mirror above the chest of drawers to make sure I still had the original contours of my face: eyes, a nose, cheeks, mouth and chin since everything else seemed to be changing. Without my glasses, its outline grew blurry. I might have had a beautiful smile. I might have sprouted warts. Since the rape, my appearance no longer mattered really. My body felt like a roll of dough someone flattened and beat with his hand. If I were a lumpy, tasteless dough girl, Remy was a quick gingerbread man. This afternoon he might be racing the hearse against surprised old men in Lincolns and Cadillacs. The police would make it a point to ignore him. The boy, fast and fluid in his black coat, wouldn't understand how I could spend the fleeting days of youth in bed. Remy hadn't been abused sexually, he, knowing of life and death, was innocent in this way, and that was the reason I no longer deserved him.

What use would he be to me now anyway? He should have arrived twelve hours ago. He should have dashed down the stairs to Lucille's basement as I made my last plea to Arnold, "Let's not," and stopped the ordeal. Remy had failed to be the swashbuckler of my tale; he'd ruined the story's ending. My eyelashes were matted with crust.

* * * * *

The third day, I had to get up and face my life. I could no longer find a comfortable position in which to lie and decided it was necessary to rise. I sat up and untwisted the blanket forming a vice around my abdomen. My headache had subsided, and my temperature, when I took it, had fallen to ninety-nine. I felt sick, but following my routine would help me to go on.

The door opened. Yesterday, Rowena, as if she'd sensed I wanted to be by myself, had left me alone. Today, with the cheerful voice of a waitress, she informed me lunch was ready. Beads of water shone like gems in her hair, wet from the shower. She smiled as if she wanted to tell me something important. I waited. She said she needed a barrette. Rowena rummaged through my carved wood box and selected one. Although Rowena was clothed, if I squeezed shut my eyes, I could see every detail of her body naked. The day after the funeral, I sneaked in the bathroom and gingerly opened the shower curtain to see my sister in her entirety. Under the drum of running water, Rowena obviously hadn't heard the door click. She held back her head to receive the spray and looked long, brown, and relaxed. When Rowena wiped her eyes and saw my face, she cursed and turned the nozzle toward my torso. Later, Laura, when told of the incident, called me a voyeur. I shut the curtain without feeling too guilty, dried my shirt with Rowena's towel, and left the bathroom. I was giddy. In order to understand Rowena, be like Rowena, and even destroy her, I had to observe her. As a practice, Rowena subsequently locked all doors.

She held herself apart in other ways. At some point last night, Rowena sneaked out of the house in her ballet flats and didn't return until 4 A.M., when she entered quietly, slung her coat over a chair, and slipped off her clothes. She, singing quietly,

tiptoed to the chest of drawers and found a nightgown. Rowena's teeth chattered, and I hoped in spite of myself she wouldn't catch pneumonia. If Rowena suspected me of being awake, she must have guessed I wouldn't tell Mother of her disappearance. She covered me up in bed before getting in on the other side. I felt pacified, was surprised by Rowena's ability to make friends so quickly, and wondered about her activities with them. Who else besides witches and lovers met in the middle of the night? Rowena rolled and faced me; her breath was sweet with red-hot hard candies as if she'd chosen to suck on them before kissing someone.

The morning sun didn't shine brightly through the window, and for a moment, I thought about returning to bed. Feeling lightheaded and weak, I pulled on my sweatshirt, dirty with a ring around the collar, and decided my flannel night pants and grubby slippers were good enough. My own hair, washed four days before, was matted and bangs greasy. I tied it back in Father's blue-and-white handkerchief. Rowena joked she liked my new style. "You look like the star of your own personal nightmare."

"I've decided not to dream anymore. It's a new policy."

"Oh, don't be such a walrus." She ushered me into the kitchen.

Everyone had seemingly begun the day late. At the table, Father was finishing the paper. Laura sat next to him. He studied the weather section and dropped it to the floor. Fire, tornados, a rise in the river--Lucille's vengeance affected us as much as any natural disaster. Mother paced around the kitchen with her eyes nearly shut. I knew she was considering what more she could have done to receive her share of the inheritance. Father mentioned Uncle Henry had carted over some used furniture. Mother said she'd have to thank him for "the firewood."

Laura folded over the market section. “What did you expect from that bitch Lucille?”

“Don’t call her that,” Mother said.

Laura looked at Mother with seeming disregard. Once, Mother had proposed to clean out Laura’s mouth for foul language. Laura argued “studies found ingesting soap causes cancer in four out of five lab rats” and received an apology instead.

The table was cluttered with dishes, red pens, and bits of paper on which Father had jotted impossible plans. He stood up to meet Mother in one of her circles, and I experienced the height of happiness; my parents bumped noses and kissed. But Mother kept a foot of space between her and Father. Their chests, which held their hearts, didn’t meet. After a second, she stiffened; he leaned to contain her in a loose embrace. She kept moving.

For the first time, Father noticed my presence. “Is that the new style?”

Rowena scoffed. I fiddled with my pants’ drawstring and knew I’d never be clean despite any amount of washing, so why make the effort. Dirty and unattractive, I felt safe. I wished I’d known earlier, before Lucille’s reading, about the danger of receiving positive attention.

“You should eat something,” Mother said.

“What is there?” I said. Rowena was drinking tea. Seemingly to get the full flavor, she’d placed the cinnamon-apple bag under her tongue and sucked. The string hung from her mouth. Mother pointed to tomato soup, the color and consistency of blood, on the stove. I almost decided to return to my room, shut myself in, and starve. I thought my knees were going to buckle. Before I could leave or vomit, my stomach rumbled. I

steadied myself by holding onto the counter and opened the cabinet. There were no more bowls. I picked up the soup ladle and dished a portion into the turkey platter. Mother gave me a stale cracker. That was lunch.

* * * * *

Mother and Father had met with the lawyer. This afternoon, we were off to the bank. While the adults convened, Rowena, Laura, and I sat in the waiting room. Rowena studied a woman's magazine, puckered her lips, their color garish and their shape like a Valentine's Day heart, and pointed out clothing that would look good on her, she said. Rowena held up a picture and suggested I buy A-line skirts, which streamlined one's frame.

"Thanks for the advice, Rowena." I preferred corduroys or even my Victorian dress. When I spread out its skirt, it covered me completely. I didn't like having fat, white legs, but I didn't want to have arms, a torso, neck, or head either. I wanted nothing more to do with my body after Arnold entered it. The pastor said one's corporeal being constitutes a temple.

Rowena was hogging the magazines, and I couldn't concentrate on the articles in *Quilting World*, so I helped Laura build a time machine with the Lego set. Laura, cute, was still at the age of capturing old women's hearts. The gray-haired receptionist gave her sugar-free suckers, one flavor after another. Laura chewed the bland treats noisily but paused when Rowena said, "Listen." From behind the door, we gathered bits of the adults' conversation. Most pronounced but intelligible were Father's yells. At the end, the banker said, "I'm thinking of what's best for your family."

"Don't include me in that estimation." Mother grew silent.

“You’re a part of this, Monica,” Father said.

“So is Rowena.”

“If I say so. What are you going to do--walk out the door?”

“Why is your father acting like he’s doing me a favor?” Rowena whispered.

“Your place is no Ritz Hotel. Why shouldn’t I stay there? Your parents kept you, Shine, all these years.”

The receptionist looked up from her record keeping and smiled at us. She probably didn’t worry about whether she’d get a raise or not this year.

The one-sided business negotiations had finished, and door opened. The adults came out. “Declaring bankruptcy is the only solution,” the banker said. His belly was almost too large to be buckled into his pin-striped pants. Father had tried to work out a payment plan. Instead of being granted an extension, he held a manila folder containing the titles for what Rowena called “our haunted house,” his rig, and the vehicles. The farm equipment would be sold as soon as possible.

The banker’s simple speech about the loss of our estate would make sense to a kindergartner. Father seemingly didn’t comprehend the man’s words. Mother kept saying, “The whole thing is unfair.”

“Don’t blame yourself, and don’t go to the bar,” the banker joked with Father.

“He’s not a brawler,” Mother said.

Tubby’s father wiped a speck of dirt from his eye with a silk handkerchief and checked his gold watch. He took Mother’s elbow and escorted her to the exit with the courtesy shown to someone suspected of loitering.

Father walked behind, and the rest of us followed at a safe distance to the car.

Father swung open his door. I thought it might come off its hinges. He motioned for us to climb in, started the Newport, cranked the heat, and peeled out of the lot on thin tires. “At least we kept the house. We don’t have to stay with Virginia.”

The possibility of living with Arnold threw me into shock. Mother, Laura, and I held back our comments. Only Rowena didn’t follow protocol. “The house looks like Count Dracula’s castle. I hate living there.”

“As a visitor, you should be paying rent,” I said.

“I have somewhere else to go,” Rowena replied.

“Where? You don’t know anyone.”

“The place’s not much, but I have permission to stay.”

“I vote we exchange our home for that steak dinner Father talked about before the reading,” Laura said. Father was driving by Bertha’s now. Our mouths watered even after the restaurant was no longer in sight. Father gave Mother ten dollars, and she hurried into Huck’s General Store to buy the necessities.

“Tell us a story,” Laura said to Father.

“I don’t know any stories.”

“How about something funny?” she said. Father told the comi-tragedy of his pet, Scrappy. “At age six, I had a goldfish. He was happy. He had a full life swimming in his bowl. One day I found him suspended within an ice cube.”

“How did that happen?” Laura said.

“Father was cleaning up after dinner and placed the bowl, thinking it was the melting Jell-O with orange slices he’d earlier ingested, in the refrigerator. When I opened

the door the next morning, Scrappy was frozen in mid-motion. His fins fanned out; his eyes bulged with surprise. I got a dog after that.”

Laura laughed at the story.

Mother came out the store and loaded the bags into the trunk. She got into the car, and we were off. “I couldn’t afford any meat,” Mother said. She suggested Father scan the classified section for the job listings when we got home. He waved her suggestion away and turned on the radio: “A local man returned to his house to find his wife asleep. He spied a shirt that didn’t belong to him hung over the doornob. He reported hearing a spinning noise from the bathroom, grabbed his shotgun, and fired numerous shots through the paneling. The man entered and aimed at the shower curtain. Police determined the whirring sound was emitted by an electric toothbrush vibrating inside a cup. The wife confessed she bought the suspicious shirt for her husband for Christmas.”

We arrived at the house and went about our tasks. I didn’t realize what the banker called “the dispersal of assets” would happen so fast, but within the hour, a man and his daughter arrived to look at Father’s farm equipment. The strangers were ready to get down to business. Father insisted they come in and get warmed up first. The father took this opportunity to sit on the couch and look around the parlor, as if he might see something else to buy at a good price. The man asked if Mother’s Austrian clock were for sale. She replied, “You’re not at a garage sale.”

We girls weren’t originally going to help entertain Father’s “guests,” but when he put on his Agro coat and ventured out with the prospective buyers, we decided to follow. As Father walked to the machine shed, he didn’t whistle as usual. Inside the building, he said nothing, not even a remark about the weather, as the man took an inventory. When I

was seven, Father took me for a ride on the John Deere this man was now complaining showed rust. Father drove the open-cab tractor past the orchard and toward the fields. In an apple tree, we saw a swarm of bees. The insects formed a purse as they hovered around a piece of red fruit on the highest branch. The weight of the yellow and black bodies swung the limb. For minutes, Father and I watched the bees buzz. I grew tired but sat on the tractor-chair arm and remained still. My knee was touching Father's. I thought our time together would never end. The next night, I thought when he returned to the house, he'd hug me, but pesticide lathered his work clothes. "Stand back," he warned. I never came so close again.

Father, we girls, and the visitors strolled through the shed. The man slurped a mug of Mother's cider. He complained the liquid was hot and spit a mouthful on the ground. His daughter, two years younger than I, laughed at him and spilled hers down her coat. She bragged to Father about how she was a real country girl. She knew nothing, I discovered, as she pointed randomly. "What are those tanks for? Can I test drive one?"

"This isn't the army. Those are called combines," Laura said.

"I see." The girl looked perplexed. She stared at the outlets and observed aloud how many pieces of equipment were plugged in.

"Father has to charge the batteries," I explained. The girl strode over to the International Harvester and studied it. "How does your father get that thing into the field?"

I said he used an extension cord, winding for miles and miles. "Sometimes the cord gets caught in trees."

The girl obviously believed this story. “Mother wants a new vacuum cleaner with a longer cord, too, so she can go up and down the stairs.”

Beside me, Rowena stifled a laugh. I couldn’t help but keep up the charade. “Let me show you the place. Your father and mine might talk forever.”

“They’re going to be friends,” the girl agreed.

We girls wandered past the barn and to the orchard. I pointed out the various trees, their branches bare. “This is a raisin tree.”

“Wow.” The girl circled the gnarled giant. “I thought it was too cold in Illinois for raisin trees.”

“You’re thinking of prune trees,” Rowena said.

“Maybe we’ll come back in the summer and buy your fruit.” The girl, probably thinking she’d become one of us, smiled. We sauntered back to the shed. Father, who must have felt it his duty, was mentioning the machines’ quirks. Their new owner looked at his watch. Father, shoving a bill of sale into his pocket, nodded. The check would go to the bank. The man expressed his gratitude with too many words and too little eye contact. Father looked down and drew a line in the dirt with his boot; it would have been better if he’d punched the man in the face and been done with it.

* * * * *

The man and his daughter had left. In the kitchen, Mother finished cleaning the counter. I put away the broom. Laura and Rowena sat at the table. Mother announced we should bring in some furniture Henry left and place the rest on the woodpile. The dresser was for Rowena, who’d protested she had the right to extra drawers even if they remained empty. She disappeared to paint her toenails. Laura joined her for a “treatment” as well.

Afterwards, they'd probably nap together in bed. Rowena had been out late again last night; I didn't know where she'd gone. I wondered if she'd eventually tell me or whether I'd have to follow her.

"Let's go, Shine," Mother said.

Something broke inside me. I couldn't take keeping the secret anymore. It was time for me to tell someone about the rape. "I have something important to say." In my mind, the words multiplied and drew themselves out into infinity. I was faced with the impossibility of saying anything.

"Well?" Mother went to the closet and put on her coat. "What is it?"

I grasped her upper arm like a child who'd lost her parent in a department store.

"Spit your news out and stop looking dreamy." Mother lifted her arms like a mother bird making her fledgling fly and shooed me toward the front door.

"It's complicated," I said. My mind became empty of images, but why wouldn't it when I'd tried to erase the memory of what happened to me in Lucille's basement?

"Arnold—he got too close."

"What about your cousin?" Mother said. "Did he touch your breast?"

When I didn't answer but stopped walking, she bumped into me. I'd have turned, faced her, and told her the rest, but such a disclosure seemed dangerous. I'd never talked about sex or boys before. The health teacher cornered the market on those topics.

"To the porch, let's go," Mother said.

My eyes bothered me: The hall seemed longer than usual and narrow. A light from the window shone at the end. I tripped and nearly fell forward. I regained my balance, and everything became normal. I checked over my shoulder; Mother was

picking lint off the rug.

“I’ll explain everything. I can hone it down to a word.” I wished Rowena were here to speak for me. She wouldn’t be hurried by Mother’s hand on her back.

“Do you want me to guess it?”

“No.” Having forgotten the word, I searched my thoughts and questioned whether there were truly anything to relay.

Laura appeared, scooted past Mother, and dove between my legs. “London Bridge’s falling down,” she sang. “Did you know that nursery rhyme is about child sacrifice?”

“You learn new things every day,” Mother said.

Laura, displaying her newly painted toes, popped up in front of me. “Are you two having a spelling bee? Rowena wants her dresser.”

I helped up Laura. I wished for her pocket dictionary, the smallest in a set of three. I wanted to locate the simple word representing a dark color in my head. The word had to be short and exact, not Greek or multi-syllabic. A few choices came to mind: “no, stop, red, hurt, why.”

Mother opened the front door. A gust of cold air blew in. We stepped onto the porch. “Tell me the word.” She caught me by my chin and tilted my head with her hand. “You could be eloquent. Think about the impression you want to make on people.”

“Thanks for the advice.” I lost my concentration. The words in my head dropped like glass globes to the ground.

“Shine, I realize teenagers have problems,” Mother said. “But nothing has happened to you that hasn’t happened to someone else. As life goes on, it gets worse. It’s about perspective.”

On the porch sat Lucille’s paint-chipped desk, which Father wanted for accounting, and a banged-up dresser. I guessed Virginia considered herself kind for bringing junk that wouldn’t sell in an auction. I bent to grab the dresser, lifted it, and set it down. Mother, holding her end, yelled, “What’s wrong? The dresser isn’t that heavy; you’re bigger than I am.”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Let’s move this dresser first,” Mother said. “I’m cold.”

I hadn’t worn my coat but didn’t feel the chill. I pressed my fingernails into my palm and forced blood. If Mother saw my hand, I’d claim to have a splinter. But she was paying attention to the task at hand. “Do you want me to carry the front end, and you can scoot back here?”

“You need to hear this,” I said. “Forget about the dresser.”

Mother let her end fall with a bang. “I’m getting tired of your behavior.”

“Arnold.” That was the word. “Arnold.”

“What about him?”

“He did something to me.”

“Did he hurt you?” She placed her elbows on the dresser and leaned toward me.

“He fell on me.”

“Oh, one of his jokes? You two should be more careful.”

“No. He got on me. He meant to. He collapsed. I couldn’t lift him off.” Who’d have known my lanky cousin could be so heavy? He wasn’t even big enough to feel comfortable telling girls his true weight.

“When did this happen?”

“At the reading.”

“With all the relatives there?”

“We were in Lucille’s basement.”

“What were you doing down there?”

“Playing a game.” I was growing tired of answering Mother’s questions.

“So it was a game. Why didn’t you tell him to get off?” Mother made the situation seem like one that could be resolved with common sense.

“Arnold pulled down his pants. He ripped off my underwear. I felt a grinding when he put his—you know what--in.”

“Are you sure he did that?”

I felt surprised at Mother’s unwillingness to believe me and said, “He had a hard time entering and forced it.” At first, I’d been dry; only afterwards was there the wetness of semen and blood.

“After he got going, what did you do? What did you say to him?”

“Nothing.” I’d lain mute on the floor and watched the shaft’s light. The colors behind my eyes changed from white to black to red with the light’s changing intensity. Arnold rolled off.

Mother asked who else knew. She put a finger in the air. She would add and subtract, calculating the damage like a math problem in her mind.

“Tubby. He saw but didn’t stop it.”

“What did you expect from Arnold’s friend?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to tell you that day.”

Mother came to my side and hugged me. I melted into her arms. She stood me back on my feet, as if we’d both had enough. “But you didn’t mention it then, so why are you telling me now? Don’t you want to forget the situation?”

“I can’t bear it anymore.” I threw out my hands expansively. I’d thought of more words to say at this point. Mother fiddled with the dresser’s top knob and asked me to spare her the details. Her fingers were clenched and white. She asked me what I wanted her to do. I tried to be calm but was losing control of my emotions and bladder. “I don’t know. What will happen to me? The pastor said women who have sex outside marriage should be stoned.”

“Rape isn’t the same as sex,” Mother said. “I wish I knew how to make you feel better, but the best option seems to be to remain quiet. Just stay away from Arnold. I don’t want to see Virginia again for a while.”

“It’s not the same situation.”

“You’re right.”

“He took something more important than money,” I said.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Mother said.

“You of all people might empathize with my pain.” I remembered the story of Mother’s descent into the well and realized how I could make her understand the dynamics of my rape. Although I guessed she didn’t know I’d heard the tale, I compared

her past plight to my current one. “When I was on the floor, under Arnold, I felt as if I’d hit bottom. I bet you felt the same way when you lay on the ground inside the well.”

“Who told you I fell?” Mother’s eyes were firey.

“Did you jump then?”

“How dare you bring up this.”

“Had you decided not to have me?”

“You can blame your father, who didn’t mow around the hole.” Mother claimed she’d been picking flowers when the “accident” occurred.

“You didn’t jump because you were married to him?”

“Shine, I told you what happened, and that’s how it was.” Mother’s face grew red.

“I was in your womb. I have a right to know.” Different words describing Mother’s situation piled up behind my tongue, but I felt afraid to say them.

We moved the two pieces of furniture. In my pants, my thighs felt as wobbly as the legs of Lucille’s desk. When we were finished, Mother lowered her face close to mine. “I know it’s tough, but circumstances change. One day you’ll be free. So will I. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No.” Perhaps that was the single word I’d wanted all along.

CHAPTER 7

At 4 p.m., my family attended Christmas service. I'd gone to church since before I was born and attended most every service since. My family hurried up the steps to avoid being late, even if I'd rather have climbed to the church's roof. My parents crowded in their normal pew. Mother told Father she hoped no one would ask how we were and if he could donate anything. Mother might stoop to stealing, but she'd never accepted charity. We girls chose a place two rows in front of her. A Sunday School girl turned her head and stared at Rowena too long. I assumed the girl, with eyes as light as her hair, wanted to the friends. Rowena flipped her off. The girl, appearing offended, looked to me. I scooted close to Rowena.

As the organ music began, Arnold and Tubby entered and sat on Rowena's far side. I allowed an extra foot of space for her to scoot over for the boys. Arnold told Rowena she looked nice. Her velvet skirt had a slit up the thigh, as if her legs were the first thing she wanted people to see. Arnold seemed to be in love with her. I dreamed of stealing the skirt and cutting the slit to the top, so she couldn't wear it anymore. Arnold avoided looking at me.

This was the first time I'd seen him since what Mother called the "incident." When my eyes captured finally captured his, we stared at each other for a long time; it was as if we understood something we hadn't known before, something disturbing,

dangerous, and life altering. The pastor, if explaining the situation, would have said Arnold had done the impermissible but somehow unavoidable; my cousin had wanted to know how things worked, as when Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the tree of knowledge and realized the truth about things, including the fact they were naked. The couple ran and hid, but in the end, the two faced God and His sword and were cast out of the Garden in their leafy costumes.

Beside me in the pew, Rowena was giggling at something Arnold had whispered.

“I can’t believe you’re talking to Arnold,” I said. “Don’t you know he kissed me?”

“Is that all he did?” she said. Then it happened, like a hundred times before; I was propelled back in time. I pressed my middle finger against my thumb and shut my eyes: I remembered everything and nothing about what took place in Lucille’s basement. The only reality lay in images: Arnold’s nose, my hand, his knee, my shoulder, the ceiling. I felt unsure about how much I wanted to share but gave more information to gain my sister’s sympathy. “He touched my breast.”

“I’m not surprised. Why were you wearing that stupid, low-cut dress in the first place? Didn’t you want to have freak appeal?”

Rowena, a flirt herself, said I shouldn’t have been teasing Arnold.

“But--” I said.

“I don’t know why you’re so proud of what you and Arnold did, but if I were you, I’d stop talking about it.” On this last point, Rowena and Mother seemed to agree.

Everyone rose to sing. Rowena held our hymn book and opened her mouth. Her voice was too high pitched to be pleasant. Afterwards, the pastor pressed his hands together to pray for God's presence. The man reminded us of those imbued with the Spirit despite their shortcomings: Saul the king gave David armor that didn't fit; the giant, Goliath, laughed when the boy couldn't lift the sword. Sarah, ninety years old, cackled at the thought of a son. Martha was a busybody; her sister Mary couldn't cook. Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. The disciples smelled of fish. Thomas doubted. Matthew collected taxes. Before the cocks' crowing, Peter denied the Savior three times. The Roman soldier fell asleep and lost the body.

"God, do you want to use me?" I wondered but didn't look up. "Am I too damaged?" If only I could start over and have my blame cast as far as east was from west. I wanted to be reborn, stitch my body back in Mother's womb.

The deacons strode down the rows and passed out the silver dishes holding Jesus' flesh and blood. Before I could decide to take Communion, my stomach shrank into a ball. I crumbled the cracker in my hand into particles and spilled the grape juice over the floor's cracks. Laura patted my hand distractedly. Rowena lifted her feet, so her shoes wouldn't be ruined by the spill.

I remembered attending Mass with a friend. I was eight years old and hadn't been to the Catholic Church before. She showed me how to kneel and "geffulcate." My attention was drawn to a life-sized statue of Jesus, front and center, sprawled on the cross. The Savior had one hand stapled to the cross' beam. With the other, He pointed a finger at me no matter how far I slid down the pew. Blood gushed from a hole in His side no one bothered to plug. The churchgoers exited after the blessing. At the door, my friend

talked with the priest. I wandered to the platform, stood on a holy table, and touched Jesus' cold plaster hand.

The church lights faded. Someone grabbed my leg to drag me into hell.

Today, I glanced at Arnold. He up held his empty cup to Tubby as if making a toast.

* * * * *

The choir members sat listlessly in the stage chairs. We listened to the pastor's sermon about how the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph to convince him to remain engaged to Mary, even though she hadn't received her period. In a tapestry on the wall, lambs ran away from their shepherd and over mountains. Arnold was writing Rowena a love poem on the offering envelope. Laura was playing Hangman with Tubby and selecting words he couldn't pronounce. At the podium, the pastor asked if anyone had a confession. I gripped the pew in front of me and felt a tightening in my legs; I was ready to spring. The organist's hands were held in mid-air. The song, "I Surrender All," was coming to an end. I locked eyes with Arnold; he shook his head no.

I didn't rise from my seat. What good would it to anyway? I wondered. But something held me back.

In December, Father had slaughtered the last heifer, too weak to last through winter. He held a tin cup under her jugular and sampled the blood. Arnold gulped and spit it on the ground. I didn't want to try the blood at all, but Father promised it tasted like a mixture of black dirt, sugar cubes, and oatmeal. The heifer lay dead on the concrete slab and couldn't see the act of desecration. I lifted the cup to my lips.

On the way home, Father cut through a neighborhood. Mother pointed. "That's the undertaker's place." I took a long look. Even if I didn't wish to see Remy, I might hide behind the trashcan and get a glimpse of the boy who remained so mysterious sometime soon. If I felt brave, I'd peek in the window. Rowena interrupted my fantasy by bragging she already knew where Remy lived. I looked at my ring and shook my head. The girl was such a liar.

CHAPTER 8

“I’ve got a present for you, Shine.” Father found his seed cap. The temperature had reached an unseasonal fifty degrees. Everyone, including Mother, followed him out of the house.

“I didn’t expect you to get me anything,” I said. Christmas was almost a week ago. Today was New Year’s Eve. I grew excited even though the gift was probably a horseshoe game he welded together with a blowtorch.

“Most apologists place Christ’s birthday the first week of July. Bethlehem census records prove--” Laura said.

“This trip better be worth my time.” Rowena groaned.

“Don’t come then.” Father smiled as if at an inside joke, but if we asked him a million times, he wouldn’t tell. “This way.” He led us through the backyard toward the barn.

“What did Father get you, Shine? A cow for your dowry?” Laura said.

“Why, do you need it to make a down payment of your own?”

“It’s nice to be at an age when no one expects anything.”

“Here’s my guess,” Rowena said. “John remodeled a stall, so Shine can live in the barn. I’m tired of her being in my room.”

I wouldn’t mind staying in the barn, if it meant being alone. Rowena was the one

who'd probably miss lying like a snow angel in bed and putting her cold hands and feet on me after spending most of the night gone. I hadn't thought of a way to stop her from leaving. Involving parents went against all teenagers' unspoken rule.

Laura screamed joyfully and ran to the broken-down corral. Then I saw my present. A skinny horse whinnied and thrust his head over the top rung.

"Where did you get that ratty thing?" Mother petted the horse and then put her palm to her forehead. Wrinkles, like a set of railroad tracks, appeared. Mother asked the question as if she thought there could be no good answer: "How did this animal get here, John?"

"I won Whitey in a poker game." He explained early this morning, the owner, taking back roads to avoid waking us girls, finally had time to bring the horse over in a trailer. Father leaned on the fence and twisted the piece of baling wire securing the gate. The whole story came out. Father had gone to the Elks Lodge, played cards with the old men, and got drunk. Last week, Mother had seen his freshly combed hair and questioned if he were headed into town. He reassured her, "I won't strike anybody," no matter what the banker said.

There was only one man Father wanted to hit, I guessed, and we all knew his name, even if Rowena didn't talk about her pa anymore. I assumed she'd decided he wasn't coming back.

Today at the corral, Mother said, "The dozen times you played poker, you lost, John. I thought you'd given up."

"I got lucky." Father winked at us girls and said jokingly, "Aren't you glad I won, Monica?"

Mother stared at him. In general, she didn't like humor. "Congratulations. We're worse off now than before."

"We were wrong to gamble on Lucille, but I'm on a winning streak now," Father said. Laura moved closer. "Luck as a supernatural force doesn't exist. Intelligent people gave up superstition with the Age of Reason."

"Here's to the Dark Ages." Father flicked her ear playfully. He might have been reckless in his gambling, but at least he was in a good mood. "Who wants to take a ride?"

"The only reason you won this horse is that man couldn't give it away." Mother screwed up her mouth as if she'd eaten a lime. The horse, walking in circles, came readily. He nosed Mother's pockets to see if she'd hidden any treats. "What a specimen. Have you thought about how to feed him? Nags eat more than fat horses."

"Whitey's eight years old," Father offered, as if the horse were a growing child.

"He's older than that. Did you check his teeth?" Mother grabbed Whitey's lip and shook his jaw. He snorted but wouldn't open his mouth. I didn't blame him. Two years ago, when I visited the dentist, he discovered four cavities.

"At least Whitey's gentle," Laura said.

"Not by choice. Didn't anyone notice this horse is limping?" Mother said.

"Whitey's not perfect, but every girl needs a pet. Didn't you have a circus pony, Monica?" Father said.

"I had a pony, a job, and a life."

"A horse! I forgive you for not buying me Barbie's chateau." Laura hugged Mother's neck.

“Whitey isn’t for you, Laura.” I stepped into their circle to end the embrace. I’d never join the richest Sunday School girl, with her fancy mount and equestrian club, but I did own a horse. I glanced at the endless fields east of the house. Whitey was tall, and I’d never been on a real horse, but with lessons from Mother, I’d become an expert rider in my Wrangler jeans and scuffed cowboy boots.

At age five, I’d ridden miles on Bruce, the mechanical horse in the dime store, with painted black eyes and fading orange spots. When I climbed on the vinyl saddle worn thin from other children’s escapades, Bruce’s ears seemed to twitch. Mother put in a nickel in his side, and he came alive. Under my fingers, Bruce’s heart seemed to beat even if he remained plastic and hollow. I slapped Bruce’s rump to urge him to trot and squeezed my knees into his notched iron ribs to hang on. He accelerated to a canter.

“Faster?” Bruce seemed to say with a whinny.

“Go,” I urged. “You have free rein.” In my mind, we launched through the store’s plate glass window and galloped into town. As I bounced up and down even after the ride was over, the clerk interrupted my dream. “Aren’t you saddle sore?”

“No,” I said. The clerk hadn’t seen Bruce’s tail wave or his mouth foam. Mother, lifting me from the saddle, assured the clerk we’d be back next week.

* * * * *

In the tack house, Mother found a stretched bridle hung on a nail. A musty saddle with rusty buckles sat on a broken washing machine. We returned to the corral, climbed over the fence, removed Whitey’s halter, and slipped the bit beneath his tongue. The horse made choking sounds. Father hoisted the saddle onto the horse’s back. Whitey

turned to sniff the encumbrance, sidestepped, and stepped on Father's foot. After that, he was content to stand back and let Mother direct the show.

"Watch what I'm doing, Shine." She smoothed the blanket's edge, so the saddle wouldn't rub the horse's back. "You'll know next time." She kneed Whitey's belly to make him release his breath, and tightened the girth. When the cinch was secure, the horse sighed. I identified with his discomfort; Whitey must have felt as if he wore a girdle.

I braided Whitey's tail. Laura currycombed his neck and crooned over "her Christmas horse." Rowena, sitting on the fence's top rung, called us both sappy.

"Can I ride outside the boring corral?" I said to Mother. I had to impress Rowena.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Shine," Mother said.

Father opened the gate. Whitey pranced as I gathered the reins, put my left foot, the correct one, in the stirrup, and swung into the saddle. After Bruce, my plastic pony, Whitey, old and feeble, would be an easy mount. I said to Mother, "Let go of the bridle." She dropped her hand and backed away.

The horse bucked me off before I got seated: Three of Whitey's feet went straight up; his fourth flew out to the side. My horse knew tricks. Before I knew I was falling, I found myself lying on the ground, stunned. My legs lay stretched out before me; I'd thrown one arm above my head. I opened my eyes. I slid my tongue across my teeth. A molar seemed loose; my mouth was full of blood. The ride was over.

Mother yelled I should roll to the side. "Horses like to step on riders."

"I guess Whitey is lazy," Rowena said.

I stayed where I was on the ground but arched my head to see Whitey's gray and tan striped hooves doing a dance. He lowered his head and attempted to bite me.

"Are you finished yet, Shine?" Laura stood over me, too. "I want my turn."

"Wait until the horse calms down." Father pulled Laura away. "Shine, get up."

I shifted, got to my knees, and stood. Whitey seemed taller than before. I attempted to grab the reins, but he spun one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees. Whitey was gaining momentum in his circle when Mother strode over, grabbed the bridle, and jerked his head up. "Ho." Mother held him still. "Horses have temperaments like cats. The horse's trying you, Shine. Show who's in control. It's nothing to worry about."

Whitey laid his ears back. Laura smacked his nose. Rowena, perched on the fence, stopped swinging her legs. "That wild thing is broke?"

Father suggested we return tomorrow for a ride. Mother obviously had a different idea. She ordered me to climb in the saddle. "There's no better time to break the horse than now."

I was thinking twice about this process. "Why do you care if I learn to ride, Mom?" I wiped my dirty palms on my jeans. Surely she knew I'd never perform feats like hers on the circus pony. "Let Rowena go."

"Whitey's your horse, Shine." Rowena jumped off the rail and would have probably run if urged to mount. My sister seemed as flighty as the horse itself. I shuffled through the slippery mud and approached Whitey again. He stood patiently, as if pretending he weren't skittish, to soothe my fears. My eyes grew teary; my nose filled with snot. I didn't want to climb on. "You said you couldn't afford to take me to the hospital, Mother."

She pointed her finger. “If you don’t get on this horse, Shine, you’ll be fearful forever.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Go,” Mother said. Rowena watched to see what I’d do. The pastor said God sends the fearful to hell, along with prostitutes and draft dodgers. The fearful person could damn herself by acting foolishly or doing nothing and remaining paralyzed, so the situation seemed unfair. I subdued my expectation of vertigo and mounted the horse. I swung over my leg quickly, before he could smash me into the fence, and braced myself as for a car crash.

“Don’t hold the saddle horn,” Mother said. “It’s meant for a lasso.”

“I’ll fall if I don’t hold something.” I realized Mother looked shorter from my seat and couldn’t help me now.

“Use your legs to grip.” Mother moved back to give me room. “It’s called posting.”

“I know, I know. I’m off!” I changed my mind about never wanting to see Arnold again. I wished he could watch me riding this beautiful horse. I wanted him to see me do anything besides crawl across the concrete floor. I held my head up, straightened my back, and stroked Whitey’s rear for good behavior. With a jerk, he stopped walking. I waited for him to launch me over his head.

“Some horses are ticklish,” Mother said. “Don’t touch Whitey except on the neck.”

I stayed on Whitey. Two minutes passed; I wiped the sweat from my forehead. We’d become friends. Whitey obeyed my jerky commands to trot, canter, and gallop

around the yard. Mother applauded. Father looked glad someone was riding his prize and seemingly ignored Whitey's stiff pace. "He must be part quarter-horse."

"Does that breed bring a high price at the meat locker?" Rowena said.

"Whitey's got life left in him." Mother strode to where I sat on the horse, stopped of his own accord. With a closed palm, she hit his rump. "Let's see him run."

The horse took off like a cheetah. I glanced back and saw Father wave a hand at me. Whitey raced into the fields. My bottom bounced up and down.

"Pull up. Where are you going, Shine?" Mother shouted.

I yanked back the reins, but it was as if they weren't connected to the bit in Whitey's mouth. I might as well have been clinging to his mane. Mother's voice faded. Whitey didn't stop. He ran into the timber and followed a deer path. Late afternoon, the oaks, birches, and maples blocked any rays of sunlight. A low branch I couldn't lift in time slashed my forehead as Whitey dragged me under it. I looked ahead; the path grew shadowy. Horse and rider, we followed the jog for two or three miles. Whitey jumped the occasional ditch as if practicing for the Steeplechase. Horsehair plastered the back of my pants. Perspiration matted Whitey's neck. I rubbed the musk on my hands and tried not to inhale the icy air so fast. The horse slowed to a lope. It was time to go back. "Turn, turn," I said. Whitey wouldn't swerve, one way or the other. I dug in my heels to make my point. "Let me show you who's boss." The saddle grew off kilter. I nearly fell before shifting my weight.

We came to a clearing, which seemed familiar, even if I'd entered from a different direction. There was Mother's pond. I pulled Whitey's head until it swiveled to one side; his disobedient hooves wound toward the water source anyway. Cattails hedged the pond

like the slats of an Oriental screen. A seemingly curious rabbit popped from its hole, twitched its whiskers, and returned to safety. A buck hiding in the tall grass stared at me before bounding away. “Will you halt?” I said to the horse. But he seemed thirsty and wanted to drink from the pond. A glaze of ice floated on top. The water hadn’t frozen, which, to my relief, meant there’d be no skating. Father loved winter sports. Last winter, he’d taken us here in his truck. The Ford had spun over ruts in the dirt road. I’d looked at the sky, as if this were the last time I’d see it. “Isn’t the sun shining too warm?”

“Do you want to get out and walk home?” Father said.

We wore a second layer of clothes, and I looped my scarf around my neck like a noose. At the pond, I stayed on shore.

“Come on,” Laura said from the center.

I reminded her only Jesus could walk on water.

“Don’t be a crybaby, Shine.”

I sat on a rock and forced on my “new” skates: Mother bargained for the scuffed pair at a garage sale. Although Laura was my height, her feet were small. She wore Mother’s ivory skates, tied with purple yarn tassels, from the Sears catalog. Laura, skating backward, waved for me to hurry. I stood on the ice and wobbled. Then, I looked at my feet and fell to my knees. Father grabbed a broomstick from the truck and tossed it to me. I pushed myself along the bank, an action I pretended was fun. I didn’t glance again at the ice, even though the water lay deep and still beneath this semi-transparent cover. Last year, a hole in a similar pond captured a girl. Sunk under tree roots, her body wasn’t recovered till spring.

When I was no longer able to feel my toes, Father motioned for us to return to the truck. He cranked the heater. We stuck our hands under the dusty vents to get warm. The temperature had plunged to thirteen degrees. We rode over the bumpy track home, and I realized I'd escaped alive. When we entered the kitchen, Mother offered us hot chocolate. The event only then became worthwhile.

Today, I saw the wind whip the sycamore's branches and watched the grass rustle. The cattails nodded their furry heads at some creature's approach. I heard a raspy whistling. The beast was human and had a voice. A boy parted the curtain of brown blades and was careful not to cut his hands--Rembrandt. The horse, seemingly nervous, took a step back. I'd fantasized about Remy so much in the past weeks that, at the moment, I thought I was mistaken in seeing him in real life. My surprise turned to awkwardness. I put a hand to my mouth and glanced at my pants. I was no Cinderella, beautiful despite her missing ball gown. I was muddy and probably appeared unkempt; I couldn't have looked worse if I were wet.

Rembrandt seemed at ease. He looked for a place to sit, curled himself on a rock stuck in the marsh like an island, and hung his boots above the water's rim. A few brave weeds pushed their heads from the bog. He cracked their stalk necks with his boot. We said nothing to each other. He rose and held up a hand, as if I were that animal moving through the grass. The horse under me, as if assessing the situation, remained frozen.

Rembrandt pointed behind him, where his shotgun lay. "This is a nice spot for hunting turkeys. I haven't seen any today. It's not really the season. You come here?" He acted as if our meeting were natural. Either his pose was good, or he was being honest.

"I first came with Mother. I don't remember." I gazed into the water.

“It’s been awhile?” Remy broke a branch from the sycamore and drowned the odd bug crawling across his rock. Its armor-plated back didn’t serve as a floating device; the bug drowned. Remy flung his stick in the air; it made a splash, floated for a few seconds, and sank.

“Stopping was a mistake. I have bad memories of this pond.” Talking to Remy at the funeral when others, even Rowena, stood around was one thing. Now we were alone. He peered into the pond. “Murky and bottomless. Do you have a better view from your horse?”

“Why are you here really?” I tried to sound playful.

“Why are you?” Remy bent to pick up pebbles and collected a handful. He stood on Father’s property, or what used to be his. I said, “You’re trespassing.”

“A trespass sweetly urged.” Rembrandt threw the first pebble in the water. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Try to keep you from getting shot?” I pointed to a house. My neighbor, the new owner, lived over the hill.

“I don’t see my being shot in the stars. But I’ll risk a bullet or two for you.” I checked the dark blue sky; there were no stars yet, but it was supper time. Soon, the owls would hoot, white stars burst open like flowering dandelions, and moon and planets reveal their separate orbits. “I’m leaving. Remy, you should go, too.”

“You just got here, Shine.”

Remy’s eyes held mine until I broke away. I looked at my hands cut by brambles and touched my lower back sore from Whitey’s bucking. I wished I were in bed and

dreaming; one could control how one appeared in fantasy. “I have to go, Remy. My parents will wonder where I am.”

“Let them.” Rembrandt grinned. “Don’t you like me anymore?”

“I don’t know. I’m different than I used to be.”

The interloper reminded me of his name. I, familiar with the sound, repeated it. Tonight, Remy would fly in his overcoat through my sleep. As he passed over the moon like a bat and blackened it, I’d care less if he were good or bad. It seemed nothing could harm me after Arnold’s attack.

“Where have you been for the past week or so?”

“I was nowhere and with no one.” This was what my classmates and I told parents, teachers, and relatives.

“Tell me a secret,” Remy said.

“About what?” The point was to show the questioner we didn’t know anything.

“Something I don’t know about you.”

“Then can I go?” Negotiation was a good strategy also.

“If that’s what you want. You’re such a strange girl.” Remy shifted on the rock’s probably uncomfortable groove. I could hardly say what I wanted and took a long time in beginning. Who, when, where, what, why. The “why,” that was the difficult part. Water lapped at the shore. Waves rose and fell, almost imperceptibly, at the rock’s base. The pattern of ripples caused me to feel freer. I still didn’t know what I’d say until I heard the words: “Here’s my secret. You’re the first person I’ve ever been attracted to.”

“I see.” He couldn’t resist a smile. “You’ve never been attracted to anyone else?”

“No one besides my cousin.”

“Your cousin?” Remy might have said something derogatory but stopped.

“Arnold.”

Remy looked intent, as if he were trying to place the face. Remy said he might remember him; the faces of dead people stuck best. “Do you care about him, Shine?”

“No. But we’ve been together since we were little. How could I avoid having a crush? My secret involves him.” My story was going to take awhile to explain; I shifted in the saddle. Whitey cropped a few blades of grass and then seemed to go to sleep standing. “One summer day when Father was harvesting, Mother sewing, and the black and white TV full of soap-opera nothing, we kids sneaked down to the stream. On the bank, dragonflies crawled across the tips of my toes. Minnows swam in the shallow water. Laura snagged a sunfish and deposited it in a Dixie cup. After Arnold and I looked at it and paid our compliments, she agreed with my request to marry us.”

“Sounds like kid’s stuff. Don’t think about Arnold. Don’t you want to be with me? Don’t you want to be mine?”

“What if I can’t be yours?”

“When did you change your mind?”

“I can’t say.” I hadn’t been prepared to face such intense feelings. Rembrandt made me want him. He sucked me in like a tornado, spun me round, and made me fly. But I didn’t want to drop out of the sky when he was done with me. I cracked my knuckles under the pressure of the decision and said nonchalantly, “I still like you.”

“Will you try to love me?”

“What’s there to lose?” I said.

“As much as there is to gain.” Rembrandt obviously knew I wished to be with him. How could I find words to deny it? I sat mesmerized on my horse. “What’s your secret, Rembrandt?”

He flexed the muscles in his legs and detached a seed pod from his coat tail. “My secret’s difficult to explain. It involves loyalty also.”

“Tell me.” Remy wasn’t being fair.

“I’ll tell you when I think you can understand.”

“You don’t think I’m smart enough?”

“I don’t think you need to know now. But this you can understand. After you take my hand, you’re never going to be the same.” Remy talked in what sounded like the language of Revelation.

“What will happen if I join you?” I said.

“We’ll do things together. We never have to be apart.”

This is what I’d wanted at the funeral. The wind blew across my legs with the touch of a cautious lover’s touch. It started at my boots, worked its way up my ankles, and spun around my calves. I shivered with delight.

“I feel as if I know you, Shine,” Rembrandt said. My science teacher said there remain depths, abysses in the sea, no diver has oxygen to reach.

Remy had been sitting for a long time. He got up, strode toward me, and said, “Do you want to come home with me now?” The horse nosed Remy. I leaned down from the saddle; he reached up and stroked my face. He told me I had to decide.

“I’d like to see inside where you live,” I waffled.

“Will you stay?” Rembrandt put his hand on my thigh. He was going too fast. My shoulders stiffened, my thighs became pudding, and I nearly fell off Whitey. “No. I’ll see you later.” Now was the perfect time to end the conversation. I stared at my ring. Remy gave me it at the party, but we remained strangers. Why did he want me? Why didn’t he prefer a girl like Rowena?

“There might not be a tomorrow,” he said. “You can see me for who I am.”

“What about me? What if I’m bad?” I wanted to rip off my clothes, so he could see my fading bruises from the rape. They looked like stains and blottings, as if someone broke a pen and poured ink on my body.

“You’re not like everyone else, Shine. You’re more interesting than someone like Rowena. I’ve been waiting to be with you all this time.” He took my hand and squeezed it.

“Really?” I pulled away my hand. “I’ve been waiting for you to finish your speech.” Rembrandt was being too insistent. His proclamations made me fearful. I didn’t want him to know me completely; it was better to hide my shame. I’d grown used to its heaviness, like a backpack filled with schoolbooks never to be taken off. In addition, I didn’t like the familiarity with which he’d mentioned Rowena’s name.

I flicked the reins and kicked the horse’s side. Remy reached up, grabbed me around the waist, and kissed me. I shut my mouth and pushed my hands against his shoulders. I was feeling the same panic as when Arnold’s eyelashes brushed my cheek. Remy released me from the embrace. “Shine, I didn’t know you were so shy. Have you never been kissed?”

“I don’t want to talk to you about it.” Arnold had grabbed my throat and stuck his tongue in my mouth to explore. I’d choked and tried not to swallow his spit.

“Was that kiss better than mine? Girls always remember their first, right?” Remy leaned in again.

“I’m getting out of here.”

“You’re free to go.” He laughed. But as I turned the horse, he was still holding the reins. Whitey, obviously trying to escape this tug of war, reared. He plunged forwards; his front legs slid into the water. He bucked to relieve himself of my weight. When I stayed on, Whitey pitched me over his head, and I fell in the pond. The temperature of the water created almost as much of a jolt as Remy’s kiss. My head went under, and I was consumed. When I surfaced, I felt the weight of my clothes dragging me back down. I kicked my legs; my boots churned up mud. I could find no footing, slipped under again, and came up sputtering. With a perverse need to find and touch the bottom, I plunged back down.

“Get out of the water, Shine.” Rembrandt stood on the bank and waved his hands as if signaling he were the one in trouble. “Swim to me. I’ll pull you in.” He got on his knees and obviously waited to see if I could rescue myself from this predicament. When I continued to flounder, he said, “Are you acting, or can you really not swim?”

Although I might drown, I didn’t want his help. Remy slipped his combat boots off. His shirt was spotless, and his socks were clean and white. He shucked off his overcoat and clothes to stand naked. Still, he didn’t jump in. I paddled madly, turned in circles, and propelled myself further into the pond. Rembrandt, no longer pausing to consider if he might break his neck, dove in and swam to me. “Be still.” He placed his

forearm under my underarm and held me across the chest. I clung to him and raised my head to take a series of fast breaths.

“Relax.” Remy treaded water and held us afloat. “Don’t panic.” He picked me up in his arms and lifted me up. I was safe and let myself go slack. He dropped me with a splash. I felt his arm slide away.

“Try swimming now,” Remy suggested. Including mounting Whitey, I’d had enough lessons for today. I slapped my arms against the water and scissor-kicked my feet. “Help me.”

“I thought you didn’t need me.” Rembrandt swam beside me but stayed far enough away, so I couldn’t touch him. I bobbed up and down. My tears mixed with water. I began screaming. “Aren’t you going to save me?”

“Can’t you save yourself?” A smile twisted his face. The sun remained in the sky, but God wasn’t contained within it. The light entering the water felt weak. I’d postponed my baptism in the Baptist Church and would drown in the most unlikely place. My head went under water; my hair swirled in the murk. Remy dove. We stayed down together for a long time. I fought, gave up, and fought again. My hands tore through the water as I grabbed at Remy’s chest. His heart didn’t seem to be beating. At the last moment, Remy lifted me. I clung to his neck, afraid he might still kill me but not wishing to drown. To disconnect myself from my captor, I slid the ring off my hand, tried to bend it, and dropped it into the water.

“I gave you that ring.” Remy let go of me.

I popped to the surface. “You took it from Lucille.”

Remy placed his hands together in prayer formation, kicked up his feet, and disappeared into the pond again. The ring lay useless and irretrievable at the bottom. I dogpaddled the last few feet to land. I didn't see Remy surface and wondered if he'd succumbed to hypothermia. Suddenly he grabbed my finger and shoved the metal circle back onto it. I was too tired to protest. Like a fish pierced by a golden hook, I was caught. Rembrandt was the second person who'd almost let me drown. My mother, saved by the ground, was the first.

Rembrandt swam to shore and pulled me in. I lay limply. He towered over me. His foot touched my elbow. I put my hands over my head to protect myself like one of Pompeii's doomed inhabitants; the history teacher had shown us a picture of a man preserved in a similar position. I wished I had the stick with which Remy drowned the bugs to defend myself, for might he want me dead? Remy got down, lay by my side, and nuzzled my neck. "You're cold."

"Yes." But it didn't seem important. I'd taken the plunge and been renewed. Remy had baptized me, and I was born again, darkly. I sat up and couldn't imagine what I looked like now. I hadn't worn make-up, fixed my hair, or dressed up since Arnold's attack. Water leaked out my ears. Sand granules were caught in my toes. My clothes were plastered with mud. The brown fuzz of cattail seeds covered my coat. My hair had caught in a thorn bush. When I touched it, the branch pricked my palm. I jerked my head free and left strands of hair curling in the wind. Remy put on his clothes and brought me my missing boot; the sock was gone forever. "You need a comb."

"When Father sees the snarls in my hair, he jokes about finding his clippers."

“Don’t cut your hair.” The ghost boy saw a strand in the bush, untangled it, and slipped it into his breast pocket.

I got to my knees and stood. Feet planted, I discovered I was fine and tried not to show panic as I climbed the slope. Whitey had remained there the whole time. He backed up, tossed his head, and watched me. I stumbled over a rock; he took flight. The reins trailed loosely. The horse galloped ahead, riderless, but looked back once, as if to make sure I were okay.

“Go on. Go,” I told Whitey. Since I wasn’t popular, even with horses, I’d walk. I rubbed my sore wrist and proceeded. I wasn’t riding with Remy in the hearse. The quickest route home lay past the clearing and through the fields.

“You wouldn’t have drowned, Shine,” Remy called. “I know how long a person can stay underwater from my father’s books,” Remy said.

“Well then, my faith in you has been restored,” I said. Yet I didn’t relax; there was something more dangerous about being with him than simply the threat of death.

“I’ll see you soon,” he yelled.

I shook my head no and shouted back, “This is goodbye.” But I knew I’d encounter Remy again, and it would be more difficult to get away than ever. I envisioned us lying together at the very end, stretched on the ground and entwined in an embrace. The scene was rendered with such light it grew painful.

Nearing a state of hypothermia, I hurried, wringing out my shirt as I fled, to the house. If I were dry before I reached home, I wouldn’t have to invent a story about why I was wet. The snow-covered grass gave way to farmland. I ran even though my shoes sloshed water: almost there. The neighbor’s cattle, huddled together for warmth, were

lodged in their barn. I heard them lowing. There was home. I reached the porch and limped inside, cold, wet, and saddle-sore. I'd made it. Before I entered the kitchen, I leaned against the doorframe to rub my crotch.

“Do you have to do that in public, Shine?” Rowena sat at the table. “You smell!”

“I'm a little muddy.”

“You're soaked.” Mother stood by the sink. “How did that happen, on top of everything else?”

“I fell in a pond.”

“That sounds about right.” She ordered me to take a shower. “I hope you don't have pneumonia.”

Father, wearing his Deere coat, overalls, and orange Carhart stocking cap, gazed at the temperature gauge mounted outside the window. He said he'd been worried about my disappearance and was glad to take off his outerwear now. “I was going to go out and look for you. Monica wanted me to wait to see if you'd come back first.”

“Here I am. Sorry to make anyone worry.”

“How far did you go, the next town?” Laura complained I'd worn out the horse. She hadn't had a long turn.

“You got on Whitey?” I said.

Laura explained Father had given her a turn, since Whitey returned saddled and full of energy. Afterwards, in the stall, Father showed Laura how to currycomb Whitey and rub him with a towel. When Father released the gelding into the pasture, he pawed the dirt with his hoof, and got down on all fours.

“You can tell how much a horse is worth by how many times it rolls,” Mother said. “Whitey cashed in at three hundred dollars, the amount we have to spend if you go to the emergency room, Shine.”

I took off my shoes and went back to deposit them on the porch. I’d clean off the mud with a knife after it hardened. Rowena followed me. “You didn’t tell Mother the whole story. You look like you almost drowned.”

“If only you knew. I saw Rembrandt.”

“Who?” Rowena stepped up to my face.

“From the funeral. You remember him.”

“I do well.” Rowena sounded possessive.

“He was at that pond we skate on.”

“You rode that far?”

“The horse wouldn’t cooperate,” I said.

“You mean you don’t know how to ride.”

“Never mind Whitey. Rembrandt’s the dangerous one.”

“That’s what I like about him,” Rowena said.

“He almost let me die,” I said.

Rowena didn’t seem concerned. “What did Remy say to you?”

“He acted like he wanted us to be together forever. Before today, I hoped for that, too, but we don’t even know each other.”

“You better keep it that way.”

“Why?” I said, but before she could explain, I remembered how she’d been sleepy during the day and absent at night and realized she must have been seeing the boy to

whom I'd wanted to be engaged. I felt angry Remy had pledged his allegiance to me after having been with Rowena.

"You better not visit him," she said.

"Right. It's not like we're married." I didn't tell her Remy kissed me.

She held up both hands and curled her fingers like a wolverine. Her nails could create gashes in my cheeks if she struck.

"I don't plan to see Remy again," I said even if the matter was out of my hands.

"No," Rowena said. "You like Arnold."

The thought of being in Arnold's presence sent shivers down my legs. I needed to pee. "How can you say that after what I told you?"

"Don't try to hide your feelings," Rowena said. "You don't have to pretend it was rape because he's your cousin."

I was stupid for telling Rowena anything. "You're sick."

"Just don't look at Remy again. Don't speak to him. Or I'll hurt you." Rowena stared at me, as if trying to decide whether I'd obey her order. I waited for her to calm down through her normal routine of slamming doors, marching to our closet to check whether her clothes were hanging in the right direction, and spraying the room with perfume.

"I wish you cared. I'm lucky to be alive," I told Rowena. Yet alive I was and drawn to Remy like steel filings to a magnet. We'd find each other again.

The next morning, Mother forced Father to take Whitey back to his original owner. Afterwards, Father left on a haul. Mother watched out the window, as if he'd left

for Mexico and not Hannibal, Missouri. That afternoon, she baked cookies. We ate them and drank glasses of milk for dinner.

CHAPTER 9

In town, people waited a month before dismantling their Christmas decorations. Oh, for January to be finished, the month with the shortest of days. February could fly by, too, with its forgotten New Year's resolutions. March, with its lambs and lions, would be filled with rain. April nights would bloom with flowers threatening to engulf us. May would drift dreamily into June, and I'd be free of school. Last spring, Arnold and I sauntered down to Beaver Dam Park after his baseball games. We walked past the picnic tables, barbecue pit, and basketball court. Arnold skipped up a set of rickety bleachers; I followed. We lazed around; there was nothing better to do. I wore shorts, and the fiberglass seats made my legs itch. He rubbed my shoulders and dropped his hands on my knees. I didn't turn around for fear Arnold would kiss me.

For now, winter was here to stay. Today, my sisters and I had to attend school. At breakfast, Father, a self-proclaimed taxpayer, argued he cared enough to make us endure any tedium involved in going. Mother, who never graduated, agreed an education was important. My Sunday School teacher, a descendent of Puritans, said even girls needed to be able to read to teach their children the Bible. Rowena, who lived to dance, scoffed at such ideas as she put on her coat. I myself had enjoyed kindergarten but thought if we hadn't learned everything we needed to know by age seven, there was a problem. Laura

concluded. She was making her way through Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and condemned it as boring.

We kids skipped down the driveway to wait for the bus. The birds seemed asleep, and the mailbox had iced over. Last October, the frogs dove into the ditch and buried themselves deep in the ooze. I yawned and wished I were hibernating myself. I thought about putting my book bag in the snow and sitting on it, when a black bird flew low. I boasted the ghost boy was thinking about me. Rowena bared her teeth like a dog and warned me of her claim. Laura laughed at my interpretation based on "free association." Today, Rowena sported new Calvin Klein jeans. Mother promised she'd pay for a tutor. Not only would Rowena pass her classes, but her name might appear on the honor roll. If Rowena stayed long enough, Mother might ask Father to let her drive the family car. I'd never dreamed of such extravagances. Last summer, I argued with Arnold about who would sneak out Father's Suzuki, put in a gallon of gas, and ride first.

The bus screeched to a stop, as if the driver had a slight case of dementia and overlooked us. Rowena, the brave one, got on first. Laura ascended, and I followed, climbing the yellow-striped stairs, and looked for a seat. All year, the bus kids, particularly a boy called Rocky, had harangued me. Was that his real name? He saw me approach, leered, and grabbed at my crotch. I pushed Laura in front of me to close the space and hurried past. Rocky's disease might be contagious. Down the aisle, I searched kids' eyes to see who'd share a seat. In third grade, my gal pal, Kathy, secured the backseat, a two-person by the emergency door. The older boys called it the "love seat" if they were lucky enough to crowd in with a high-school girl, but Kathy and I considered it ours. We traded stickers for our books. She peeled off scratch-n-sniff ones from spelling

quizzes: root-beer floats, banana splits, caramel apples impaled on wooden sticks. They were worth more if one removed the wide-lined paper of spelling quizzes.

This morning, my fellow scabs, cramped in their seats, pretended to be kind. As I pushed my way through, someone tripped me. With no other choice, Laura and I made our way back to Rocky. He scooted over and, sensing he should entertain us, told this story: “A man wept. He owned no shoes. Then he saw a man who had no feet. The first dude realized how blessed he was. He took the second man’s shoes.”

Laura, perched on my knees, exclaimed my “boyfriend’s” joke was dumb, but Rocky was obviously looking for any feedback he could get. He pulled a packet of Big Chew shredded gum from his backpack and offered to share if I’d give him a smooch. The boy with one leg in a brace breathed love in my ear. I kept his crutches between us. The bus lurched into the half-circle in front of the school. I put away my homework about square roots, cut in line, stepping on someone’s feet, and was the second one off, after Rowena.

I had fifteen minutes before homeroom. I sprinted to Huck’s General Store to buy tampons. Once inside, I saw Huck wasn’t working. Good. He wouldn’t peer at my breasts and call me “girl.” Still, the mayor’s mother, wearing a floppy beach hat, felt the need to address me. She relayed she was back from her winter house in Key West, where she drank orange juice and strolled on the beach. The lady mentioned today was her parakeet’s birthday.

“I have important things to think about,” I said.

“When I was your age, honey,” she began.

“Things you wouldn’t understand.” I hurried to the personal items row, grabbed a damaged box of Playtex, made sure no one was watching, and folded my arm over it. I slipped the box under my shirt. I thought about grabbing some Band-Aids for a new dressing on my wrist but decided not to be greedy. I zipped my coat and glided out the door with an intentional air of nonchalance. The box poked my abdomen. I convinced myself this pain was my period, late in coming.

My first class was algebra. I sat in the corner, next to the handprint-covered window, and pulled my sleeve over my wrist. From this coveted spot, it was possible to avoid being seen and therefore insulted by other students. Arnold sat at a desk at the front. I felt thankful we didn’t sit next to each other in any classes. I scrunched down and interested myself in the backs of my classmates’ heads: boys with cropped hair, gals with straight tresses parted down the middle, and Sunday School girls with bows. I avoided looking at Arnold’s red curls. Unlike at the church service, I didn’t feel the need to reveal to those in charge what he’d done. I knew by now no one would do anything.

The algebra teacher, known for his bad humor, gave us a story problem. If Sally were a cannibal, and she ate twenty of her friends, and five of her acquaintances. . . . I lost track of what the teacher was saying and stopped computing variables. The master, who seemed as bored with math as we were, paused in his lesson to enlighten us with the “facts of life.” He gave such speeches every week: In Atwater, everyone was beautiful, except those who were ugly, low class, and derelict. Rejects, retards, repeats, they would bear kids who never carried Lone Ranger lunchboxes. Everyone desired to be beautiful, like on TV, but it wasn’t possible. Old folks were people who may have been attractive at one time.

I listened since the teacher gave pop quizzes and wondered if I'd ever be as appealing as a cookie jar sitting just out of reach was to a small child. At the hour's end, the teacher gave a homework assignment the bullies wouldn't turn in. They made up next year's football team, and that was enough to be required of them.

History was next. The teacher asked us to draw a map. I chose gray as my favorite color and penciled in U.S. landmarks: The St. Louis Arch, Alamo, Snake Land, and Disney World. The class nerd announced he was planning on moving to France and didn't want to complete the assignment. The teacher contemplated aloud living anywhere besides Atwater and scoffed: One might as well be planning a trip to Pluto.

The teacher paced back and forth and watched the Sunday School girls' work. They held up perfect maps. He raised his head as if in approval and looked down their shirts as he lowered it. The teacher meandered back to my desk. His belt was cinched over his waist. He tapped my paper and declared my map incorrect. I replied since we were studying the American Revolution, the United States didn't exist yet. The teacher produced the ping-pong paddle from his back pocket to end such arguments and slapped my palm. I cried out with feigned pain.

Tubby, obviously wanting to inject himself into the fray, threw brightly colored pencils at me. I forgot about the teacher standing there and insulted Tubby. I wasn't sure why the word "fuck" bothered the teacher (perhaps since it was French), but when a boy tried to pick a fight, it was the best thing a girl could tell him to do to himself to make him go away. The teacher told me to hold out my other palm. Before he could whap me, the principal opened the door. He pulled the arm of a girl hiding behind him. He said he wanted to introduce a new student. I didn't have to take a second look. Rowena had

completed the test in the secretary's office and by her look been held back a grade. The teacher seated her in the broken chair beside mine. To calm her nerves, I leaned over and tapped her elbow.

“Don't touch me!”

The principal had exited, and the teacher glared at Rowena. He then proceeded to evaluate the remaining students' maps. Rowena, who didn't know where anything was located in the school, whispered I better not follow her.

“Tell me when you need the bathroom,” I said.

Rowena cursed at me and received a detention. The bell rang. I showed her where the principal's office was located.

* * * * *

No one liked me. Mother said to have a friend, one had to be a friend: “Be polite and smile,” she said at breakfast that morning. “It's easy.”

Nobody gave my classmates such advice. They'd rather be entertained than chummy. The bullies liked a dirty story, good belch, or tale of how some guy transferred zit cream to his girlfriend's face by kissing her.

In science class, I didn't have a good spot in the back. I had to sit center right, front row. The teacher, standing between the podium and a hanging, model skeleton, lectured without looking at our faces. The secretary announced over the intercom the heater wasn't functioning properly. From the vents, torrents of hot air blasted the room. Rocky, slumped in front of me, smelled like formaldehyde. Between the heat and odor, I couldn't concentrate on cellular structure. My bladder hurt so much I couldn't control it. I felt a leak. To relieve the unrelenting pressure, I peed a small stream. My private parts

burned and itched. These reoccurring symptoms could have something to do with the fact Arnold broke the skin between my legs. When class finished, I got up quickly. A yellow pool, bigger than I'd expected, had formed under me. I ripped out my map from history class--it had received a failing grade anyway—and tried to mop up the mess without calling attention to myself. I couldn't hide the fact my white pleated skirt was wet in the back.

I fled to the bathroom without bothering to write down the homework assignment. The girls who regularly skipped class were hiding (I spotted their feet) in the stalls and probably creating graffiti with Magic Markers. With a sort of second sense, they'd stand on the toilet seats if a hall monitor burst in. Glad a stall was open, I entered by the sinks. Two flag corps girls wandered in to comb their hair, spray it with bottles of Aquanet stashed in giant purses, and gossip. I inhaled the aerosol fumes and watched the flaggers through the metal partition apply lotion. Charity, captain and a senior, was short, squat, and looked old enough to be someone's mother. She'd tried out to be a cheerleader but couldn't manage the scissor jump--she hadn't gotten off the ground. Hope, known as the Rumor-spreading Skank, had a nose like a parrot. As a little girl, she'd swum in a meet and thudded into the pool wall to win third place. Hope was horizontally challenged but had big breasts and a high voice. For boys, these qualities diminished her faults.

“Did you see the spot on Shine's skirt?” Charity said.

“Even in the country, people have outhouses.”

I cringed at the girls' words and took off the embroidered panties. Monday, Monday, full of bliss, would never be so again. I stuffed my underwear, its lining covered with white pus from an infection, in the metal box and wondered how to prevent further

accidents. I remembered the tampons and slid one inside. I couldn't push it too far; my crotch was swollen. I remembered suddenly and stupidly Arnold had had a girlfriend last October and thought maybe he hadn't been a virgin after all.

I left the bathroom and went to stand in the lunch line. Wizzer sneaked up and poked me. "Don't worry about what happened. I pee down a floor vent when I don't feel like leaving my bedroom."

"That's ingenuity." Quiet now and with dignity, I placed my seventy-five-cent ham and cheese in the toaster oven. The bun would taste like a rubber bed sheet, but I didn't want to stand in the queue for a free hot lunch and have the kids say the government was paying for it. I went to the tables and sank into a chair. Charity, leader of the wench mob and Wizzer's girlfriend, licked the grease of a meatball sub from her fingers. "Why are you at this table?"

"What is this, twenty questions?" I could park my butt anywhere I wanted.

"Yes, and if you were smart, you'd know the answers," said Hope.

"If only there were a girl named Faith, your squad could be called the Beatitudes," I said. The group, looking confused, stared at me. The girls moved their plastic trays to another table. Rowena wasn't at my side; they didn't have to be civil. I sat by myself in the cafeteria, which buzzed like a hive. No one ate alone; it was an unwritten rule. I felt eyes on me. Not knowing what else to do, I claimed a chair with the only group left--girls shunned like Hindu untouchables. I lowered myself next to a cross-eyed girl who sucked milk through a straw in her ear. Without a word, she and the others got up and left, too. I yelled at the milk-drinker's back, "He may be broke, but I know who my father is."

After lunch, I had gym class. I used to pray the school would burn down, so I wouldn't have to dress. In the locker room, Charity, who seemed to follow me everywhere, commented on the masking tape wound around my wrist. "Did you try to commit suicide with a pair of rounded kindergarten scissors?" My sweater had hidden the homemade bandage until now.

"No, I used more professional means." I couldn't wait until next week when my classmates found someone new to prey on. It was only after class ended, and I was putting away my basketball, I spotted the tampon string hanging out my shorts.

The next class was English, which I liked except for the fact I couldn't spell. My pencil broke during a vocabulary test. I asked to borrow one from a boy named Horse. Hope forced a stub in my hand instead. I thanked her. She laughed and said she'd dropped it in the toilet. I grew interested in how the pencil's letters combined to spell the word "sharp," reached out, and stabbed her with the graphite point. The teacher paused on the word "confrontation" and looked around. Hope had yelped. The teacher demanded she head to the principal's office.

Charity, sitting in front of me, flipped her dyed, evil-colored hair. "Will we see you at the Sadie Hawkins dance, Shine? If you dare show, don't pee on your partner."

She of all people should be sensitive about what the health teacher called "women's issues." Such girls never learned. I said, "Are you having another baby with Wizzer? If so, your selection of prom dresses may be limited."

Charity probably didn't like my revealing of her pregnancy to classmates; she flipped me off under her desk. I was relieved I didn't have to make any countermove;

Horse toppled his chair to end class. This act was a daily occurrence to which the teacher seemingly never caught on. She led him to the nurse's station for an ice pack.

Last hour was chemistry. With my safety glasses on for protection, I sat and thought about Remy and ignored the experiment. My partner, the smart Catholic girl, shook beakers, lit the Bunsen burner, and peered through the microscope. I noticed a picture of Darwin on the wall: According to the teacher, he'd tried to make monkeys of us all. But together Remy and I could become superhuman. That day at the funeral and again at the pond, he'd given me the feeling he could change my life. I imagined our genes, dominant and recessive, paired and jotted down possible reactions in my notebook. Midday shadows crawled across the desk like the hands of a sundial. The bell dinged when I imagined it never would.

Everyone leapt up and rushed into the hall. Boys threw books into lockers and slammed them shut. Girls looked to see who was available to drive them home. I was searching for Laura among the throng when Rowena flounced past without appearing to recognize me. A hearse made a sharp turn off the street. Rowena waved and made her way to the car. I pulled Laura from the bus line and hurried after Rowena. Laura took a shortcut off the sidewalk, and I slid and fell in the mud when the sprinklers, trying to coax grass from the snow, shot on. The car's door swung open. I tried to see inside. Even though the driver's face was dark, I recognized Remy.

“Wait,” I said to Rowena.

She climbed in.

“Shine?” Rembrandt leaned toward me. “How are you?”

I paused. Rowena seated herself and looked at me with seeming irritation, as if I were holding them up. She tried to pull the door shut as I grasped the handle. Remy chastised her and offered us all a ride home. I didn't know what to say. I was in shock and almost confessed to mooning over him during the last hour. Dreaming was one thing. Seeing the boy who'd almost allowed me to drown was another. The hearse seemed stuffy; the cushions smelled like bouquets of smashed flowers. I pulled Rowena's arm and told her to get out of the car.

"Shine, I told you not to follow me." Rowena wrangled out of my hold. "And stop treating my boyfriend like a criminal," she said.

I backed away and turned to Remy to see if Rowena's claim were true. He raised his shoulders and winked as if such a relationship were new to him, too. "When you said you never wanted to see me again, I guess you didn't mean it, did you, Shine?"

"I don't want you near any of us," I said to Remy. Then I focused on Rowena. "Don't you remember what I said about Remy trying to kill me?"

Rowena seemed no more impressed by this reference to the pond than the first time. Laura whined we'd missed the bus due to this "stupid girl fight." She complained she was getting cold. But Rembrandt didn't seem bothered by what Laura called our "carrying on."

Laura asked if there were a pool in Remy's limousine. He laughed and replied there was a corpse instead.

"What a time for a joyride," Laura said. Before I could stop her, she climbed in. Left with no other choice, I crawled in, too. Rowena moved over but refused to look at us. The hearse seemed a vehicle without air, but I guessed the dead no longer needed to

breathe. The quarterback in his Jeep invited Remy to cut in line. As Remy cruised down Main Street, my classmates honked to celebrate the week's end. Remy drove us home and even escorted us to the door. So Rowena wouldn't accuse me of flirting with her "boyfriend," I hurried ahead. Behind me, I saw Laura grab hold of the ghost boy's hand. Before Remy left, I heard him promise Rowena he'd attend the dance even though he said he hated such affairs. He, assuming I'd be attending, asked me to save him a song. We girls stood on the porch as Remy returned to the car. When he didn't turn and wave goodbye to Rowena, she rushed down the steps and pushed him in the back. He spun, and she shoved him again in the chest. "You better not dance with anyone but me."

Rembrandt bristled but, with the patience of one working with hysterical people, commanded her to step away. Rowena raised her fists at Remy's pectorals and threatened to dump him. He grabbed her hands and twisted her to the ground. For a minute, she sat there. I remembered when she'd fallen into Lucille's grave, and the undertaker asked me, in what I still wasn't sure was a joke, if we should leave her there. When Rowena rose now, the back of her jeans was smeared with mud. One of her high-heeled peach shoes was buried in the muck. I glanced at my wrist, covered with tape, and studied hers. Within seconds, Rowena's arm, due to bruising, had turned the color of eggplant. Laura and I looked, speechless and seemingly afraid, at the ghost boy. Rowena, the girl who loved her pa unconditionally even if he'd left her, didn't seem perturbed by this turn in the relationship. I knew she planned on going to the dance with Remy if he remained willing.

CHAPTER 10

Rowena and I stood at the bottom of the attic stairs.

“Wait here. I’ll see what I can find.” Mother journeyed to the top floor to search for something in an old chest and brought back a dress I’d never seen before, along with matching shoes. I assumed these items, relics of her circus days, were meant for me. I looked at Mother and remembered our difference in size. Rowena grabbed the goods, flitted into the bathroom, and put on the sequined number. Although the hemline was short, the dress fit. She could even wear the silver platform shoes; they’d been too big for Mother.

“I want to go to the dance, too,” I said.

Rowena stopped admiring her raiment long enough to snort, and Mother raised her hands as if the question of how to produce a dress were a mystery. “Why don’t you wear that outfit from the funeral? It was unusual. No one else would own the same one.”

“I’m not going to a costume party.”

Mother pursed her lips. “I know what you can wear.” She went into the laundry room where her sewing machine was located and found Virginia’s wedding dress in a bag. Mother unfolded the lengths of fabric. The gown dragged on the floor. Its lace had yellowed. If Mother used a harsh detergent to wash the dress, it would fall apart. My

aunt, sentimental, had originally asked Mother to make her a set of curtains. “What do you think?”

“I’m not getting married. I’m only going to a dance.”

“The flag girls will ask her where the groom is,” Rowena said. “Shine will have to tell them she’s been thrown over.”

“What groom?” said Laura. Rowena was teaching her how to waltz.

“I don’t know. Maybe Shine can marry her cousin,” Rowena said.

“I’m not wearing that dress,” I repeated.

Mother told Rowena to start getting ready and leave us. She had three “short hours” to shower, fix her hair, and put on make-up. Rowena would stand under the water to steam her pores and leave me no hot water. She’d blow-dry her hair and study the ends for splits with a magnifying glass. Father had given her horse shampoo, and she was trying to grow her hair long enough to sit on. If I did that, I’d look like Medusa.

I decided to make my routine simple. I’d ask Mother to put up my hair in a chignon. If I danced, the sweat wouldn’t glisten on my neck. Still, there remained the problem of attire. I, like Cinderella, began to think better of going and decided to stay home and read my monster book. Mother told me to hold on: She thought she’d figured out a way to disguise the wedding dress’ stains. “Get the mop bucket. We have a project to do.”

I tried not to show my doubt as she heated a large pot on the stove. When the water was boiling, she poured it into the bucket and dumped in a package of red dye. I used a wooden spoon to stir the mixture and placed various bolts of the dress in the solution to soak. Mother made up two batches of blue and yellow dye. When we’d

finished the three-tone job, and Mother had cut the dress with scissors to tea-length, I speculated about the result.

“Put the dress on the clothesline,” Mother said. After an hour, I retrieved it from the wind and hung it on a nail by the fire. “Don’t get the dress too close to the flames,” Mother warned.

When the dress was still damp, I spread it on the rug and saw it was covered with streaks. As I surveyed the folds, I realized the garment had a random assortment of stripes and patches. Mother bustled into the parlor, picked up the gown, and flung it out before her feet. “The dress turned out better than I thought,” she said. “Put it on.”

“I’ll look like a bedraggled gypsy queen. I don’t have to attend the dance, really.”

“You’ll look fine. Besides, it’ll be dark in the gymnasium.”

Mother didn’t know about the revolving spotlights.

I changed in my room and ventured back to the parlor to display the result. The dress was small, especially beneath the underarms. I pulled in my abdomen to avoid showing my pooch. Mother smiled. “Enjoy the dress. Afterwards, Virginia can pay me for rainbow curtains.”

Other girls would borrow dresses formal if slightly out of fashion from pregnant cousins or older sisters; I had no relations. I didn’t want to wear the ridiculous garment, but Mother would be disappointed if I failed to attend the dance. She hadn’t become excited about any activity of mine since the party.

Mother was headed to church again—I think she went there to petition God for some request--and gave us a ride. In the car, I touched the loops of hair Mother had pinned like a work of origami and grew nervous. I’d never been to a dance before. We

arrived late, but Rowena seemed to prefer the chance to prance through the door an hour tardy. I followed a short distance behind. She could have the glory all to herself. The gym was a sea of colors. The girls, moving daintily in their dresses, looked like exotic birds escaped from their cages at the St. Louis Zoo. The boys, more comparable to penguins, a species that by nature couldn't take flight, looked sharp in their finery also: black pants and white, button-up shirts with oversized collars. The gym itself, a place where athletes competed, dripping sweat and spilling blood, became magical once dancing was introduced.

Balloons were tied to cardboard pillars. Streamers ran across the ceiling. The theme was "Under the Sea," and I reassured myself the scenery was composed of paste, paint, and papier mache when an octopus covered with green glitter reached out its tentacles to grab me. Despite my envelopment in the dreamscape, I spotted one person from whom I needed to stay away. Luckily for me, Arnold must have planned to do the same. He'd brought a date, a flute player in band. She was laughing stupidly at something Tubby had said. I wanted to draw the girl aside, tell her what I knew about my cousin, and warn her about his unnamed disease. Arnold threw me a fierce look. I didn't have the guts to confront her, even if I encountered her alone in the bathroom. I let the predicament go; the girl wasn't my friend, after all.

I ignored Arnold and his date and shifted my attention to the important matter at hand. I looked at the crowd. Remy was nowhere to be seen. Despite Rowena's anticipation of meeting him, I felt relieved he'd not come, and now I could relax. Now I was attending my first such affair, I wanted to have fun. On a fast dance, the girls drew close and formed a circle to keep out boys. Only during slow songs did a girl let a guy

hold her close, and depending on the boy's level of attraction and popularity, clasp her by the small of the back.

The fat girls bounced as they moved, and had canyons between their breasts. Their skirts dropped from their waists like upside-down mushrooms. I saw Tubby point to his date's cleavage and brag to Arnold, "If you dropped a pencil down there, you'd never get it back." The plain girls, who should have had the fat girls' dates but had acted too good to accept them, had plunked themselves on the bleachers. They fingered heart lockets dangling from thin chains around their necks and probably tried to be resolute in their continuing refusal of admirers. The jocks strolled around, observing all girls without prejudice. The boys smelled of alcohol and fruit punch. They'd offer drunken propositions to any girl who'd listen and disappear early with whomever they could charm. One dweeb, dressed in a tuxedo jacket, seemed to take pride in his stiff, exaggerated dance moves on the floor. When Tubby, on the way to the bathroom passed, he executed a wrestling move called the pile driver on the unfortunate boy. The football coach, a chaperon, observed this stunt but, apparently leaving for a smoke break, left the boy to writhe.

The flaggers, tottering on high heels and holding the skirts of dowdy dresses, made their social rounds. They bounded over to see Rowena and me. Charity lifted a fold of my skirt and tittered. "What is this you're wearing, Shine--a tie-dye wedding dress?"

"Well, I never," Hope giggled. "Flower power."

I'd seen enough of the flag corps girls earlier today. I asked Rowena if she wanted to ditch the dance and go somewhere else, perhaps Mulberry Pass, where we could sit on the bridge and swing our feet back and forth and be alone. Rowena smirked at my

suggestion, and Charity twisted the large fabric rose sprouting from my bosom. “Rowena, it looks like Shine’s in love with you. Maybe she’ll pluck this flower and make you a present.”

At times, I was taken with Rowena; it was true. I grabbed her hand. “We could run away to Chicago, like you want, and be together forever.”

The third flagger, a brunette, smacked her lips and made kissing noises. She represented a thorn without the rose. I wanted her to vanish and before I knew it, whapped her across the face. In the midst of this suddenly violent scenario, I caught my finger in her hoop earring and yanked it out. She put her hand to her ear. I saw a spot of blood on the lobe. The three girls screamed in unison and dashed for the bathroom. I was surprised at myself but glad they were gone.

“Thanks.” Rowena patted me on the shoulder. “Next time I’ll handle the situation. Your father’s teaching me to box.”

“Since when are you two getting along?”

“I showed him a few card tricks for the next time he goes gambling.”

“Your relationship with him will be short-lived. I’ll always look out for you.”

Rowena held up her palms as if I’d gone too far with my comment. She claimed she’d depend on Remy to protect her if she needed any help at all and pointed to the bleachers. “You can join the wallflowers. I’m going to dance.”

I felt as if I’d stepped into a crosswalk and been hit by a speeding car. In my mind, the dark vehicle with no driver raced around the corner, and I had no time to move out of its path. Rowena flounced away in her dress.

I watched my sister. Before she took six steps, one of the Sunday School girls' boyfriends had blocked her way. He asked for a dance. His girlfriend was nowhere to be seen. Southern Baptists weren't supposed to dance, and her father was a deacon. The boy, a college student, must have been in town for the weekend and decided to come without her. I hoped Rowena would be intrigued by this new guy and forget Rembrandt. She shrugged at his invitation and led him to the floor. Someone touched my shoulder. I accepted a request to dance with Tubby. His date had tired herself out herself. Despite his sweat smell and problems of ambulation, Tubby was an excellent dancer. Arnold took turns with the plain girls. Probably to him one pair of feet was interchangeable with another. I'd seen his date enter the bathroom. She had yet to exit. The girl's face was broken out, and I imagined her staring in the mirror. I should have gone to tell her about the rape. Arnold glanced my way and would probably block the door if I tried to leave the gym now.

Most kids disappeared before the last hour, but I meant to last it out, dancing with myself. Remy had yet to appear. He didn't seem the kind of guy to feel pressure to keep such an appointment. Perhaps he wouldn't come at all. Rowena, having danced with most every guy, seemed disappointed. She resisted looking at their faces as she watched the door. None of her partners seemed to notice this slight. When there were ten minutes left, and the DJ was playing "One of These Nights," Remy arrived. I saw him glance at us sisters as he stood in the door. He wore the same torn jeans but had donned patent shoes, a pearl-snap shirt, and suede vest. As The Eagles sang a song about a man making a choice between two women, I wondered if Remy were lonely himself. Would he prefer the "daughter of the Devil himself" or an "angel in white"?

Rowena noticed Rembrandt had arrived and left her dance partner in mid-step. I guessed Remy would no longer have to choose between us: She'd made the decision for him. I approached Rowena to protect her from the ill-made decision. By the time I reached them, Rowena had presented herself to Remy. He didn't look at her for more than a second when his eyes caught mine. I watched him take me in, head to toe, and supposed he'd find my bridal get-up ridiculous. Rowena, clinging to his arm, saw the look, and let go of his elbow.

Rembrandt asked me if I wanted to dance. Surprised at his proposal and my answer, I accepted. I remembered my close call at the pond but decided he wouldn't try to kill me in public. If he did manage to murder me through some surprising means, then, I reasoned, an end came to everyone's life. An ocean of silver and blue decorations surrounded us as we circled. I felt as if I'd been hit by a wave; I'd gone under the sea. But now I was floating. Moments after Remy took me in his arms, one hand in mine, the other placed on my hip, the dream ended. I'd forgotten about Rowena's existence when I spotted her in my peripheral vision. She was running out of the gym like the latest women's track star. I hesitated and then apologized to Remy. I felt obligated to pursue Rowena. On the way out, I glanced back at him and sighed at a lost chance to glide across the floor with the prince no girl should have.

When I caught up with Rowena, she was standing outside the building and looking in all directions as if contemplating which way to make her escape. As on my birthday when she'd been barred from entering the house, she seemed furious.

"Are you still following me?" she said as I approached slowly, as if with a wild animal, to stand by her side.

“I’m ready to leave. I’ll call Mother and have her pick us up.”

“I’m not going home. And I wouldn’t ride in the same car with you anyway, Shine.”

“Wait here. I know where there’s a phone,” I said. When I turned around to reassure her of my return, Rowena was gone. She’d taken off in a sprint. At a trot, I followed her around the building and stopped. My Mary Janes pinched. When I returned to my point of origin, Rowena was nowhere in sight. She’d taken some hidden turn and escaped me. I decided to phone Mother anyway. Perhaps by the time she arrived, Rowena would have joined me on her own. The dance had come to a close. Parents in station wagons waited for the younger students to appear. The mothers of shy girls had been parked there the whole time, probably in case they broke into tears when the football’s safety brushed by and touched their arms without acknowledging them. There was heartbreak everywhere.

The phone was located two unlit blocks away. My Cinderella slippers narrow, and my feet swollen from dancing, I resigned myself to taking small steps. In the student parking lot, post-festivities had begun. Impromptu partygoers perched on their vehicles. The health teacher claimed they were unaware of their part in a greater landscape, a “teenage wasteland,” and I saw with some understanding what she meant. As I cut through the aisles of cars, my rougher classmates called out my name. I gathered I’d become popular through my few seconds of dancing with Remy. But I’d never fit in. I didn’t throw around God’s name in vain; wear purple matte lipstick, a red leather jacket, and hot pants; or have a mother who danced at the makeshift men’s club in the laundry mat’s rear.

The kids from across the tracks were playing their usual games. Gals wrapped their lips around bottles of Boone's, tipped them up, and drank until they choked. Last month, one girl fell and turned up with broken teeth the next morning. Tonight, the guys applauded, laughed, and categorized such information, I guessed, for potential future encounters. As I strode past the line, I smelled cigarette smoke and spotted two kids pairing up behind a car. A boy dropped his loose pants from his skinny hips and lifted up the girl's dress. The two kissed and careened in the darkness. Against my will, I stopped to watch. A truck's headlights illuminated the faces of Wizzer and Hope engaged in a "special moment." The boy grunted in what seemed a familiar declaration: I heard sounds of passion and promises he probably didn't intend to keep. The girl moaned and repeated something about how the scenario wasn't quite right—he had a girlfriend. In the midst of the act, Hope began to cry. I wondered if I should go over to help her. I knew from experience it was difficult for a girl to reason with anyone with whom she was having sex, and maybe intervention was needed. Wizzer pushed Hope against the car's trunk, and I, afraid to interfere, stayed where I was. Later, no one would believe Hope was an unwilling partner. Maybe she did want it, I told myself. She wasn't even crying anymore.

I continued walking. I'd spotted Charity running across the lot and knew things were going to get interesting. In the sliver of moonlight, she'd obviously spied her boyfriend pressed against her best friend.

Wizzer buckled his belt with leisure. The threesome began shouting and arguing with what the health teacher called "teenagers' logic."

"I leave for one minute, and what do you do?" Charity said.

"You're the one who talked about a threesome," Faith argued.

“It was your fantasy to watch me kiss a girl, Charity,” Wizzer said.

“But you had sex with Hope,” Charity said.

“I saw no reason to stop.”

“Everyone knows she’s a skag, and I wasn’t even there.”

“All the easier.”

Charity pushed Wizzer. Looking as if he didn’t understand what the ruckus was, he stumbled back. Last July, Wizzer fractured his ankle playing “b-ball.” The family sedan was broken, so he stayed in bed for two weeks instead of getting the bone set, and walked funny now.

Hope, crying anew, this time probably with shame, wiped her face with her hand and fluffed her hair.

Charity continued yelling at Wizzer. “Was she tight?”

He made an “O” with his lips. Charity kicked him in the balls. He swore he’d kill her as he limped into a run. She waited, as if to give him a sporting chance before dashing away. I wondered if the couple would break up.

Ester, the fat girl, remained the only female not to pair up. She’d developed “early,” growing pubic hair when she was six years old, and had been waiting a long time. No guy appeared drunk enough to make a move, but Rocky watched her. He lost his chance to make a move when the police appeared. My classmates disbanded but were sure to congregate later in some desolate field. To avoid the suspicion directed at them, I made my way toward the Dairy Whip. I saw the hearse. Remy toiled up Main Street and glanced toward the houses, as if looking for some bridge party to crash, which could provide him with future customers. I crouched by a fire hydrant to avoid being seen. I

might as well have been holding a road construction sign. He spotted me, made a U-turn, and beckoned for me to come with a curled finger. For a second, I thought about bolting, picking my way through backyards, and calling Mother from the town's other pay phone. But the ghost boy's mind seemed a crystal ball; he must have discerned my plans. He drove alongside me as I jogged down the sidewalk. I didn't look over. He rolled down the window. At least Rowena wasn't snuggled next to him, I saw, even if her absence made me wonder where she was. I opened the passenger door, still suspicious. A hearse was a reminder of how people's lives would end: youth's tale split open like a rotting pumpkin.

"Do you like walking better than you like dancing, Shine?" Remy said. "Get in."

"I have to find my sister."

He assured me Rowena got a ride with Horse.

"You saw her?" I said.

He nodded. I stood with the door ajar and wondered what to do. I shook my head in agreement with Remy's request, climbed in, and slammed the door closed. I glanced out the window. Twelve o'clock curfew had passed. The streets were bare, but I wasn't ready to go to my house. For once, Rowena had complied with the rules and beaten me there. If Mother weren't already sleep, she might worry about me, but at least she'd have her firstborn home safely.

"Stop worrying about your sister," Remy said.

"She's one of the most important people in the world."

"Rowena isn't anything special," Rembrandt said. "I know her kind."

I hadn't solicited his opinion. I didn't even want anyone to understand why Rowena had become my obsession. Still, for the moment, I let her go. I didn't have to

stick up for the girl who'd abandoned me at the dance. I wondered how much Rembrandt liked my sister. In the past, he must have had many girlfriends. "Rowena's okay, but I'd never been enamored of anyone besides you."

"Enamored."

"It's a word from Lucille's romance novels."

"You're blushing."

I remembered I was wearing a wedding dress and felt my face grow hot. "I don't actually know much about love."

"That's what I like about you." Rembrandt suggested going for a ride. I didn't care where we went. I hoped he'd take me away, as Arnold was going to do once, but concealed my desire. There was Chicago, and then there were places of which I didn't know, places perhaps worse than Atwater, terrible places from which no one returned.

Remy accelerated and made his way through town as softly as a night hawk. I remembered cruises with Arnold last summer and the endless, gravel-specked stretches of road. Arnold's tools were piled in the backseat; he'd predicted the motor could blow any day. We crossed our fingers. At Huck's General Store, Arnold got out and scurried under the broken lamppost to siphon fuel from the owner's car. Borrowing from a Lincoln was easy; only the Buicks had locks on their gas caps, he'd learned. I leaned out the window to watch for the sheriff. When we left, I unsnapped my seatbelt and sat, the gearshift between my legs, close to Arnold. The truck's engine burned gasoline. In an oncoming car, a group of boys, probably on their way home, looked at me. I bid them and everyone else in town goodbye. My cousin belched, his breath smelling like a late-night childog, and waved. There was something exciting about whooping down country lanes at one-

hundred and thirty-nine miles an hour and dimming the headlights. Arnold's truck was a roller coaster jumping its tracks and shooting us into eye-shut, blue oblivion.

With a squeal of the tires, Arnold swung onto a side road. Even in Atwater, he was capable of creating a thrill. We could have been Bonnie and Clyde making our break and exploring the surrounding counties without a map. I rolled down the windows to drink in breaths of black air. The wind, which I felt but couldn't see, loosened my hair and blew it straight. I hung one foot out the window, closed my eyes, and lost a thong sandal. If the air grew chilly, my cousin threw his bedspread over our legs. He drove for hours. We didn't know where we were going, but we were on the run. Five in the morning, I cranked Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's album "Whistling Down the Wire" on the eight-track player. The farmers were now up. We were ready to go to bed. Arnold passed them in flatbeds sporting stickers like "Eat Beef: The West Wasn't Won on Salad" and drove back to town, where we spent the remainder of our money on gas-station coffee as a favor to Huck.

Riding with Remy was a more serious affair. I fastened my seatbelt, necessary to wear even in a hearse, the best place to hide from death. The ghost boy drove fast through a neighborhood and spun over sheets of ice. He steered with two fingers. "Do you know why you're here?" His teeth gleamed with every word.

I didn't say anything. I hoped Remy wasn't going to kill me.

"You're the one," he said.

Pride, like an arrow, shot through my heart. For a second, I didn't care what happened to me as long as I kept this distinction. "Will I be the one forever?"

"Forever or until I change my mind."

“You might change your mind?” I grew angry.

“How should I know?”

“You have to decide.” Scared, I grabbed the door handle and got ready to jump out.

“I know how to prove myself to you.” Remy, almost plunging into the ditch, made a U-turn in the road.

“How?” I grew curious. He told me to use my imagination. We drove past the abandoned drive-in. The screen was torn by windstorms. The movies, with scripts as clichéd as Virginia’s soap opera, and audiences of yesteryear were long gone. I shifted in my seat, shut my eyes, and imagined a film in which I starred. It would no doubt be a tragedy. I didn’t care as long as I could experience twenty minutes of bliss.

Out of the blue, Remy asked if I wanted to get married.

Surprised, I didn’t reply at first. “Are you serious?”

“I know the best place to tie the knot,” he said. “We don’t even have to tell anyone.”

“Let’s do it.” I smiled, and we were on our way. Remy drove to the Second Baptist Church and parked by the cemetery. I felt shocked at his choice of locations. We got out of the hearse. “Follow me,” he said. I looked in the sky. A comet, like a woman with blazing hair, brightened as it sailed through the night. The Greeks regarded comets as rare apparitions, omens of evil. Charlatans sold pills to protect the fearful. I paused and tried to formulate in my mouth the word “no” with its two simple letters. Remy was foreign, remote. He lay in a realm beyond me. I thought I’d made up my mind. I considered Rowena’s claim to Remy and the danger seemingly resonating from his

hands. I said yes. His eyes, large, luminous orbs, commanded me to answer so. I wanted us to be together, even if in the end, I foresaw, we'd do some damage.

The comet hung motionless before falling from glory. It remained visible, low on the horizon, in the company of the bright planets, Venus and Jupiter, and then vanished. With a wispy tail of gas and dust blown from its frozen core, the comet would journey to the fringes of our solar system, a thousand times further away than the outermost star. I wished I could have joined the celestial being on such a trip.

“Take off your glasses,” my husband said. I'd slid on the pair from third grade, their nosepiece tight and arms short, to view the sky. I removed them. The moon, a globe hanging before my optic nerve, grew indiscernible. With so much to see and know, I wondered why true love was blind. Remy leaned over and kissed me. Shy, I pulled away. I desired to know about his universe but feared it would replace my old world. Remy, seeming sure of himself, drew me to him. “Have you ever made love in a graveyard, the spooks and haints surrounding you?”

Startled, I shook my head to the negative and pushed Remy away. “Who does that?”

The health teacher, arguing women should demand a bed since they weren't animals, wouldn't approve of Remy's type of encounter. Then again, I already lay outside the town's bounds, cut loose from decency. What Arnold communicated when he pushed me down in the basement was lust. But Remy was different; he radiated love, and I was willing to try what he wanted to make him happy. I'd finally met someone who wouldn't be ashamed of my past, and I was ready to reveal to him my big secret. Rembrandt hugged me and remarked he couldn't marry a girl who wasn't a virgin. I hadn't known

Remy was traditional but clamped my mouth shut and hoped I looked clean. Like the moon, one must show her bright side to the world. And why let a trifle, such as rape, end my joy? The ghost boy's affection, once obtained, could make up for any misfortune.

We skipped to the church's rear and picked out the pebble trail, leading past the leaning gravestones, to matrimony. I halted midway and asked Rembrandt if he wanted to rethink the program. "Don't you want to be married in the church?"

"No." He laughed. Remy claimed his uncle, the pastor, possessed about as much power as a crucifix in a horror movie. Such strength seemed a start and seemed good enough for me. Remy reminded me the hour was late.

"We can go to the pastor's office tomorrow."

"Do you want to get married or not? Don't love me if you can stop yourself," he warned.

"I'm ready." As we walked, I hummed wedding music, stole some marigolds from an anonymous tombstone, and strewed them along the snowy path. Remy and I performed the ceremony ourselves with utmost solemnity. I twisted the ruby ring on my finger, felt both excited and afraid, and guessed Lucille watched me from her grave. For once, I was glad I possessed the witch's signet and that I'd taken it from her.

"I'm glad you like the ring. I'd get you another, but dead people aren't known for giving big tips to their driver."

"I like wearing the ring for you now. It's not as if I can get it off."

"There's something you can take off." Rembrandt unzipped my dress' back and tugged it down my hips. At his insistence, we stripped and stood naked. I slung my dress over an angel monument where a baby lay buried and covered my breasts and crotch out

of a strange shame. I looked forward to retrieving my garment as soon as possible. My arms were covered with goose bumps. I jiggled up and down in vain to warm my body. Rembrandt, appearing paranoid, said he kept hearing noises. I looked around, concentrating my attention on nebulous trees and bushes, and said I hoped the police didn't come.

As I grew accustomed to the cold, I forgot my own body and began to notice the one belonging to the boy before me. He sported the tattoo of a long-stemmed rose; petals spread over his bicep. Cut roses died soon. But I remembered the rose bushes overtaking the fence beyond my house. The buds burst open in reds, pinks, and yellows. Father had burned the entire glade to stop the "weeds" from spreading. Tonight, when I bent and smelled Remy's tattoo, his skin seemed to give off a scent sweet and overwhelming. He clasped me to him, so close I couldn't draw away. Around Remy's neck hung a skeleton key.

The last part of the wedding ceremony was untraditional. In crimson lipstick from my purse, I spelled "savior" on Rembrandt's abdomen. Then it was his turn. "Stand still. I'm not going to hurt you," Remy said. He could wipe the lipstick off but had decided to give me something more permanent. With his X-Acto knife, he etched a life-sized heart on my chest. I looked away and tried not to cry out as he carved.

"I'm done," Remy said. I thought I might faint. The engraving bled between my breasts. Tiny rivulets ran down my chest. Blood congealed in my navel.

"Let me help you." Remy produced a handkerchief. I felt too terrified to run as he blotted my wounds. He was careful not to touch the silver cross pendant hanging over my collarbone. When it got in the way, he asked me to remove it.

“It’s a present from my mother,” I said. The cross was the only item she wore when the townspeople pulled her from the well. When God in the sun saw her jump, He’d placed a dirt floor in Hell’s bottomless pit.

Remy shrugged and told me to clean off the blood myself. I hurried to put on my dress and fasten the back, so I wouldn’t see any more red drops fall. If my garment were stained one more color, it would hardly matter. We slid on our shoes. Now I was warm, I forgot my pain and grew bold. I danced atop Lucille’s grave and celebrated her death. I twirled and trod on other lots without discretion.

“Shine, that’s not proper,” Remy chided. True, the fathers of Atwater had never persecuted me, but neither did they show kindness to my family and let it prosper.

“You can stop,” Remy said. In my building lunacy, I turned a tombstone over and wished the earth-consuming worms upon everyone, down to the last Puritan.

“I work here, remember.” Remy lifted me off a marble block and set me down. Now we were married, he asked if I felt any differently. I paused and remembered my descent into the pond. I guessed the taking of vows was another step in the right direction. “Yes.” I did feel something new. Despite the dusting of snow, everything surrounding me seemed alive. The irritation Rowena caused me was fading, and the numbness I’d felt after Arnold accosted me was going away. I stretched high my arms; I was waking up.

Married. I was young but knew all the tricks. I vowed I’d never be like my parents, imperfect, weak, and petty in their long-suffering.

Married. I'd live with Remy. No one could make me go home. If I had had a picture, I'd send it to Mother. When she passed through the parlor, she'd remember how we laughed at our dye-stained hands, companions for a moment, in making my dress.

Married. I wanted to hire a crop duster to write my and Rembrandt's names in the sky. They would hang as clouds for several minutes before blowing away.

Married. I spun the ruby ring on my finger, considered the long years ahead, and promised Remy, "Till death do us part."

Rembrandt encircled my wrist with his hand. The remaining marigolds fell to my feet. My husband smiled. "Why speak of that now? For us, there is no death."

"Maybe not," I said.

CHAPTER 10

The trapdoor leading downstairs was marked with a trefoil sign onto which someone had spray-painted a yellow and white anarchy symbol. Remy informed me he'd slept in the bomb shelter outside his house ever since his father got a girlfriend. He descended, and I followed. The original residents furnished the shelter and left its contents. In those days, I guessed, people felt the need both to tunnel subterraneously and launch into space and bounce on the moon. All but farmers seemed to have grown tired of the flat prairie. The shelter's heavy door was constructed of steel. The three feet of concrete lay between the ground and dormer to minimize a missile's impact. I paused in my survey of the room and sat on Remy's couch. On the coffee table lay *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, a 1950 pamphlet from the Civil Defense Office. The cover depicted a drawing of a mushroom cloud hovering over the skyscrapers of some unnamed and soon-to-be unrecognizable city. Its pages were worn, as if hands had thumbed over them for instruction. According to the government, I read, every responsible family should have not only a white house, dog, and two children, but also a well-stocked shelter. One could proceed directly to its safety within seconds of a radio announcer's notification. Quickness was the key. Nonetheless, those within half a mile of the blast would be vaporized instantly. The author gave gruesome details about such possible scenarios, using short sentences and no-nonsense language.

I put the pamphlet on top other mystifying books, including one on how to become invisible, rose from the couch, and explored further. Shelves, lining two sides of the dank shelter, held cans stacked forty years ago, including a supply of lima beans. Even if the room had saved its inhabitants, a vegetable diet would have turned children into mutants. Among the inventory, someone had placed random toys. Rembrandt grabbed a Kewpie doll and pulled off her head. There was a popping noise as the doll's air rushed out. He touched the Star Wars figurines he'd added to the mix: the Millennium Falcon pilot, Death Star operator, Princess Leia standing on one leg, and Darth Vader, empowered by a legion of space-suited Storm Troopers. Nearby, on a kerosene drum, stood an army of plastic, olive-green soldiers as tall as my pinkies. Remy put a few in his duster's pocket. The soldiers poked out, protectors for the next world.

Tonight, I might have been located in the safest spot in Atwater but felt as if I were in a crypt. "Let's play a game." I asked Rembrandt to name his biggest fear. He assured me it was best not to talk of such things. Nevertheless, he shared his phobia: being thrust into a jar, like the mythological Sybil I learned about in history class. She wished for immortality but neglected to ask for eternal youth. Over time, she shrank. Sybil knew the answers to the kids' homework questions, which she wrote on leaves and tossed into the wind, but didn't please them. For protection against the bullies' anger, she crawled inside a bottle. "Sybil waited, wanted the end, and wished only to die," Remy said.

"It might have been worth it. Can you picture us twenty years from now, middle-aged?"

"We'd still be young."

“For how long? Do you want to ‘grow old together,’ wrinkles piling on wrinkles?”

He didn’t answer.

“What if you could live forever and be all powerful?” I said and imagined such a scenario. I’d be a superhero like one of the shelves’ toy figurines. I’d never pass away.

“Who wouldn’t want to be vital, with a lifespan stretching like a rubber band?” Remy said. “Might such an acquisition require committing a crime?” Remy didn’t mention what the foul deed might be, but at the moment, I didn’t care. My mind opened itself to any avenue providing power. Remy watched me in my calculations and shifted lazily on the couch.

Outside, winter continued. The wind whistled clean and cold. Rembrandt turned on his ham radio and stretched the antennae to catch a signal. “Seven children and their parents found dead, having lived in a railroad car,” the transmitter said. “Frozen. Hearts clenched hard as agate.” Remy turned the dial. The voices on the frequencies moaned and whined. They sounded as if they belonged to extraterrestrials from faraway planets warning one another not to land here.

The air smelled stale. In a twenty-gallon tank, Remy’s fish consumed the oxygen I was supposed to breathe. I watched the oscar bite and slap the picasamus until it floated to the surface on its white abdomen, a flag of surrender. The oscar, too, would inevitably pass, but I didn’t ask Rembrandt to remove the dead fish from the water. In a joking voice, I called for “re-animation,” a process a scientologist, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, explained could take up to a week. At my insistence, Remy smirked and estimated the date on his calendar with a marker.

A flower on the coffee table represented the only other sign of life. I didn't understand why Remy was keeping an African violet in this sunless abode. It had wilted and dropped petal hands in sadness. I felt as if June would never come.

For tonight, I wanted to forget all of that. I wished to dream on lavender-scented sheets and wake up spread-eagle, soaring on the ceiling. Rembrandt seemed in no mood to go to bed early. I didn't even see a mattress. "Where do you sleep?"

He pointed to a beanbag and yellow sateen blanket in the corner. There was room for one. I glanced around for other possibilities and spotted an old waterbed propped against the wall and still plugged in located behind what appeared to be a wet bar. On top the counter sat a collection of vodka bottles. If one managed to escape the blast, he could look forward to one long party, I said. Remy choked back a laugh and explained the bar was really a two-person coffin, turned upside down, with which his father had gotten stuck. I suggested righting the coffin and stuffing the waterbed inside. Remy gave in to my request and flipped the "bar" over. I tucked in the mattress' corners and smiled in anticipation. Two twin-sized bunks were bolted to the opposing wall: Remy argued we could have slept in one of those if I weren't so perverse.

The coffin had been specially made for a man and his wife both dying of cancer, Remy explained. I wondered if the two had climbed inside to figure out if they could lie together comfortably in such a space. When I asked Remy about this possibility, he said the man and woman stepped in one at a time instead, so they could observe each other. I remembered Remy had almost let me drown and now viewed the place he might have laid me. I turned away in a hurry to climb the stairs and open the lid. But my feet hadn't

warmed up and were slow in moving. Remy caught my hand, pulled me into his arms, and said with a chuckle, “Don’t you want me to finish the story?”

I nodded yes. He proceeded: A month before the man died, he read his wife’s diary. She’d cheated on him. Even though the man was sure of his wife’s infidelity and had access to a family plot in the cemetery, he said nothing. The man died, and his body was put on ice. A week later, his wife miraculously recovered. She eventually remarried.

“That’s tragic,” I said.

Someone knocked on the trapdoor. I shivered and guessed it was the deputy. Two years before, Arnold and I got lost in the woods, and Mother put out a call to bring me back. She must have found me a second time. Remy’s father descended into the shelter. He’d stirred two mugs of Ovaltine and carried them in one hand on a silver tray. The man bowed to me and remarked he didn’t know his son had “company.” Remy’s father graciously motioned for me to take his own mug. When I put the drink to my lips, the hot milk scalded me. “This is delicious,” I said. The undertaker looked in my direction to accept my thanks. Remy didn’t introduce me. He, seemingly nervous, pulled something from his back pocket instead. He stuck two fingers in a can of Skoal and held the tobacco fragments to his nose.

“I didn’t know you dipped,” the undertaker said.

“I don’t.” Remy replied he liked the smell and had owed the same can for a month.

Father and son settled on the couch. I perched on a ratty stool and pulled stuffing from its plaid cushion to entertain myself. The undertaker looked at me askance, and I crossed my legs. It wasn’t polite to sprawl in a wedding dress.

The man patted his son's knee and asked about his correspondence studies.

"Would you like to attend the high school instead?"

"No." Remy insisted he was nearly done with his coursework. He'd graduate in spring.

"There's no hurry," the undertaker said.

"This summer I'd like to take a trip," Remy said. I wondered where we were going. Although he hadn't mentioned me in his plans, I assumed the trip would constitute our honeymoon. Like Rowena with her wanderlust, I wanted to go somewhere far away, where no one knew me, with Remy. Eventually we'd return; he was an only son with obligations, he'd said.

"That sounds nice." The undertaker asked what kind of birthday cake Remy preferred. "Devil's food with red lacquer icing, your favorite?"

I interrupted and offered to make the confection. I wasn't any expert in anything but, as any country girl, knew how to bake. Remy argued he didn't want to celebrate his birth. I wished to remain fifteen for the rest of my life, too.

Rembrandt turned on his small television and flipped through the channels. The reception was bad. He settled on a divorce judge, handling the case of a redneck couple. The husband tugged on his handlebar mustache and explained he wanted to divorce his wife of six-and-three-quarter years. She never had sex with him. "The skinny chance I do get to make her, she lays there."

I said, "It's supposed to be 'lies,' not 'lays.'"

“Shush, Shine.” The ghost boy was either interested in the couple’s marital problems or tired of having guests. The undertaker announced he had something to divulge.

On TV, the redneck husband said, “I’m on the bottom humping her. She’s holding the newspaper and reading it over my shoulder—particularly the want ads, like she’s looking for something.” I imagined the couple sleeping on a heart-shaped bed with velvet overlay, the biggest piece of furniture in their trailer. The husband insisted to the judge, a woman herself, he wanted to have sex while he could. “You get it, your honor?”

Remy had told me his father was lonely and wandered among the empty rooms and slept in a different bed each night. At the week’s end, he made up the beds.

On T.V., the wife was talking. When she was last pregnant, she’d tried to make her buck-toothed bubba understand he must wait three weeks after she birthed their babe before sex. “On the ride home from the hospital, he got his rooster out of the barn while I drove.”

“I couldn’t wait forever,” the husband said. His wife pointed a finger. “Then there was the time he tried to rape me.”

“That didn’t work,” the man said. The woman, as big as Noah’s ark, smiled in agreement.

The honorable judge banged her gavel and silenced them both.

The undertaker informed his son he was engaged. Remy had told me he’d met the woman, who worked as a nurse in the emergency room. At one point, the undertaker asked her to wear his former wife’s clothes. She refused. He, in turn, kept a family

picture on the nightstand. I wondered if at the last minute, the woman would break off the engagement. Today, Remy looked shocked at the news.

“I need company.” Corpses weren’t much for conversation, the man said.

“When are you getting married?” Remy said.

“In a week.” The woman was ten years younger. She seemed ready, he said.

“You might as well get together sooner as later,” Remy said. “She smokes a pack a day.”

“She’s quitting.”

“She’ll never outlive you.”

The undertaker smiled, as if his son had paid him a compliment, and casually changed the subject. “Your uncle’s looking forward to doing some hunting. He heard you caught some ducks.”

“Yes. I haven’t gone back. Shine’s pond seemed desolate the last time I went,” he said, as if he’d not possessed some ulterior motive in hanging around there. In the past, Rembrandt had told me, his uncle took him deer hunting. Remy hated the sport. The two rose at 4:30 in the morning, stumbled through the woods, and sat in a wood platform built in a creaky maple to “spend time together.” They might wait for hours for a victim to appear. Remy got cold and fell asleep. His uncle unsnapped his Carharts and urinated in the air. The arc fell in the bushes below. Its scent seemed to draw animals. Hunting didn’t end with rifle season. Remy’s uncle had been the state champion bow hunter for ten years. My husband told me the man’s bows, resined and ready to be cocked, hung above the fireplace. Besides an arsenal of weapons, his house held trophies. When Remy used the toilet, a mounted buck head stared without expression at him from the bathroom wall.

The uncle had filled his living space with a zoo of taxidermied animals, including a beaver, raccoon, and coyote. The undertaker shared this much in common with his brothers, the town judge and pastor: All three were engaged in the art of preservation. In my family, I told Remy, Mother was the best shot.

The undertaker rose. He said he thought he'd heard a vehicle pull into the driveway and was waiting for his fiancée to arrive. As he left, he shook my hand, as if he were accustomed to seeing girls come and go from Remy's rooms. Then he stopped, took a close look at my face, and seemed to recognize me. "You should have left your sister in the hole."

"Why?" I said, startled at the conversation's turn.

"Now there's nothing you can do to stop her."

"Stop her from what?"

"I shouldn't have said anything. I've just seen her--around."

"Around where?" I said.

Remy said something under his breath to his father. The man gave me a pained smile and receded from view in the manner of those rare, unobtrusive but loving parents. Remy rose, as if to get his father's news off his mind, and stacked records between cans of asparagus, serving as bookends. He'd bought the albums at flea markets: Deep Purple, The Doors, Rainbow, in alphabetical order. His musical choices seemed depressing; my favorite songs reminded me of happier days. In my room, I used to twirl to tunes from the sixties on Mother's record player. In particular, I danced in the mirror and sang to "Cherokee Nation," by Paul Revere and the Raiders. On the bed, Laura lay on her back and kicked her legs in time with the beat.

Remy slid a record from a group called Black Sabbath from its sleeve and lifted the needle. The music blaring from the speakers belied a darker tone. “Can you dig it?” Remy, seemingly impatient for his favorite number to begin, slid the needle across the 45 and made a scratch. The record began to skip. Rembrandt sang over the crackle. In St. Louis, Remy used to be in a band called “Itchy Pickle.” He boasted its dime songs were better than those of rivals, “The Plaid Jumpers” and “Toenail Clippers.” The members let Remy go when they found none of the publicity shots revealed Rembrandt’s picture. There was only a grainy spot where the spirit man stood. He joked, unlike aliens and missing milk-carton children, he didn’t show up on film.

“Really?” I said.

“No. The band broke up. We weren’t going anywhere.” Remy rubbed the rough indentation on his thumb and grabbed his guitar. My husband lent me his favorite Eagle pick and said I should learn to play and develop my own calluses: “I’ll teach you how to strum my gi-tar.”

I thumbed the Fender Stratocaster’s strings, up, down, and broke the bottom one. Remy, obviously distressed by my carelessness, threw a piece of sheet music at a candle stuck inside a wine bottle and dripping wax on the table. His recklessness made me afraid. I put down the instrument with a thud. I’d never learn to play chords, but if I were in a band, it would be called “The Noose.” I’d scream from the microphone, center stage: “If we can’t escape being murdered, you’ll have a rope around your neck and swing pretty with me. We’ll hang around together, baby.” My girl group would beat yours, Rembrandt, no doubt, although I’d never trumpet the fact. Brightened by blue stage lights, I’d side-step and kick a foot above my head. My pants, hugging my hips, would be

girded with a slinky belt. A million lights like the landing gear of spaceships would hit me. I'd grasp the microphone, twist my fingers in its cord, and gaze into an ocean of faces: expectant mermen, swimming slowly, waited in low tide. I'd hurdle a speaker and fling myself into the crowd, opening its arms for me like an octopus.

In Remy's shelter, music ricocheted off the walls. For a second, I thought we'd been blasted by the big bomb; disembodied voices bounced from all corners and frightened me. I lifted the record needle. The air seemed to glow chartreuse, and the cartoon people on the campaign posters covering the walls seemed to scream. Would the bomb fall? When would the bomb fall? Remy and I were safe, but we'd stay inside. If not the Russians, then the apocalypse was due to come, the pastor said so.

Something was happening outside. I informed Remy I thought I heard a rustling in the bushes. He scoffed. "Maybe it's a tiger, a big cat on the loose?"

"I don't know. It sounds dangerous." The candle, its hot tongue licking the air, burned until it nearly extinguished itself. I lounged on the couch and dipped my fingers into the molten mass until they grew numb.

"I see." Remy sat next to me. He ran his bare feet over the white rug and made peaks like meringue. He asked how my eardrums could penetrate the shelter's walls. I shrugged. My sister had risen from the dead, and my cousin attacked me; stranger things had happened.

"You need to learn to relax. Try this." Rembrandt lit a cig and held it like a white stick of lightning in his hand. It was my first time to smoke. I drew the substance deep into my lungs, coughed, and waved away the fog lingering in my eyes. The cloud rose and gathered on the ceiling. Remy laughed, took back the cigarette, and stubbed it out.

He unbuttoned his shirt. I turned toward him, lifted my skirt's ruffles to one side, and massaged the hard ripples in his back. My husband said he liked to feel my soft hands on his shoulders. I scratched with my nails.

“Hurt me,” he said. But I knew he didn't want to feel pain. Remy probably didn't know what it felt like to have his private parts burst into flames; he couldn't imagine sex as the striking of flint against rock into fire. I repented and touched him with my fingertips more gently. Remy swiveled his head and torso toward me, and my heart beat fast. This was my wedding night, supposedly the best night of my life. I couldn't stop worrying. My period hadn't come since Arnold molested me, even though I expected it any time. Perhaps Remy would make me bleed. Like sloughing off a peach's skin to reveal the fruit, he peeled away my clothes.

I understood Remy's excitement to possess me was growing, but I chose to ignore him. Hunger hit me. My stomach rolled. I could wait no longer to eat. Ravenous, I removed Remy's arms from my back and sneaked to the mini-refrigerator. Remy followed with seeming dejection. He shook a can of whipped cream and doused his fingers with the spray. I fed him three maraschino cherries. Satiated by sugar for the moment, we continued our play. The ghost boy and I donned Halloween masks from a chest and, like wild animals never having seen cages, felt around for each other in the near darkness of candlelight. He played a bear. I became an ostrich. Remy grabbed my leg, and I shrieked, flapped useless wings, and tried to spur him. He stood over me like a grizzly, all two hundred and two pounds, raised his paws and extended his claws, and mauled me. Remy engulfed my feathered body and covered me with hot, honeyed kisses. I smacked his lips and neck in turn. I even tasted the tang of his skin, but Atwater girls

didn't talk about that kind of thing. Remy chuckled, grabbed my nape, yanked me back, and warned me not to give him a hickey.

But Remy and I weren't the only animals. The tiger in the bushes outside, obviously wicked with her plan, paced around the trapdoor. I imagined she twitched her whiskers in the purple moonlight. Rembrandt picked me up in his furry arms and twirled me around. My heels bumped into amplifier knobs and typewriter keys, twanged guitar strings, and flipped off the lampshade. Remy admitted he loved me. I arched my head back and looked at him. His eyes were like expanses of water filled with smoothly gliding sharks. I took care in wading into such depths: My husband might not mean what he said. Like my mother, he might not be capable of appreciating me. At the moment, love represented but an afterthought. Rembrandt stumbled and almost dropped me as he approached the coffin bed.

I thought I heard the trapdoor open and had the feeling someone was watching us. Rembrandt and I crashed into the mattress, which rippled like a raft on the stormy ocean. His hands unclasped my bra and pulled down my underwear. My silver cross pendant came loose and fell into the sheet's folds. I felt the heart carving on my chest burn as if I'd thrown myself into a fire. Do not make idols for yourself, the First Commandment warned. But Rembrandt was a graven image that moved, breathed, and caused confusion. His stone lips broke into song. I held onto the coffin's outer handle for lack of a bedpost. I felt as if that crop duster I imagined writing our names in the sky had run out of gas and was going to crash; we two, its occupants, watched the sky flip upside down.

Remy pressed his palm on my pelvis. He moved his forefinger in and out of my vagina. I resisted a feeling of ecstasy. An image of Arnold's hand over my mouth and his

dead weight on my abdomen had scorched like a cattle brand into my brain. I couldn't let my husband enter me, I realized with terror. Rembrandt, my love for you represented the color pink: not red and passionate, not white and pure, not brown and dirty, but pink—fearful, muted, lackluster. He stopped poking, withdrew his finger, and frowned when he saw he obviously wasn't having the desired effect. I trembled and groped the sheets for his dangling arm. "I can't."

My husband interlaced his fingers in mine and held me. "It's all right. It's your first time." I had to tell my husband what Arnold did to me. I thought I was ready but pressed my lips together and bit my tongue's tip to prevent myself from blurting out the truth. Before I shared my news, I needed to know if Rembrandt would die for me or at least with me, if we were ever so unfortunate as to grow old. My husband sighed, wrapped the bedspread around us like a cocoon, and told me not to worry about such things. He dismissed me as "timid," and I, grateful for this positive designation, lay on my side, cast an arm over his chest, and threw my leg over his ankle. I felt his body begin to grow hot again. Under the covers, he ran his hand down my ribs. But I wasn't a butterfly, ready to burst out of my chrysalis. I stiffened, crossed my hands over my breasts, and closed my legs tightly. Rembrandt pleaded with me to let him do the deed. I couldn't help but flinch and spasm at the thought. My insides, never healed, were sensitive and inflamed.

Rembrandt threw back the covers, got on hands and knees, and planted his head and shoulders between my knees. He kissed me on the inner thigh, gently at first, as if this were part of a new strategy. As my husband moved closer, I reacted to what could

have been an exquisite moment, at least in Lucille's novels, by shrinking away. I pushed myself as far up in the coffin as I could go, hit my head, and sat up.

"Shy girl, this is but foreplay," Remy said. "I'm using my mouth, where words come out."

"Then tell me why you like me."

"Haven't I said enough nice things to you? What's wrong now?"

"Nothing someone else hasn't experienced before." At that moment, I decided to let myself go. Overwhelmed by the pleasure of being so close to Remy, I sucked on his shoulder blade; it grew blotchy. My law-breaking teeth pierced his neck and broke the skin. There was a spot of blood on the bedspread; more dotted the sheets. Remy didn't seem to notice I'd gone beyond the point of bruising him. He rolled on top of me. We embraced each other naked and drew what seemed like a shared breath. In a moment split between out-of-mind ecstasy and lucidity, I saw the limbs of our entwined bodies and noticed we wore only our shoes.

In the background, something moved. Beside us, Remy's boxers swirled through the air, having been caught by a stationary fan set on a filing cabinet, but did I also spot the swishing of a black and orange tail in the corner of my eye? I wrenched myself out of Remy's grasp and sat up. A girl was approaching the foot of the bed. She and I both screamed. My nose was filled with her scent. Blood, stripped of all oxygen and gone blue, coursed through my pulmonary. My unwilling suspicions about Remy and my sister pushed me to the point of madness. I felt a slick fiber stuck between my middle and ring fingers. I pulled out the blonde hair, detached it from my ring's setting, and held it up, proof she'd gotten here first. I pictured Remy and Rowena together and realized the

mattress' past was more obscene than that of the coffin. She'd laid her head where mine rested. If I inhaled, I could detect the citrus smell of her perfume clinging to the pillow where she reclined. From what I knew from Lucille's romance novels, Remy had probably said Rowena's name over and over. Perhaps she imagined she was floating on the ceiling. Afterwards, he must have lain in the bed, contemplated his big thoughts, and held her, but only for so long. With his head overflowing, he'd soon get up and go without offering or seeking a compliment. I wondered if Remy had made Rowena crazy as he climbed the ladder and left her in the underworld.

He paused in his kisses, sat up, and uttered "Rowena," a name I didn't want to hear. I'd never been more shocked than when I saw my sister lurking in the candlelight. "Rowena," I shouted.

She paused as if to gather her bearings and consider possible moves.

"Rowena," Remy said. She uttered a curse, turned, and ran. Heedless of her safety and careless of others' belongings, she knocked over Remy's amplifier on the way out. With her speed in ascending the ladder and her deftness in opening the door, I could tell she'd been here often. My husband called after Rowena one final time. I held onto his hand. We stayed in bed. Like a cat surprised while on the prowl, Rowena had leapt up the rungs, dashed through the bushes, and probably retreated into the night. Remy was the bear, I, the ostrich, and she, the tiger. It was a stand-off. None of us could have hoped to win this particular fight.

Rowena didn't bother to close the trapdoor. I saw my chance. Cold air penetrated the shelter, and I felt myself able to breathe. Without knowing it, my sister saved me.

“Is it me you want?” I said to Remy. To hell with Remy and his coffin, I’d leave before he came up with an answer. Even if the coffin was a double wide, and corpses couldn’t complain about being crowded, I wanted to sleep in my own bed. I wasn’t staying, not for the night, let alone the long haul.

CHAPTER 11

I went home and tried to resume my life. In leaving Remy, I expected to feel the numbness I'd suffered after Arnold's attack. Instead, I experienced the sensation of loss. Despite their differences, both boys had failed me in their own ways. The hotline operator had told me it was important to maintain a normal schedule. For three days, I attended school as if nothing had happened, came home, shut my bedroom door, did my homework, and slept in my bed. I tried to become a better person and helped Mother with the housework. Laura was busy reading the family encyclopedias, and Rowena was practicing her dance moves on all surfaces, including the table. I paid attention in school, including algebra class, even if the teacher's word problems had what he himself called "little real world application." I told myself I'd forget Remy, even if watching the slow days accumulate like a stack of pennies wasn't easy.

That first night, it took me a long time to go to sleep. I wanted to run back to Remy's shelter and ask him why he loved Rowena. What was the point? I already knew. He'd fallen for her for the same reason Mother and everyone else had: She was mesmerizing. I didn't know why I'd gotten up my hopes of being anyone's favorite in the first place. Still, while Rowena interrupted my wedding night, she'd helped me make sure Remy slept alone. After I returned to my house, I'd waited for him to come to my window in repentance. I listened even more intently to see if he knocked on Laura's pane

in search of Rowena, who'd switched beds to avoid me. Then again, I wondered, would Remy feel lonely? Maybe he'd gone to sleep minutes after I dashed out. In any event, he didn't come to my house that night, or the night after that, or the night after that. Despite the words I penned in my diary--anger, apathy, and forgiveness--Remy never came.

Night after night, a shadow with green eyes darted through my head. With a voice as cold as pond water, the shadow boy whispered he was the one. One evening, it felt as if he'd entered the room, gained physical substance, and stood beside the bed and waited for me. In my sleep, I reached up to grab his hand and float away, if only for the length of a dream, from this one-stoplight town. Flakes of snow seemed to blow in the window and land on my cheek. I felt the chilly night air and shivered. I opened my eyes, looked around, disoriented, and wondered why the window was open. The moon crept white through the pane; perhaps its bright beams had struck and broken the glass. As I got up to check the window for holes, I found Laura wasn't lying next to me. Lately, even she'd grown tired of being around Rowena. There was only a lump in the pillow where she'd laid her head a few hours before. I assumed Laura had opened the window and not bothered to close it. Someone stepped out of the shadows. I thought it was Laura, wandering back from the bathroom. When I saw it was a man, I drew in my breath to scream: a robber. Remy touched my arm; he'd finally arrived. I, afraid, scurried into bed. He waited by my dresser and looked at me. I hoped my face held no attractiveness for him but was disappointed. He put his hand on the bedpost, leaned over, and kissed me. Before I could make my fists into battering rams or melt, Remy ordered me to be quiet.

“You can't be here,” I said.

He put a finger on my open lips and sealed them. I leaned back, grabbed the bedcovers and pulled them to my neck, and folded my legs under me. I didn't want Remy to see my filmy nightdress, reaching mid-thigh, which could seem compromising. "Don't touch me."

Rembrandt laughed at this order. I'd managed to avoid him for days, but any spells I'd woven to prevent him from finding me hadn't worked. I was the one captivated. Confound it, I couldn't get away from the spirit walker. Rembrandt was removing his duster. His leather belt fixed with chain-links jingled as he unbuckled his jeans. I'd resolved never to see Remy again. Why had he come now?

"Remy, I never want to see you again."

His pants slid to the floor.

"Remy, you have to leave."

He kicked off his combat boots, peeled off his socks, and wiggled his newly freed toes. Remy complained he was getting cold, told me to move over, and climbed in bed. I somersaulted backwards and almost escaped out the opposite end when Remy pulled me toward him. My insides felt raw when I bathed. My back felt sore when I slept. Each time my tailbone, chafed when Arnold and I skidded over the concrete together, scabbed over, I scratched the crusts off. Remy was attempting to disrobe me. The sheets would grow damp with sweat. I didn't have much time. If I wanted him to stop, I had to admit I'd been raped.

I couldn't. For the third time, I yelled at Rembrandt to go away. "You can't be here when Mother wakes me." I pushed him until he fell off the bed. I thought Rembrandt was getting up to leave. He closed the window. "Come back to the shelter."

“I won’t.”

My husband protested he couldn’t sleep without me, undid the top two buttons of my nightgown, and traced his fingers over the jagged heart outlined on my chest. I chewed my lip and caressed the Bible on my nightstand. I prayed a three-word prayer, “God, please, God” to prevent Remy from jumping me. Despite whether or not God in the sun intervened, considering the time of day, Rembrandt left. I shut my mouth, so I wouldn’t relent and call him back. Laura bolted from the closet, where she’d been hiding and complained about my midnight visitor. She told me for her all her trouble, I might as well have had sex with him.

Sleep came to me as a relief. I lay in bed and closed my eyes. I didn’t know how long I’d snoozed before something rattled the window. Remy, intent on his mission, must have returned. I was wrong. Some new and horrible presence had entered my room. I flinched at the monster’s piercing laugh and squeezed my eyelids shut. He landed, peered between the slits, and breathed hotly in my face. I stretched out on my back but pulled in an arm dangling dangerously off the bed. The devil outlined my breasts with a claw, ready to mate. I remembered how my book explained a vampire would never allow himself to be separated from his prey.

On my wedding night, when I repeated such adages, Remy laughed at my interest. He knew similar “legends”: “When the townspeople dug up bodies of men suspected to be vampires, the corpses had erections.”

On the couch, I rubbed against him. He continued, “After weeks of nocturnal visits from their deceased husbands, the widows had become pallid and exhausted.” Pregnant and surprised, they realized their husbands’ appearances weren’t illusionary. I

smiled in scorn at the vampires' deviousness. Remy said he wondered how anyone could believe such nonsense.

At the moment, as I lay paralyzed on my bed, worries such as pregnancy seemed trivial. The incubus seized me. I remembered how Arnold got on top of me. I hadn't been able to breathe after he'd put his hand over my mouth, let alone shout. In the pond, a stream of bubbles had blown out my nose, and I couldn't scream either. Now the incubus climbed up, sat on my abdomen, touched the skin above my heart, and studied me. Too scared to move, I lay still in the hope the incubus would believe I was dead. On my breast, the monster made an insufferable weight, and I groaned. The puff of air emitted a butterfly called the Alp, which flew from my mouth. The preacher would call this breath my soul. The demon laughed and bent over my face.

But the being didn't mean to kill me. There must be something else it wanted. My heart palpitated. I was filled with uneasiness and desire, emotions feeling one in the same. The incubus lifted his wings, floated through the room, and disappeared. In what might have been my imagination, I rose from my bed, jumped out the window, and sleepwalked toward town.

I didn't fall asleep until 6:30 a.m. and had little rest. God in the rising sun disturbed me. The gold ball of light divided itself among the casement's rectangles, and pieces fell on my bed. My feeling of bodily heaviness had returned, except this time Laura represented the pressing weight. In sleep, she'd hooked an arm over my chest and leg over my pelvis.

"Get off," I said. She awoke, looked perturbed, and remarked I was nearly naked. I saw I was wearing only my underwear and yanked the covers over our heads.

According to Laura, in my sleep, I'd taken off my gown and moaned. "I didn't realize your subconscious was so close to the surface," she said. I wiped the sand of sleep from my eyes, found my gown, and felt glad the nightmare was over. In the cloud of waking, I almost believed there'd been no demon.

Luckily for me, it was Friday. I inched my feet out of the quilt and placed them on the cold wood floor. Mother entered the room. She'd fixed oatmeal and carried two heaping bowls on a tray. To please her, I ate five spoonfuls and then ran past her and down the hall. I retched into the toilet and curled in a fetal position on the bathroom rug. I had a Carpathian-sized headache. My throat felt scorched, as if I'd opened my mouth and inserted a blow torch. Laura knelt beside me. Mother bent, stroked my head, and asked on what my eyes were fixed in the distance.

"Nothing, just the wall."

"Shine, you'd better get up now."

Laura put her hand on my head. "She has a fever."

"It can't be that bad," Mother said.

Father, having come home in the last few minutes, found us. He stood above me with arms crossed as if he wasn't sure about the seriousness of the situation and reminded Mother we couldn't afford a doctor. He demanded I see the school nurse. Mother volunteered to call the church about my "condition" and have a prayer partner "intercede." If those church ladies knew I'd been visited by Satan, they'd be waiting for me with stones when I arrived home from school. In the kitchen, Mother talked on the phone. In my room, I crawled back in bed. The end of January, a communal inertia set in, and most kids would rather stay in bed than play even. There were hypochondriacs with

all manners of plague. Older brothers with fake coughs mocked younger ones; big sisters stuck out their tongues and said, “Ah,” to little ones in a teasing manner. After three days, Mothers pushed even the “sickest” out the door. I was too old and proud for such antics. I got up, returned to the bathroom, and stood under a lukewarm shower. Rowena pounded on the door and urged me to hurry. “I need to put on my makeup!”

I came out with eleven minutes to switch my attire from towel to dress. Forget Rowena’s flounces and fanciness, I jumped into dirty sweats and cowboy boots. I’d hardly had enough energy to brush my teeth, so I chewed two of Father’s wake-up-and-avoid-driving-into-the-ditch pills. We girls dragged out the door and clattered down the porch stairs. I wrapped my scarf around my face. Laura remarked it didn’t cover the black shadows beneath my eyes. I shivered and stretched my wool sweater past my rear even though this would make the sweater lose its shape. Before me, the driveway stretched like a path into oblivion. I felt a pebble in my boot but was too sorry for myself to take it out. Ahead, the bus stopped. Rowena bounced up the steps. This morning, I’d heard her inform Father she was starting to like school, especially P. E. class. She still wasn’t willing to do any homework. Rowena was a dancer.

Laura climbed on the bus. She looked back, informed me I looked pathetic, and joked she’d attend my classes for me and take the tests if the other kids wouldn’t be upset she’d ruin the curve. I lingered behind, ignored her, and let the obnoxiously orange vehicle and its driver wait for my ascent. We arrived at school sooner than I wanted. I trudged down the hall, passed the nurse’s station, and remembered Mother’s plea over the phone “her daughter be healed body and soul.” I didn’t know whether the pastor could reach God on my behalf, but the nurse could cure me. On the other hand, I didn’t want to

face her disapproval when I told her about Arnold. Inside the station stood the regular customers, including a seventh grader who wet his pants. When he peed himself, the nurse produced clothing donations. Today, “Pisser” donned a pair of lime green pants that rode up the butt. A bumblebee was sewn on the pocket. How long would it be before his sister in my grade recognized the pants? I laughed until I felt a pain in my own bladder.

My first two classes were uneventful and gave me time to dread gym class. Every year since sixth grade, I’d prayed for the school to burn, so I wouldn’t have to dress. Now more than ever, I didn’t like the thought of showing my legs. Arnold might look at them and have scandalous longings; after all, he’d gone crazy when I wore my Victorian dress, which covered everything but head and hands. I changed my clothes in a locker-room stall and made an effort to remain unclothed for the shortest amount of time possible. The other girls, I saw through the cracks, sat on benches segregated according to popularity and dressed nonchalantly. The cheerleaders, moving slowest of all, took items like deodorant and perfume out of their lockers and sprayed themselves. Rowena, wearing the skimpiest underwear of anyone, was stretching, as if she expected gym class to be strenuous.

As I dressed, I found I’d lost more weight. My bra was loose, and my shorts’ waistband fit less snugly. I felt proud until I realized this circumstance made it easier for Arnold to pull down my shorts in a back corner. The girls’ coach stood at the door and called for everyone to come out. If not, according to experience, he’d barge in and find us. The man was less feared than the boys’ coach, who ran the football team, taught Drivers’ Ed. even though he argued women shouldn’t be able to drive, and threw desks at

students. I watched the boys run laps around the gym's perimeter. Arnold had a lazy, loping pace, but it was Tubby who fell behind. His underarms were wet, and he huffed and puffed like an old wolf trying to blow the pigs' house down. Tubby's breasts were bigger than mine. Perhaps he hid in the locker room, too.

This morning, the girls' coach had set up the volleyball net. Unlike basketball in which we individually practiced our shots, a group effort was required. The coach encouraged us to display favoritism by his selecting two girls to pick teams. My team leader solicited Rowena first. Even if she'd never played before, the logic went, she was tall. I was chosen second to last, before Ester, who didn't hit the ball unless it came directly to her. Her policy in life seemed to be to never to take an extra step. We took our places. I stood in the front row next to Rowena to help her when she messed up. The game began. Rowena sprang up and blocked the other team's first shot. Her shorts were as short as the cheerleaders'. My sister, who obviously couldn't be bothered by form, punched the ball with her fist. Although I cringed when balls flew at me and had a hard time bumping them across the net within bounds, my serves were good. Through no practiced skill on my part, the ball spun and confused the other team by causing girls to run into one another.

Ten minutes into the game, I became tired and felt lightheaded. I hadn't eaten for days. Balls started to whiz by me at what seemed like fifty miles per hour. The final one seemed to double. I put my hands over my eyes and fell to my knees. The coach pointed at me. "That sickly one over there, are you eating enough?"

"My name's Shine." I wanted to wrap myself in the volleyball net and hide but the next best way to make myself disappear was to lie. "I have the flu."

The coach obviously didn't hear what I said and made me repeat myself. He, not bothering to ask for details, grunted and said he'd write me a note. The man fiddled in his back pocket for a pen. Hope whispered I'd contracted the kissing disease and asked from whom. At some point, Arnold must have boasted with terrified bravado I was known to come on to anyone, even a cousin.

The volleyball game had resumed, and the other side scored a point. The coach raised his fists, yelled at the defense, and forgot my pass. My escape from class was cancelled. With nothing else to do, I got back in line and stepped up to serve. Charity, a member of my team standing in the front row, got the ball, and spiked the sphere above my head. It bounced a few times before I ran and caught it.

"Don't contaminate the ball," she said. "You'll make us sick, including that cutie with the hearse."

I returned to my spot inside the boundary line and ignored her. This morning, my hands had looked yellow, the reason Mother offered me cod liver oil. Now, the ball had hit my wrists enough times they'd turned red. Proud of my ability to withstand illness or not, I should have stayed in bed.

The flag girls continued to speak. "Didn't the undertaker's son leave the dance early to get out of dancing with Shine?" Charity said.

I bit the inside of my mouth but refused to say anything to defame Rowena. It was enough for me to know, even if I'd left Remy, he'd chosen me. This affirmation of loyalty should have made me confident as I served. I took an extra step and mixed my overhand toss. I wished I'd aimed the ball at Charity's head instead. Seemingly unaware of my intent, she rearranged her thin wad of hair in a clip. Long orange pieces dangled in

the front. Hope was now talking, theorizing I wanted to imitate the flaggers' looks, but my family was too poor to buy salon scissors or make-up. "Shine's got no hope in attracting that new guy. She's so crazy he probably ran away forever."

Attractive, maybe, crazy, perhaps, yet I was the one on the run. If only those girls knew. Rowena advanced from the back row and threatened Charity and Hope. "You better not laugh at any more jokes mentioning Rembrandt."

"Or what?" Hope said.

"Or else," Rowena replied. "And you might as well leave Shine alone, too."

"Thanks, Rowena," I said.

"Mother's got enough to handle," she replied.

Charity stepped forward and brandished her fist at Rowena. "Don't talk that way to us."

"What's wrong?" Rowena said. "You're mad you aren't the most sought after girl in school?"

"You think you are?" Charity said.

"Rowena has a better chance of being the best looking girl than someone like Shine," a third girl argued.

"If there's a prize for cuteness in this podunk town, give it to Shine. She needs all the help she can get in hooking Arnold."

"I don't want Arnold," I said.

"That's not what I hear." Hope pushed me. In turn, Charity tripped Rowena. My sister landed on her knees. When she rose, they'd turned the color of radishes. The rows of girls broke and reformed as a circle. We fighters stood within it. The coach had gone

to his office. From other side, I heard Tubby shout “girl fight.” I hit Charity in the chin, with what Father would have called a slow and sloppy hook. She fell, and I commanded her to leave us alone. Then I turned to help Rowena, who Charity held hostage by handfuls of hair. As soon as I put my hands around Charity’s neck and pulled her close to my face, she let go of Rowena.

“I had the situation under control.” Rowena smoothed her hair and reminded me she didn’t need me to fight her battles. I advised her to ask the coach for an icepack for her knees. As I found my place in the reforming back row, I saw Hope about to tackle me. A wad of bloody toilet paper fell from her shorts, and she froze. I no longer felt sorry for the skank, rape or not, although I might offer her a tampon in the locker room later. God in the sun hadn’t punished Hope for what the church ladies called “placing herself in a compromising situation.” The girl was having her period; she’d gotten off scott-free.

The returning coach, oblivious, blew his whistle, and pointed to my team. It was the Iron Maiden’s turn to serve. She seemed distracted by the bloody wad. The girl with the metal work in her mouth missed, and the ball went to the other side. The coach saw the putrid tissue on the floor and jogged over. “Someone should have picked up that Kleenex.” He reached down and grabbed it. “Who’s hurt?”

No one said anything. Rowena smirked. Perhaps the question really was, who’d escaped impending pain? Hope’s mother was impregnated by her grandfather. He came from a line of insane German royals. At the beginning of the world, Adam’s and Eve’s children had incestuous relations--the Sunday School teacher said this was God’s way of populating the world.

“Does someone have a bloody nose?” the coach said. Girls giggled, but Hope, silent, was now safe. The coach identified her as the culprit. “Off to the nurse’s office, and remember to tilt your head back.”

* * * * *

Sixth hour was health. My groin felt itchy, and I had to urinate. Midway through the teacher’s discussion of gonorrhoea, I raised my hand.

“No, you may not,” the teacher said. I put my hand down. As she droned on, I stared at my desk and concentrated on holding my breath. A girl never knew when she’d find herself drowning in a pool or being kissed by a monster. Such a skill as being able to hold my breath for long periods would surely come in handy. On the way to becoming an expert, I hyperventilated and almost passed out. I sat up, looked around with the curiosity of a baby just out of the womb, and saw something unusual. I raised my hand immediately. “There are spiders crawling across my desk.”

The teacher, round as a Matrushka doll, waddled to my chair. “I don’t see anything.”

“Really?” How could she not? “There are millions of them.” A brown recluse crawled down my pant leg. I screamed and shook it off. Rowena, sitting behind me, tapped her fingernails across the desk. I saw her shake her head. The teacher called my “hallucination” a “strategy” to get the class off topic. “We have to cover genital crabs.” She shuffled back to her desk.

“This spider’s bite could make a person’s skin rot and fall off,” I said. The teacher warned if I uttered one more word, she’d send me to the principal’s office. Compared with the spiders, this threat held little terror. And why was this woman singling me out

for bad behavior? The delinquent pubes, reading *Fantasy Girl* smuggled between the pages of our health books, were flunking. She began writing on the board in letters big enough for the blind. A boy called Spazziod banged his hand on his desk and claimed he had a question about “reproductive responsibility.” Our teacher was the expert on the subject. At our prodding, she’d admitted to using the rhythm method, which didn’t always work since, I understood, it involved reciting poetry. To safely avoid pregnancy, women should use something called a “diagram.”

“What’s your question?”

“Tell me, are condoms safe?” Spazziod said. “This guy I used to know was walking across the street wearing one, and he got hit by a bus.”

The woman frowned. “As I’ve said, abstinence is the only method of prevention.”

The class cracked up. The teacher put on her spectacles, probably to get a better look at the clown, and noted something in her grade book. Rowena, perhaps tired of adolescent jokes, threw spit wads in my hair. I took this act as a sign of affection and turned. She sported a lipstick red dress, as in *Vogue*, and looked pretty, even with bruised knees. Rowena jabbed me between my shoulder blades with her pencil eraser. “When does this class get over?”

The teacher, holding up drawings of crabs and pointing out their prickly feet with great clinging power, looked at me, as if I’d made the comment. She wore dentures, and sometimes, as now, she clenched her jaw so much she couldn’t talk. I knew I was in trouble.

At the end of class, the teacher handed me a note for Mother concerning my “roving mind,” she said. The woman suggested counseling. Outside the room, I ripped the paper to bits and watched them drop to the floor with the imaginary spiders.

At my locker, I ignored my growing dizziness and gathered my books to leave for the day. I wanted to climb on the bus, sit down, and pass out. Rowena and I walked down the hallway filled with black and white headshots of graduating seniors, and she offered her own perfect smile. Glass cases held trophies and brass medals. A wool football jersey was enshrined in one; beside the shirt rested a deflated football. The counselor argued these years were the best of one’s life.

Something in the periphery caught my eye. Remy stood at the corridor’s end and watched the doors as students exited. There wasn’t much to this business of monitoring the location of one’s crush.

“Remy!” Rowena said. He gave her a half-moon smile and slipped into the men’s bathroom. Even if I wanted to travel in the opposite direction, the last bell generated more excitement than a fire alarm, and the crowd thrust us forward. When I looked back, Rembrandt had crept out of the bathroom. I averted my eyes. Rowena probably guessed he was weaving his way toward me. She took hold of my book bag strap and secured a place by my side. I kept striding even if Rowena resisted this forward motion and said, “I’m not talking to Remy.”

“You’re right. Let’s play hard to get.” She smiled, grabbed my hand, and swung it. Rowena, with her halting steps, made the trek to the parking lot interminably slow. Remy was probably studying us; I could tell she wanted to glance back. Rowena let go of my hand. “You and I are pretending to be friends, that’s all.”

The moment was gone, even if the warmth I'd experienced took longer to fade.

"If you don't want to ride the bus, you could call that college guy," I said.

"Who?"

"From the dance. Mother told me he phoned the house looking for you."

"Why would I call him?"

"Remy won't take you home," I said.

"No?" she said.

"He better not."

Rowena remarked she knew how to handle a guy and explained the underlying motivation of the boy we'd both wanted: "Remy's a clinger. The reason he's still stuck like a dead skin cell on you is you won't give him something."

"Why should I?" I said. "Either way, it doesn't matter what I do." I told my sister Rembrandt promised to be with me forever.

"Why would he say something like that?"

I looked down at my Mary Janes and tried to explain I'd become a new person. My clothes had grown big and hung on me. The night before at supper, Mother told me I was doing a good job losing weight. Even Rowena said she approved of my current look, although she'd seemed wary I might try to fit myself into something of hers. I'd received this commentary with a mixture of gratitude and scorn. No one understood I wasn't trying to become skinny. Something more important was happening, something related to what Laura half seriously called my "delusions of grandeur."

Ester, the hall monitor, gawked at me. "It's the anorexic girl who sees things and her model sister." She accused any girl thinner than she (all) of being emaciated and

approached the health teacher under the pretense of concern every month. Tubby, walking past us, overheard Ester's remark. "Ester's so chunky when she thunders past my locker in the morning, I scream 'earthquake.'"

Arnold, who I hadn't seen approaching, encircled his arms like a necklace around Ester's large head. I felt sorry for her momentarily then smiled. Arnold wasn't harassing me. Tubby hissed the principal was coming. The man we called "The Enforcer" had posted this sign above his door: "The longer I live, the more I see I'm never wrong about anything, and all the pains I've humbly taken to verify my notions have only wasted my time." Arnold screamed as if in fear and let go of Ester. The man continued down the hall. Rowena wasn't done with the mock compliments. "Ester's so big when she wears a white dress, you could show movies on her. Can't you just imagine her and Rocky together, making filthy chicken love?"

I didn't know what chicken love looked like, but I imagined feathers and excrement. Tubby guffawed. He and Arnold, bent over with laughter, exited out a side door. Rowena shoved her elbow into my rib. "What are you grinning about? You've slimmed down, but Rembrandt danced with you out of pity that night. He's not attracted to you."

"He prefers girls without breasts?" I said.

Rowena lifted her shirt. Two computer geeks, on their way to Scholastic Bowl practice, wouldn't shut their eyes without seeing this image, I guessed. I drew in my breath and then shrugged, as if I'd seen my share of topless girls in gym.

"Remy will come to me," Rowena said.

"Let him. He's right behind you."

In front of Rowena stood someone else. Rowena didn't seem to recognize the college guy with whom she'd danced. He swung an arm over her shoulder and awkwardly bent to give her a kiss. The guy seemed cocky if not exactly smooth. Rowena must have seen her chance to make Remy jealous. She smacked one on the college man's nose. Remy stepped in front of the guy, who hadn't seen him approaching and wouldn't know to be afraid. Remy's face looked wan. Without a word of warning, he left knuckle prints on the guy's chin. Rowena screamed and fluttered her hands to draw the attention of anyone watching. After Rembrandt watched the guy to make sure he wasn't going to pursue a fight (he didn't get up from the floor), he ignored them both. Remy attempted to bestow on me his own kiss. I said I didn't need a ride and sidled away. Remy insisted he'd driven to school to see me. I walked on, placing one foot before the other. He promised never to look at Rowena again. I didn't believe him. He'd have to poke his eyes out to fulfill such an oath.

* * * * *

“What do you mean you aren't eating supper?” Mother said.

“I'm sorry.” I stood in the kitchen door. “I don't feel better. I feel worse.”

“After the prayer session I requested, you can't be sick.” Mother herself had changed into pajamas, covered by a dressing gown, and looked ready to retire.

“I am.”

“You like spaghetti.”

“I want to go to my room.” I loved my mother, so I lied then. “I'm not hungry. I scarfed down two pizza slices with my lunch.”

“Come join us, and tell me what else you did at school.”

Although I was no longer in first grade and gluing popsicle sticks into the shapes of animals or hooking loops of cloth into potholders, I sat with my family as requested. Mealtime wasn't the same with Father's chair empty. Mother served everyone, minus me, the thin marinara sauce that looked like blood, angel-hair pasta, and green beans. The sight of food, even meant for others, made me feel ill. Laura stared with seeming boredom at her paper plate. She crossed her eyes and exposed a ball of bread in her mouth when I looked at her too long. Behind us, the china cabinet held Mother's antique dishes, too good for use and up for sale.

"Are you more popular after hosting a party and wearing a new dress to the dance?" Obviously, Mother had guessed I didn't have any friends.

"Yes," I said. But my popularity didn't show in ways she'd expect. Everyone knew me officially as Rowena's sister, the girl who chased after boys she couldn't get. Rowena chuckled at the conversation. I melted lower in my chair and gave her what I hoped was a nasty look. She studied me, as if trying to determine my intentions, and sprinkled garlic on her meatballs. Last night, I'd seen her read my Monster book, which I'd left open on the dresser, and then take the "precaution" of spreading whitethorn under our bed. Laura, perhaps attempting to lighten the table's somber atmosphere, tried to get Rowena to sniff a strand of spaghetti up her nose. Such antics sickened me, but I began to feel hungry. My palate didn't yearn after Laura's scrap of roll lathered in real butter or smidgen of applesauce. On her saucer lay a partially devoured piece of Red Velvet cake. Mother rose and cleaned up the dishes. She matter-of-factly dumped the cake into the trash can. I wondered how dirty the piece would be if I retrieved it after everyone were gone.

Mother, acting in her rare Mother Hen mode, must have sensed my hunger. She produced a clean plate and spooned on some cold green beans. I, nauseated, plugged my nose. Mother turned to get me a fork. I scooped the greens into my napkin. Mother handed me the utensil and complained, "I didn't raise my daughters to eat with their hands."

"Girls with bad manners don't get good husbands," Rowena said.

"Freud proposes men are more concerned with women's potential for hysteria," Laura said.

"Maybe some females would be better off alone." I told Mother marriage wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"You're probably right," she said. "I can attest to that."

"For your information, I have a husband."

"Oh." Mother smiled. "I see."

"I'm not kidding."

"Who are you talking about, Shine?" Rowena said. I pulled the ice pick from my pocket and kept it hidden in my lap. I'd been carrying this weapon since the day Rocky grabbed my privates on the bus. I touched the tip to test its sharpness in case my sister attacked. "I married the undertaker's son."

"You didn't," Rowena said. It was more of a statement than a question. I felt let down Rowena didn't jump up and try to hurt me, but before I could explain to anyone my relationship to Remy, she told Mother the rumors concerning his family: This past summer, his twin sister, Ella, led five girls in an assault on a hated teacher. They sneaked

into the young woman's room, held her down, and clipped her hair down to the scalp. She left the same night. It was a joke, the girls told the headmaster. Ella was forgiven.

"In October, the father caught Ella in bed with Remy," Rowena continued. I wasn't as bothered by this claim as I should have been. I understood the urge toward such family closeness and pictured the two sleeping together as they had in the womb.

"Sounds like a classic case of the Oedipal complex," Laura said.

"From then on, the father watched Ella during holiday visits." Rowena proposed Ella was in love with her brother. "When the two were young, they spoke their own language."

"I bet Remy knows all her secrets," I said. Once, Remy told me, he was learning the fine art of decorating the faces of the dead, and she'd lain on the kitchen table like a corpse and allowed him to practice, using his brushes and plasters on her.

Rowena had obviously meant to make a case against Remy, but the more she spoke, the more fascinated we'd all become. Mother frowned to show she didn't approve, but had prodded Rowena to continue. I listened to the stories and guessed my sister wasn't making up anything. She never wasted her time with subterfuge. "Is Ella pretty?" I said at last.

Rowena, not one to give compliments, nodded. "I've seen a picture. Remy claims she looks like their mother."

Even after Rowena finished, Mother remained quiet. I assumed she wanted to insist Remy and I never see each other again. But Mother must have remembered Remy's charm and how she herself had rebelled against Lucille. "Do you know he's the one, Shine?" Mother said.

“You don’t have to make a choice now, Shine,” Rowena said. But I felt as if my fate had been arranged already by some mighty force: Rembrandt and I’d been meant for each other from the day we were born.

Laura didn’t appear impressed by Rowena’s rumors or my liaisons. She wanted to know if I’d saved any wedding cake.

“Never mind about Shine’s relationship with Remy, Laura,” Mother said. “Their marriage is nothing more than child’s play.”

Her words made me burn, and I walked away.

* * * * *

Everyone had left the kitchen. I took one bite of Red Velvet cake, chewed cautiously, and spit it into the trash can. My mouth felt dry; my tongue was coated with a rancid acid I couldn’t rinse down after drinking two glasses of water. After I made sure no one saw me enter the hall, I sneaked into the laundry room and pulled the Clorox bleach from the top shelf. I didn’t want to be tempted to eat again, and it took a capful to terminate my lingering hunger. I had to be careful when I poured the bleach on my tongue not to swallow any. At first, the cleaning solution burned my taste buds and hurt unbearably. Then, I liked the sensation. Above all, I wanted to feel empty.

As I slinked back to my room, Mother met me at the door. "I didn’t mention this at the table, but your health teacher called. She said she sent me a note."

"She must have the wrong student," I said with a lump in my throat. This statement wasn't technically a lie. After going into the pond, I’d been born again, made anew.

Mother reminded me she had problems of her own. I guessed she, too, was having a hard time with Father's absence. "You have no excuse for adding to my grief," she said.

"I'm sorry. I guess I've been doing it since I was born."

"Let's not go overboard." Mother adjusted her robe and placed her hands on her hips. The neckline fell open and exposed her pajama top and the outline of brown areolae. In unexpected moments, I found Mother beautiful. Ester had a real oinker for a mother. After school, Ester had to hightail it to the Econoline van. If she were too slow, her mam would heave herself from the front seat and find her way to the Home Ec. door, where the teacher gave out burnt cookies. Ester, holding her mother's coat's belt, would lead her away from the scent of food like a large, docile animal.

I went to the closet to find my sweater.

"Where do you think you're going, Shine?" Mother said.

"Out."

"Where?"

"Mulberry Pass." Even though Laura's bike was small and uncomfortable, the exercise would make me so exhausted I'd sleep all night.

Mother shook her head. "It's too late. Go tomorrow."

"It's 7:00."

"It's dark," she said.

"I don't want you to worry, but I'm leaving."

Mother grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and caught in her watch my curly hairs. "Wait until your father gets home."

I pulled back. "I'll be waiting a lifetime."

Mother let go of my neck and reached back to swat my rear.

“Why don’t you really hit me?” I arched my back and stood tall.

“What’s wrong?” Mother raised her arms and leaned against my dresser. “You’re not a prostitute, are you? You don’t go behind the bleachers with boys, correct? Honey, your allowance, I could--”

I reminded her I didn’t get an allowance. Mother picked up a pawn from my onyx chessboard, the only present from Father I liked, even if he had yet to teach me the rules. She fingered the hand-carved man in her hand and then him against my mirror. The glass splintered. I observed Mother’s cracked reflection but wasn’t in a place to see much of my own.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I’d forgotten Laura was celebrating her birthday with a slumber party, all Mother could afford. Laura and her chums clomped down the hall, opened my door, and crept in. Under the dent in the covers, I spied five loud tiptoes peeking at me in bed. One girl put a hand out. Naked beneath the sheet, I realized I should have locked my room. Laura pointed out the curtains I’d drawn permanently against the sun and told her little friends I was “cuckoo,” like the funny bird in the parlor’s clock. The giggling girls left.

I’d neglected to purchase Laura a present. Mother used to buy her and me a box of hard candy at Huck’s Store, and Laura traded her pink hearts for my green limes, smaller in size, but her favorite. Last year she’d asked me how to spell boys’ names for pre-cut cardboard Valentines and whispered of kisses beneath the monkey bars. Laura, thirteen, had her own life now.

There was no use trying to sleep. My feet hit the floor. For lack of clean clothes, I pulled on my wedding dress. I didn't want to spend the best years of my life in this house. I stepped in front of the mirror, remembered the cracked fragments of Mother's face, and shook my head. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and brushed mascara on my lashes. I stuck out my chest, puckered my lips, and struck poses like a girl in the Lucky Strikes ads. Even though I couldn't see myself accurately, I figured I was dressed to kill.

I closed my door, skipped down the hall, and slipped past the kitchen with its refrigerator so old it seemed to hum the national anthem. I opened the door, galloped down the steps, and gathered my skirts in my hands, so I could run. It didn't help I wore jeans and cowboy boots underneath my dress. Despite layers of clothing, the cold air penetrated my nose, ears, and throat. I checked my watch. If I hurried, I could hitch a ride and be in town before 7:30. There I'd distract myself with a game at the arcade and a jukebox song or traipse around the square while cars blared by and kids waved. Nosferatu, child of the night, I kept my face down, hidden from the light. The moon beamed, white crazy white, on my silhouette, and I laughed like a mad girl. As I ran down the driveway and waited beside the road, there was no God in the sun to stop me.

CHAPTER 12

I gnawed my finger and tried to decide. As Remy might have predicted, I relented in my oath and found his place before the hour's end. Staying the night with him wouldn't be bad, I told myself. We were on intimate terms, and he must have loved me to crawl in the window and risk Father's rifle, had my father been there. Remy even made an effort to find me at school; I guessed he felt repentant enough. As I lifted the shelter's door, I imagined kissing my husband and making up. When I descended into the pit, Remy didn't seem surprised. He was taping up a remade wanted poster of Jesse James. Like Rasputin and other such rebels, the black-and-white photographed gunslinger was Remy's idol. As a child, Rembrandt visited Meramac Caverns in Missouri, where James stashed his loot. "He could find his way around that network of caves in the dark," Rembrandt bragged. Since then, Remy made a pilgrimage to St. Joseph. The Chamber of Tourism had relocated the outlaw's house a block from the Harley-Davidson outlet. For a dollar, Remy toured the one-story, whitewashed hideout. "James robbed and killed from his hometown. He had an alias. No one knew for years."

"That's strategy," I said.

"All good things come to a close," Remy assured me. In the sitting room, the chair on which James stood to straighten the framed needlepoint, "God Bless This House," remained. The man's back had been turned. The shade was down. James

removed his six-shooters to avoid drawing neighbors' suspicion. The younger Dalton, invited to stay with the family, shot James from behind. The picture, never righted, remained askew.

Rembrandt stuck a last piece of Scotch tape on the poster. I ventured close and slid my finger along the white line, "a scratch," my villain called it, on his neck. As his alter-ego, Remy had been shot, too. The bullet, lodged in his throat, pressed against his esophagus. I listened to the story: As children—Rembrandt, his sister, a friend—wandered through the woods. The friend, bored with identifying birds, pointed his rifle; the bullet was supposed to whiz past Rembrandt and knock a blue jay's nest to the ground. The projectile entered Remy's neck.

Remy, finished decorating, surveyed the room. His fish, aggressor and victim, were both dead now and rotting despite my hope for re-animation. He scooped them from the tank and flushed them down the toilet. The bodies had begun to stink; nevertheless, I'd considered their former potential to feed me and wandered to Remy's refrigerator. There was no food. Even the jar of cherries and bottle of whipped cream were gone. Rembrandt reached in his pocket and held out an apple. We sat on the couch, and I decided my fast was finished. I polished the Red Delicious on my skirt. After I finished the apple, I threw away the core and felt more ravenous than ever. I'd have something to drink. A number of bottles were stored in the fridge. I took out the first, tore off the wax seal, and formed it into a soft ball. I drank slowly until I realized what I'd believed was wine was really blood.

I heard steps behind me.

“I’d forgotten those bottles,” Remy said in his matter-of-fact voice.

“Hematomania. That’s your fetish, I guess. Everyone has one.”

I made an effort to screw up my face in disgust and glanced at the bottle in my hand. “I don’t like it.”

“That blood is Lucille’s.” He pointed a finger. “I guess you have as much right to it as anyone else. She didn’t leave you anything.”

“You have to be kidding,” I said.

“You’re like my father in what he calls his ‘fascinations,’” Remy said.

I remembered the undertaker with his teeth white and even as dentures. At the funeral, he’d pulled back his lips when he smiled to show the dark hole of his mouth.

“My grandfather was weird, too,” Remy said. “In World War I, he killed a man and brought back his skull.”

“What about you?”

“I came out of the womb with pointy teeth.” Remy threw out his arms, roared, and grabbed me playfully.

I studied the flask in my hand and considered the implications of what I’d done. I ran my tongue over my teeth but couldn’t get rid of the sour taste. Remy grabbed the bottle before I threw it against the wall. I bent over, tried to puke, and spat out what I could. Remy went to the bathroom to get a towel. He returned, muttering that the smell would never go away, and cleaned up the mess. I tried to help. He shooed me toward the couch.

“Why do you have the blood anyway?” I said, suspicious.

Remy explained the Red Cross paid for rare blood types.

“How do you know?”

“Once, I went to the hospital for a throat culture,” he began. In the waiting room, he saw a Red Cross sign urging: Give Blood. “No,” Remy said to himself that day, “take blood.” Telling the staff he was visiting terminally ill patients to show pictures of sample tombstones, he sneaked into a refrigerated closet. Rembrandt stole a bedpan, piled in phials of blood, and folded his coat over his arm. (At this point in his story, I understood, Remy had been exaggerating for effect.)

The next time Remy needed money, he decided to bypass the hospital break-in and gather the blood himself. “But it wasn’t always easy,” he laughed. He recalled a time when no one died for two months. “The old people were stubborn despite the hundred-degree heat, and my father couldn’t rustle up a single stillborn child for the life of him.” The man was having trouble making ends meet. The bank would have repossessed the funeral parlor if the bank could have gotten new investors.

I ceased to listen to Remy and thought about the blood I’d drunk. I wanted power, and who better than Lucille, dictating the fates of whole families, to give it to me?

“Why do you need the help of dead people?” Remy said as I confided in him. He argued such qualities as beauty, intelligence, and power lay dormant within each person. All I had to do was urge them forth. “Besides, the blood won’t affect you--your body won’t process it.”

I refused to believe him but nodded, I hoped, innocently to end the conversation. Now I’d found my means of strength, I wouldn’t give it up. Unexpectedly, I remembered my birthday book and wondered if I’d become a monster.

“Shine,” Remy insisted, probably similarly tired of such talk, “I know what you’re thinking, but there’s no such thing as vampires. For years, my father has been experimenting with how to keep a person alive.”

“Why?”

“Death is his passion, second to beauty,” Remy confided. “Instead of trying to prolong life, I wish he’d spend time with me.”

“I’m here with you.”

“Yes, the moment, that’s all we have,” he said.

But I was waiting for the perfect time, when Rowena said goodbye and went past the county line. I wondered how I could propel her to quicker action.

* * * * *

Remy and I were sitting on the couch. “It’s almost night,” he said, his voice low. “Let’s go for a ride.” The dusk didn’t bother his sensitive eyes, he said, and I wouldn’t have to apply the coat of sunscreen necessary lately to keep my skin from burning. This was the day the Lord had made. I should have rejoiced and been glad in it. But darkness had become more familiar than the light. I reached out and hugged Remy as he grabbed his coat. His shirt collar flipped open, and I observed my husband didn’t have any chest hair. In that way, he was still a child; perhaps this was why we belonged together. Remy kissed my lips and grabbed the keys. He said he needed to look for a replacement headlight for the hearse at the bone yard.

Before completing this errand, he said he needed to buy toothpicks. We drove downtown. At Huck’s Store, he took a long time selecting his box. Paranoid, I kept imagining someone had told Huck I’d stolen those tampons, and he’d arrive during his

off-shift and grab and lock me in the cleaning supply closet until Mother arrived to pay. Famished and faint, I grabbed the rack of postcards, picturing Atwater's biggest attractions, the courthouse and jail. As I concentrated on remaining upright, I became aware of my body. My skin had grown white, translucent, and seemed to glow. The veins in my wrists buried themselves for warmth. My nails had become elongated, like Vlad the Impaler's. My dark hair was loose; strands released themselves as I combed it with my fingers. I dropped the hairs on the ground and ceased to observe myself. I guessed what Remy would say about my new look: My skin was pale in winter; my nails were long, as I'd neglected to cut them.

I felt someone's eyes on me and glanced up in shame as if I'd done something wrong. The cashier was staring at me. I walked on, rummaging through unnecessary and expensive items and pretending to shop. God forgotten as I wandered down the aisle furthest from the checkout, I sneaked three candy bars and a bottle of Helen of Troy nail polish in my purse. Then, I saw the pregnancy test in its battered, half-opened box. It was the last one in stock. I placed a finger on the opening and remembered a story. Last year, Charity, according to Hope, who couldn't keep her own legs or mouth shut, got pregnant and plunged a pair of pliers into an unknown cavity to uncross a few livewires. She flushed the remains down the toilet; that was that. Charity and I had had nothing in common. The possibility that we did now was too frightening to consider.

I didn't need the test, but at the last moment, I pushed it into my purse. In the next aisle, Remy was grabbing duct tape, a bag of pipe cleaners, and Silly Putty, which he'd explained came in handy at the mortuary. I slipped into the restroom, unwrapped the black and silver papers from the Hershey's, and forced myself to finish the bar. The last

bite of milk chocolate, with its waxy consistency, made me sick. I rinsed my mouth in the sink and stuffed the two unwrapped candy bars into the disposable napkin container to lessen my shoplifting offense. Then, I retreated to the toilet, ripped open the cardboard box, and read the test's instructions. My hands were shaking. I stared at the divided plus and minus sign and pondered the ratio distribution of such a simple mathematical equation.

I pulled down my jeans, crouched over the seat, held up my dress, and attempted to pee on the white stick. Before I finished, my legs gave way. Urine splattered the floor. My hand was wet, the stick mostly dry. I crammed the test's contents in my purse. Remy would be waiting. I stumbled out of the bathroom, felt a second wave of nausea, and vomited on the floor where the cashier stood with her mop. The woman checked out my ski coat, tie-dye wedding dress, jeans, and boots and looked into my eyes as if to read intent. She stared at me as if I were what the gym teacher called a "special case" and took a wad of gum from her mouth and stuck it on the mop's handle, as if she couldn't chew and reason at the same time. "It's early to be getting snockered!"

"You've got it wrong." I tried to apologize. The woman thought she had a drunk on her hands and yelled at me to get out. Remy's eyes grew explosive; he took my forearm. I stumbled after him out the door. Remy shut off the gas pump, removed the hose, and directed me to the hearse. I opened the door and crawled in. As Remy shut the door, I felt sure he'd scream at me. He raised a hand and whispered, "I didn't realize you were sick. You didn't have to come with me."

I smiled at Remy's naiveté. He obviously didn't recognize the changes taking place. As if I were a child whose parents had long been dead, I had to observe my

metamorphosis alone. I considered past goals: When I was five, I wanted to be a Mohawk: to scalp grown men, shave my hair into a center stripe, wear buckskin trousers, and send warning smoke signals from my teepee. Following that period, I hoped to hold a number of diverging occupations: king's food sampler, gypsy, and Flying Nun. Last, I'd tried to be "a proper young lady," but since the bankruptcy, townspeople called my family "white trash." Being a vampire was the best role yet.

* * * * *

The hearse skidded over ice patches in the road. Remy chewed his toothpick until it resembled a bone fragment. Two car-lengths back, a cop followed us. My instinct was to wave him down and have him arrest me for my behavior of late. I forced my fingers to rest in my lap. Remy, law-abiding citizen that he was, slowed down to ten miles per hour, placed both hands on the wheel, and stared straight ahead. The cop passed. Remy told me the police never pulled over a hearse; still, the man glanced at us in his rearview mirror. I raised my hand and gave a small wave.

Remy sang one of his made-up, off-key songs, "I live in a small town; people think so small, they use small words." Most Atwater residents believed our town held national importance. Scraps of cloth, cardboard boxes, and used tires littered the road like accidental landmarks. Remy unrolled the window to toss his toothpick. Winter nights were even colder than the days. Plumes of smoke, like specters, flew from chimneys and swirled in the sky. Remy passed a last set of houses and entered the country. We gazed at the dead land for miles around. The fields were filled with stubble; here and there lay a frozen corncob.

“Talk about empty space,” Remy remarked. He reached over and touched my cheek. “You feel hot, sick, I mean.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

Under the weight of the heavy-lidded sky, the horizon blinked, and it was dark. Remy sped up as if he felt a sense of urgency. I grabbed his forearm, tightened my hold, and wondered suddenly if he might kill and bury me in this shadow land. I imagined floundering in a hole, throwing my hands up to get out, and then falling backwards. The dirt was similar to water in its denseness and color; it lacked only fluidity. Rembrandt reached the bone yard and parked under a stand of birches. We got out of the hearse. The yard wasn’t open at this hour, but Remy said Boner owed his father a favor. To prove I wasn’t afraid of the mission, I skipped up to the fence, placed my boots in its diamonds, and climbed haphazardly.

“You’re going to break an arm,” Remy warned.

“Next time, I’ll lift my sleeves and fly.” I leaned forward and jumped.

Remy took a more direct approach in entering the yard. He whipped out his X-acto knife and cut the gate’s rope. We stood in the middle of it all--the Great American Nowhere—and stared at our surroundings. Most of the vehicles had sat for years. I hunched over, and Remy enclosed me in his arms. We meandered through the yard and looked for the elusive headlight. Stars fast as angels’ feet zigzagged across the sky and bottomed out in surrounding fields.

“I’m your vehicle, girl; I’ll take you where you need to go,” Rembrandt crooned. He found a Buick, opened the hood, and worked on removing a bulb. The process took a

long time. Remy muttered and searched his pocket for the right screwdriver. I punched my fist into the driver's side door to do what the principal called some "aimless damage."

Remy dropped his screwdriver. "Why did you do that?"

"I wanted to see if the change had come yet—if I could cut myself and heal instantly." Blood erupted from my knuckles. Before I could lick the rivulet, Remy produced a handkerchief meant for a sobbing old lady and wrapped my hand. "I wasn't aware I'd married a mythological creature," he said.

"It's not something one can force." I opened and closed my fingers inside the cloth and wondered why the change was so slow in coming. Far-off, the dogs began to bark.

* * * * *

The rain came down hard, but it didn't matter. We'd retreated to the shelter, where we had sex for the first time. After I'd allowed Remy to have me, I thought he'd be mine. I assumed we'd be united. Yet after the act, he drew apart and remained as free as ever. It was as if he'd taken my body unto himself and cast my spirit aside.

Now, Remy and I sat immersed in his porcelain tub. I, lodged between his knees, rested my head against his chest, flipped through *Spook* magazine, and read the apparitions' balloon talk. Even though the water had grown tepid, I liked the fact Remy wanted to be neat and clean. He wasn't like Caliban, the boy my English teacher accused of taking a bath only on Saturdays. I remained curled in the tub, hands rubbed raw with soap, but feeling just as dirty as before.

Remy had fallen into a deep sleep. Six foot three, he couldn't fit his entire bottom half in the water. His feet hung over the edge. As he slid down, I, enclosed in his arms,

struggled not to go under. A long green snake glided through the water and encircled my ankles. I kicked the snake away, only to realize it was a floating washcloth. I whispered to Remy, “If only you’d wake up and carry me out of here and place me on the shore.” He failed to stir. I tried to climb out of the tub, but Remy’s hands were locked around my chest. What could I do but remain patient? There must be something more for me, I thought, even as my skin grew wrinkled from the water.

Remy awoke with a start, pushed me off, and pulled the drain’s plug. I wrapped a towel around myself and watched the water swirl like a tornado and disappear into the hole.

“All hail the American Night. Now it’s time to pull down the shades of your eyes and shut off the light,” Remy sang.

“I’m not tired.”

He gave me a sleeping pill from his father’s fiancée’s stash, so I could “rest,” he said, and pointed to the bed. In ten minutes, Remy nodded off. Left alone, I imagined I was levitating. In my mind but seemingly also in reality, I rose Peter-Pan style, floating above the mattress. Weightless, I slipped out the door and soared through pixie-dust night. Once in Never-Never Land, I could have stayed forever. Why did I return? Remy lay still. He slept so hard he didn’t seem to breathe. Under a blanket smelling of dog, he remained as gone as the dead.

Through the center of town, I heard the train pass; roll, roll, probably Norfolk Southern out of Peoria, running coal. The engine blew, whistle screeched, and wheels clanged. At this hour, no one else beside the engineer was on the move, except a band of truck drivers. I wondered if Father were among them.

My eyelids grew heavy. The temperature rose. My brain water flowed like the Lethe, and I forgot my worries in favor of strange dreams. I half realized I'd said something in my sleep that made no sense. Rembrandt rolled over, causing ripples in the water-filled mattress that made me feel seasick, and said, "What are you raving about?"

"Nothing. I can't get any rest in this bed. Let's talk about something."

"Talk now? You can either go to sleep or go home." He turned away. I, afraid of being turned out, arranged myself on my side, hooked a pinkie into his boxer shorts' band, and snuggled against his back. After a while, this position grew boring, so I pushed myself up, located the flashlight on the nightstand, and flipped it on. Remy, as if to defy observation, stiffened into the immovable posture of a corpse.

* * * * *

I lay awake, trying not to fill my lungs with air, and listened to the sound of Remy breathing. I held my breath as long as possible then let it out. I felt the blackness pile on top of me, layers and layers. In the end, I couldn't slip away. I sat up in the coffin bed. Shadows crawled around the room as the candle winked. It seemed like the night of the living dead. Feeling an ennui that had grown unbearable, I threw back the blankets, got a bottle of pain reliever meant for menstrual cramps from my purse, and sleepwalked to the bathroom. I shook ten pills into my palm, spilled half on the floor, and flushed the rest of the bottle down the toilet, so that Remy would think I'd also swallowed them. I switched off the light, lay down in an uncomfortable sprawl, and arranged my hair as I'd seen an actress do. When Remy entered the bathroom to look for me, I wanted him to take responsibility for my white face and black-circled eyes.

Time passed, how much I didn't know. My shoulder blade and hipbone ached from lying on my side on the tiles. I stretched, rubbed a knot in my neck, got up, and turned on the light. Deciding I should look beautiful for the show, I painted my nails with polish. When my stomach gurgled, I lay back down. Rembrandt didn't come. Finally, there was nothing for me to do but rise and hurry back to bed. Then he wandered in to urinate. Remy knelt, shook me, and grabbed my wrist for a pulse. I remained limp but opened my eyes in a squint to observe him. He dropped my hand on the rug. While I pretended to be dead, Remy pulled down his shorts and urinated in a stream over my body. I expected some sympathy and wanted him to carry me to bed. He told me to get up and not "try any more shit." When I dragged myself to my feet, I noticed the pills floating in the toilet water.

I trudged to bed but paused when I thought I heard something call to me: Listen to the rain trickle above. Come out into the dark, where the mud is soft like rose petals between your toes. Come out, naked and alone. Run away forever. I pictured myself racing through the night, hurdling buildings, and pole-vaulting rivers using a telephone pole. I'd lie in the ditch, poor and expectant as a highwayman, and wait. When someone passed, I'd crouch low, like the lioness, and then leap. I realized why I hadn't killed myself in the bathroom: I could no longer die.

In bed, my husband crawled on top me. I raised my hand, let it fall and dangle from the coffin, and wondered how I'd become entrapped. "Good night. Good night. Good night," I whispered to myself. Remy was already asleep.

CHAPTER 13

All the clocks in the world conspired to tick together. The combined tocks wrenched open my eyes. I awoke Tuesday morning at 11 a.m. to see Remy's wind-up clock sitting on the nightstand. Rembrandt refused to stir and might lie immobile the better part of the day, for all I knew. I removed his hand, clenched around my nape, and sneaked out. As I was leaving, Rembrandt woke up and called, "Where are you going?"

"To my parents' house for a change of clothes." His nostrils flared, and he tilted his head as if to consider other options. "You can wear my mother's. I'll steal some from the house."

"That's okay." My attire might be hand-me-down, but at least I didn't smell like lilacs and embalming fluid, which I imagined to be her scent.

"You'll be back this afternoon?" Remy said.

I leaped up the ladder, two rungs at a time, and shook my head in a way that didn't confirm a no or yes. I couldn't tell my husband I'd decided never to see him again. Forget any marriage promises of forever and ever. A few weeks together had been enough; that was for sure. Even though my mind had been set against going home, I'd return there and stay that night and every other and continue to struggle with school. Remy, usually a mind reader, didn't recognize my excuse as a lie, or at least he didn't say

anything to test it. I slid on a pair of big sunglasses left under the couch, which I assumed belonged to his sister, and opened the trapdoor. Outside, daylight burned hot. My spirits rose. I wanted to see Mother again, to look into her eyes, and know I belonged. The rumor of her jump into the well was probably just that. Often words didn't represent truth, even if repeated over and over or spelled correctly.

In town, I lifted my hand to flag a ride. The bakery driver, who called me a Priscilla Presley look alike, gave me a lift. To stop his glances, I retied a filmy, polka-dotted scarf around my hair. I'd seen a picture and knew Elvis' former wife and I had nothing in common. The man drove with his left hand and placed the unoccupied one on the seat. I shifted my body to be closer toward the door and touched its handle. As he approached my house, the man asked whether he should drop me off at the porch. I said no rather too quickly to show gratitude. Still, this additional effort on his part could create some sort of unstated obligation, I understood. The driver said I could flag him down any time, but I remembered the health teacher saying something about milkmen and children, and I smiled to avoid commitment. I got out at my driveway, and the man drove off rather too fast. The day was blue and white. Clouds dipped and rose. The vista was panoramic, as in the postcard Rowena bought, she said, in order to remember the place.

When I stepped inside, Mother met me with the attitude of a hotel clerk attending to the late arriver. She seemed removed, but I didn't dawdle long enough for her to consider the day of the week and ask why I wasn't in school. I entered my room, shut out the daylight by drawing the curtains, and slept into the afternoon. Rowena, opening and closing the door, came and went. I thought I heard her speaking to someone in the parlor, but I couldn't keep track of her doings and finally quit. Night fell outside the window and

left me to fantasize: Stars appeared and collapsed; comets collided with planets. Still, in the end, the universe paid attention to me, and I became its center. It felt good to lie in my lumpy bed, one that wasn't someone's final resting place.

* * * * *

At six the following morning, the kitchen phone jangled. I let it ring four times before falling out of bed. Mother dealt with creditors, but these past two weeks, she'd seemed tired from her new job, cleaning church ladies' houses, and so probably didn't choose to get up. Or maybe Remy was calling. I quickened my pace going down the hall. He'd discovered my lie and perhaps was calling to give warning before coming forcefully to collect me. After all, I'd proven myself his by returning thus far. I picked up the receiver.

Father said he couldn't talk long. Eleven truckers were waiting. "Is your mother there?"

I went to her room. The door was locked. I hurried back to the phone. "She's asleep."

He seemed disappointed. I felt a sense of relief. If Mother talked to this stranger in his booth dialing long-distance, she might suggest a delinquents' home for me on the health teacher's advice. Father said he'd call in a couple of days. "When I get home, we'll do something fun."

As soon as I'd returned to bed and warmed the sheets to their original temperature, it seemed I had to get up. Laura woke me half an hour before the bus arrived, and I lumbered into the bathroom, splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, and dressed. My head ached, so I grabbed my purse to see if I had any aspirin left. I

unzipped a pouch, and the plastic pregnancy test fell out. A pink line crossed the middle. It reminded me how Father slashed each passing day with red pen on the calendar. I experienced a defining moment, what the English teacher, who'd probably had no such moments herself, called an "epiphany": I wasn't some mythical vampire, after all.

In my mind, I pictured Arnold first; then I saw Remy. The second would have to advise me how to handle the damage caused by the first. There'd never be a good time to tell Remy the news. I decided to do it now. Vampires could vanish without a trace—slip into crevices and seemingly cease to be—but I couldn't escape this punishment. I threw the test into the trash and left the bathroom.

As I entered the hall, I kicked Rowena's suitcase to get it out of my way before noticing the family's set of suitcases beside it. I didn't know Mother had been planning a trip. I wondered where she was going and why she needed so much stuff. She didn't have any friends, and our relatives, people she detested more than ever since the reading, lived in town. I ventured into the parlor to ask her these questions and saw her take the Austrian clock from the mantel and place it in a box. She was going somewhere for a long time. Father's rig was gone, and I didn't know when he'd be back. An envelope with the outline of some small object sealed inside lay on the coffee table. I felt confused.

"What's going on?"

"I'm—taking off."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Were you going to leave without the rest of us?" I said.

“I was going to write you a note after you’d left for school. Since you’re still here, you’ve saved me the trouble.”

“But wait, Rowena and Laura are going, and they get to skip school?”

Mother, like a bird caught on the ground by a cat, failed to meet my eyes. I took my coat from the closet, since it seemed as if everyone were leaving soon, and laid it over the couch. When I reached to hug Mother, she yielded to my embrace but looked toward the hall. When I didn’t let go, she stiffened her back, dug her nails into my arms, and pulled me off. I noticed Mother wasn’t wearing her wedding ring. Mother, I thought, I tried to get into your head and understand your reasons for jumping. I explored all possible provocations for your entering the well. Perhaps you simply needed a long, lusty drink of water! But have you considered my side? I said aloud to her, “Don’t you want me?”

“What is it you’re asking, Shine?” she said. “Be specific. I’ll try to understand.”

I remembered one July afternoon when I was nine. Mother was taking a nap. Laura and I were bored with playing with mittens transformed into sock puppets and woke her. She shepherded us outside to play a game called “statues.” The strategy was like tag, except the person tapped had to freeze into position. When Mother was caught, she turned into a Bloomingdale’s mannequin: Her mouth was open in a laugh; one arm was raised, the other stretched out behind. Mother played games all afternoon and got no rest. Today, she stood similarly motionless but without that look of gaiety. I looked at the ceiling and thought, God, you knew me before I was formed in my mother’s womb, yet why did you let me live?

Before Mother could ask me to repeat my question, Laura dashed into the parlor. Her hair hadn't been combed. In her arms, she carried a set of encyclopedias.

Mother's eyes left me. "You can bring one of those, Laura."

"I've only read them once," Laura said and dropped the books. She jumped up and hugged me. The remaining encyclopedia lay lodged between our chests. I heard someone shut my bedroom door and turned. Rowena approached us, encircled Mother's waist protectively, and reached to place her family picture, now encased in a frame, carefully in Mother's box. I glanced over and noted the other family pictures remained on the wall.

I headed toward the hall to pack my stuff. If I were ready, Mother would have to take me.

"Guess what?" Rowena, like a goddess of victory, was grinning.

I stopped and looked back at her.

"Last night, Remy came to say goodbye to me," she said.

"Why would he do that?" I said.

"Beats me," Rowena said, "especially after I'd just broken stuff in his shelter during an argument."

My legs were heavy from standing in one spot, and my feet had gone numb. I wiggled my toes in my boots. My tears grew hot and, as water from a tap, cascaded down my cheeks. My husband had protested to me he couldn't stand to be around Rowena. He'd promised he'd never again speak to her. She'd teased him, broken his things, and abandoned him, but he'd sought her out anyway.

"Are you two still dueling over the ghoul?" Laura said.

“We’re not fighting,” I said.

“That’s because I already won.” Rowena shrugged as if his visit were unexpected, sweet, and of little consequence.

“Raise your sights, girls.” Laura asked why anyone would waste her time with a Druid. Yet I couldn’t let Rowena’s encounter with Remy go so easily. I realized, as one who’d contracted herself to the Devil, there was nothing worse than a Judas. Rowena was deserving of punishment; I fantasized about what I’d do and addressed her. “I have something to say to you.”

“Pray do tell,” she said and laughed.

“You deserve my wrath.”

“Sounds scary.”

Mother, who’d been coming in and out of the parlor as she packed, must have heard our last remarks. She dropped a blanket on the floor, hurried over, and stood by Rowena. Mother’s face displayed a look of shock. I empathized with her protective nature. At times, Rowena seemed as delicate as a museum piece. Yet she should get what was coming to her. Rembrandt once remarked, having observed this situation at the funeral home, those closest were the ones to hurt us worst. For months, I’d lived side by side with the enemy. Cain slew his brother Abel, and God had put a mark on him, but perhaps Cain had no other choice but to act that way. Like the first murderer, I understood, in some half formed way, if I went so far as to kill my sister, I’d also no longer be able look upwards, toward God in the sun.

Mother ordered me to stop fighting with Rowena. “What would your father say if he walked in?”

“Who knows? He’d probably take her side.” Father aided me, for the first time, through his absence.

“He wouldn’t be happy with the way you’re acting,” Mother said.

“Me? What about you? At least I don’t tell people what I think of them through a letter.”

“You’ve never known my real circumstances,” Mother said, “and I don’t intend to explain them.” Her tears began to come. There hadn’t been a rainbow in the sky for a long time. God in the sun promised the rains would never again flood the earth, but He didn’t say I wouldn’t drown in my mother’s downpour.

I raised my fist and with too much anxiety to take aim, I thought about punching Rowena in the face. After I hit her, she’d look at me with disbelief and place a hand gingerly on her ear. Dots of blood would cover her index finger. Before she could exit and evade me forever, I’d jump forward with an uppercut and knock her again, this time in the jaw. There’d be a loud crack, like a tree branch breaking under the weight of the ice, as her head hit the carpet. I’d study her lying on the floor. With her head twisted at an obtuse angle and face bruised, she’d remain as beautiful as ever. Her hair would fall away from her shoulders like the robes of a queen. But Rowena, no beautiful Victorian corpse of Lucille’s novels, would shake the stars from her head and rise to one elbow. She’d begin to crawl.

At this point, my feelings of fear and guilt would no longer serve as a deterrent. I’d shuffle over before she could scamper away, get on my knees, and straddle her, and pin her wrists. Rowena would take a few deep breaths, lift and roll her head to stare at me, her assailant, and begin screaming. I’d sit on Rowena’s abdomen, make a slit in her

neck no longer than a paper-cut with my thumbnail, and bite her as if we were part of the same dream. Rowena would shriek I was insane and plead for me to let her go. She'd promised she'd never come back to Atwater; she'd never get in touch with Mother at all. I wouldn't flinch. Then for Rowena, an understanding of what I was about to do would apparently settled in. She'd begin to cry.

I remembered my stint as a vampire and longed to be immortal once more. If only I could take a bite and be changed into a supernatural being. My sister's blood probably possessed the sweetest taste. If a transformation were possible under any circumstance, it would be she who could aid me. As I bit Rowena, I'd remembered my book's claims: Some vampires used the gossamer thread of spiders to tie up their victims. Other vampires forced dirt down their victims' throats to get them used to the earth, where they were headed. Vampires could initiate an eclipse, make crops wilt, and drink the morning dew dry. I'd lean over Rowena's body but not look into her eyes. When she rolled her head back, that was the signal to bite: glamorous red, siren-cry red, red, scarlet as a bad word.

But at the moment, Mother brought me back to reality. She had other words for me. "Stop looking moony, Shine; you're going to miss the bus."

Ready for school as I'd ever be, I plodded down the driveway. I didn't know why I'd ever imagined bringing down Rowena. When I glanced back at the house before getting on the bus, I saw her and Mother watching me from the porch. I hoped Mother would still be there when I returned.

* * * * *

I found a seat easily on the bus, and soon the orange vehicle arrived in the school's half circle. I tried to look innocent and got off the bus as usual but then slipped away to Remy's shelter. In his house's drive, I didn't spot any cars beside the hearse. The undertaker's absence made me feel more at ease, but when I opened the trapdoor, Remy didn't welcome me. He didn't call my name and urge me to come down and kiss him. Without this usual greeting, I descended the ladder and felt ill with what I had to say.

Remy probably thought he'd seen and heard it all. Little could he have guessed I was carrying my cousin's child. Reasons for being in this odd predicament flew to my lips: I might have stopped the rape but I'd been flirting, I'd dived down the laundry chute, I'd lifted up my face to be kissed after landing, I'd been born alive. "I have a confession to make."

He was quiet, waiting. For a full minute, we stood there, facing each other like marble statues in some English garden of Lucille's novels. The days--past, present, future—spun around us like the closed and unconnected circles of hula hoops. The room's lack of clean air seemed suffocating. Dizzy, I hoped I might faint and thereby gain time.

Remy flipped on the radio.

"My secret's important," I said.

Just as quickly, he turned the music off. "What is it?"

I looked around. "What happened to your place?" The needle had been yanked off the record player. His collection of 33's was broken into halves and thirds. The TV set's face was smashed to leave an empty wooden box. This last act of vandalism was an atrocity, even if the TV broadcast mostly blowing, unvaried snowstorms. One shelf lay

tipped; onto the floor, the cans of vegetables had rolled. Remy kicked one marked “beets.” Toy soldiers littered the floor, fallen to their deaths in an attempt to protect the country. I strode around the room to survey the damage. Remy’s clothes were ripped and scattered across the floor. I picked up a pair of boxers and discovered they were wet. Someone must have poked a hole in the waterbed; a puddle covered the floor. I sat on the mattress without thinking. Water sloshed onto the pavement; I almost expected the flood to contain a school of fish. When I was young, I’d imagined piranhas swam within the perimeters of Virginia’s waterbed and, insisting to Arnold they really had teeth, poked a hole with a pair of scissors through the fabric to set them free.

“Don’t worry. You can’t make anything worse than it is now,” Remy reassured me.

“Who did this?”

He began to curse. The couch’s cushions were overturned. I rearranged them and sat down. By the sofa, I found a box containing handwritten poems and obituaries cut from newspapers. Letters spilled from the top. The intruder had crumpled some of the papers into balls and torn others in half. “What are these?”

“Stuff from Ella,” Rembrandt said. “She was here last week.”

“I wished I could have met her.”

“Yes.” He stared at me and shook his head. “Despite her problems, my sister is fairly normal. Your sister, on the other hand, is crazy. Do you know that?”

“I do.” Suddenly, I remembered Rowena had mentioned having a “tiff” with Remy. Rowena, who shouldn’t have been here in the first place last night, was dead to me, I vowed. I no longer had to defend her actions. But at that moment, I understood I

couldn't rely on my family either and needed to keep someone in my life. Instead of becoming enraged with Remy or turning away in apathy, I foresaw my chance of losing him forever and the necessity of forestalling this event. Here lay an opportunity to console Remy about his room's appearance and prove my worth, if only I didn't have such bad news to tell. I got up from the couch and looked around at the damage. Remy, in a voice that chilled me, promised my sister would pay. His eyes were shot with red. Although I wasn't on her side anymore, I laughed at the idea anyone could get even with my sister. By the time Remy felt lonely enough to approach her again (I understood there were limits to his affection for me), he'd find she was long gone.

I turned to face Remy. I still hoped to find in him the incalculable force that would complete me. We'd lasted thus far. Two nights before, in bed, I awoke and found him stuck against my side. He hadn't made me leave despite my laughably staged suicide. Would what Remy learn about me today be so unforgivable? I wondered if I'd be permitted to stay. Would he be sickened every time he attempted to make love to me and realized Arnold had been there before?

Not foreseeing a better time to share my secret, I told my husband the news in a tiny voice, scrunched my eyes closed, and waited to see if he'd hit me. Remy didn't become the bear of his former Halloween mask. He approached me slowly. Still, as I felt his hand on my cheek, I screamed, stepped back, and tripped over a can of Spam. Before I could fall, Remy caught me. One shoe had fallen off. I slid it back on as if to test the world's reality. I knew my savior would understand, but he was happy?

"I feel proud to be a father."

Remy was offering to adopt the child?

“If it’s a boy, let’s name it after me.”

My dreams ended with an element of sharp surprise, like the pop of a balloon at a birthday party. Remy had obviously failed to hear the rest of my disclosure. He looked ready to celebrate; I wanted to die. “I have to confess something, Rembrandt.”

“Go ahead.” He reached out, hugged my waist, and lifted me into the air. He said pregnant women were known to be emotional. Before the clichés could continue, I told him to put me down, removed his arms, and stood apart. Remy frowned and put his finger on his temple, as if thinking. “How do you know you’re pregnant? It hasn’t been a month.”

“The baby is Arnold’s.” I began to weep and walked backward away from him.

“The baby is how old?” Remy turned the radio down and pulled me toward the sofa by my hand. I insisted I didn’t make love to my cousin. “Arnold raped me.”

“Arnold? You picked that guy to have a kid with?” Rembrandt stumbled over the stool and kicked the lamp from the table. I began to repeat my revelation. My husband whispered he’d gotten the gist, “damn it.” He ran over to the remaining upright shelf and swept off the foodstuffs. A jar of molasses cracked and dripped its syrupy contents onto the concrete. Rembrandt yelled I shouldn’t have let that “interloper” touch me. I should have told Arnold “no,” run away, kicked, screamed, and torn my cousin’s eyes out.

“You make it sound easy.”

Remy turned his face away. “Did you just lay there?”

“The word is ‘lie.’”

“Lie, did you lie there then?” he said.

“I didn’t want sex, and that’s all you need to know.”

“Who knows, maybe it’s best between cousins,” Remy said.

“You know more about such things than I do. Why don’t I ask your sister? Or mine?” I ceased to hear Remy’s swearing and began to cry. I was lying on the basement’s concrete floor again. I couldn’t run. I couldn’t lift Arnold’s thrashing body. My cousin might as well have weighed a thousand pounds. I prayed, but my arms didn’t turn into wings able to fly. I was the ostrich.

My husband smirked, as if he’d absorbed my news in its entirety. I, too, had regained my composure. Nevertheless, I didn’t expect what he’d say next. Remy decreed our union null and void.

“You can’t go back on the promise of marriage,” I reminded him. No one in our small town had done this, not even my mother. A man of principles to the end (which he more than anyone recognized to be death), he nodded. “Then prove your loyalty, Shine.”

I felt surprised at this chance. I’d agree to anything he wanted. “What’s the solution?”

“To get rid of the problem,” Remy said. I didn’t have to ask what the ball and chain heavy enough to sink me in any three feet of water was. Still, I persisted in attempting to convince him to change his mind. “We could let it live,” I suggested weakly.

My husband listed “reasons” for the contrary. One, he argued, the baby might have birth defects. Second, it would desire its parents to love it, despite such flaws.

“The baby could turn out fine.”

Remy contended that the organism growing, its cells multiplying quickly inside of me, wasn’t human. He made his final point. “You should be having my baby instead.”

I couldn't fight anymore. If he wanted me to abort the baby, I would. Stunned with this necessity, my mind was blank as to methods. Attempting to will away the fetus hadn't worked, I now realized: The instinct to live was perversely strong.

In health class, the teacher stressed that girls should "avoid conjugal relations prior to marriage." When against her better judgment, the next year many turned into "whores," the double-chinned woman patted her pin-curled hair with pleasure and congratulated them on the consequences. The teacher had explained how to prevent a baby (abstinence) but never how to get rid of one. It hadn't been on the test; how was I supposed to know the best way to kill? The hotline operator would be of no aid here either, but there must be someone who could share her knowledge. Mother must have come up with a hundred plans to dissolve me, even if none of them worked.

I looked around the shelter, which must supply me with the tools, despite its chaotic state. In earlier days, I'd heard, country women used rusty wire hangers to remove embarrassing predicaments. Unfortunately for me, Rembrandt arranged his clothes neatly on plastic hangers. In the closet, his shirts had hung in the same direction, an inch apart, starched and pressed, until Rowena came along and pulled them down. I strode over to the TV, detached the antenna, and with my teeth bent one end in the shape of a "U." My tool looked like Captain Hook's hand. I cringed at the thought of inserting the wire in my private area, but I could ostensibly wiggle it around, catch the baby's ear, and pull it out. To gather courage, I thought about the Atwater pioneer who caught his ankle in a wolf trap. He cut his foot off with an axe and got away. Later that week, a blizzard came. The man died yards from his cabin after falling and losing his cane. This story did little to make me brave.

“Stop bothering with that fishing hook,” Remy said. “Your method isn’t going to work.”

I placed the bent antenna on the coffee table and let out a heavy breath. For one second, I thought he’d released me from my promise. Rembrandt appeared to ignore my, what I hoped were, pleading eyes and ventured into the bathroom. I followed and watched him rummage through the cabinet and then retrieve a box of rat poison from under the sink. As I stared at the box, I remembered a time when fleets of rats overran my house’s basement. Mother put a stop to their roving pirate ways by laying out traps. That part was easy, compared with what I had to do: put on the plastic dishwashing gloves and gather the dead rodents in an empty ice-cream bucket. On the dank floor, bodies lay stiff, tails curled into accusatory question marks. I took the corpses outside, and so our cat, Cuddles, wouldn’t uncover and eat them, put the rat in a tissue box, and floated them out to sea. The plague ship always circled the creek once before capsizing.

“Mix these pellets with water and drink the mixture,” Remy said.

“Those five-gallon jugs aren’t sealed. The water is more than twenty years old,” I complained. “I bet it tastes stale.”

“There’s a container of blood in the fridge if you’d prefer.”

The thought of mixing those two poisons, one for immortality and the other for death, made me sick to my stomach. “I’ll take water.”

“Suit yourself.” Remy left the bathroom to get a glass. The solution remained cloudy despite his attempt to stir in the pellets. He put the concoction in my hand as if offering me a drink at some bar. “This should do it.”

“This will kill me.” I almost let the glass slip from my hand.

“There’s been an unofficial study. Numerous three-year-olds have conducted experiments in regard to poison and discovered what amount is negligible,” Remy said. For his humorous attempt to mimic Laura, I almost threw the glass at him. My heart began to palpitate. All I wanted to do was to crawl into Mother’s lap. She wasn’t there, so I placed the glass down and wound my arms around Remy. After a few moments of standing stiffly, he removed my embrace. “Do you need me to stay?”

“You mean you’re not?” I wanted him but could tell by the way he shifted his weight from one foot to the other he wanted to leave for a while.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

“How long?” I said.

“Never mind. I was wrong to be angry about your pregnancy. You don’t have to do this.”

“Do you mean it?” I said.

“Yes.”

“So you understand? You’re not jealous?” I said.

“No. It’s your baby after all,” he said. “The situation doesn’t have anything to do with me.” The words hit my ears, and I understood: Rembrandt had seemingly removed himself totally from the situation. I felt a coldness emanate from him I’d not experienced before.

In analyzing my connection to Remy, I experienced a variety of emotions. I wanted to cry, yearned to rush and pound him, and desired to reach out my arms like a starfish and touch his finger. I didn’t have time to do any of these things. He shrugged, gave me a quick, bone-crunching hug, left the bathroom, and was gone. I heard him

climb the ladder, open the trapdoor, and tramp into the morning, headed across an ocean or across the block. I wanted to wait for his return, but I didn't believe he'd choose to do so before the procedure was over. Even if I somehow guessed my efforts to please Remy and return my life to normal were in vain, I still meant to go through with the abortion.

I couldn't endure looking at the glass filled with poison one moment longer. I exited the bathroom and sprawled on the couch. I might as well begin the procedure. Unlike God in the sun, I couldn't kill anything simply with my thoughts. I picked up the hook and Ella's box of writings. Words, especially simple ones concerning life and death, always comforted me. With my stand-in medical instrument and some engaging reading material, I returned to the bathroom and locked the door. I turned on the water in the tub and sat on the rim. The basin's balled feet featured lions with curly-haired manes. With mesmerized eyes, they watched me undress. The cat closest to my ankle seemingly roared and swished his tail. I nudged a towel over him with my toe before he could leap.

While the water rose, and air gathered steam, I thought of the monsters from my book. As a child, Countess Elizabeth Bathory experienced fits, during which time she'd bite her servants and throw chamber pots. She ordered one nanny to jump from a window. Her parents believed she was a victim of demonic possession. Her seizures, epileptic, and her temper, which she could have controlled, didn't decrease her value as a woman. Age fourteen and engaged to a man she'd never met, Lizzie took a peasant lover and became pregnant. When the child was born, Lizzie's mother sent it to a family compensated for being quiet about the matter. The following year, Lizzie married her royal fiancé. Her husband, even if she grew to love him, was always off, battling the Turks. Someone poisoned him as part of an "intrigue," which was, I gathered, a form of

entertainment. Elizabeth grew lonely; Elizabeth grew bored. Her nurse taught her black magic. Lizzie discovered the castle had a dungeon and punished her servants for their indiscretions. One winter, she made a wench take off her clothes and stand naked in the snow. The girl wouldn't expire quickly; Elizabeth threw water on her until she froze.

In her portrait, Lizzie had raven hair and eyes cold and blue as icebergs, and she remained vain of her appearance. One day, Lizzie hit a servant for pulling her hair while arranging it. She put her hand to her face, looked in the mirror at her blood-stained cheek, and observed she'd grown younger. Afterwards, Lizzie killed so many servants she had a difficult time finding new ones. When the case was brought to trial, the prosecutor presented a diary with six hundred names. Bathory was kept under house arrest--walled up in a castle room, buried alive. The accommodations provided a slot through which a servant slid food. Perhaps not satisfied with such paltry provisions, Lizzie drank her own blood. She was most certainly visited by the incubus. Lizzie was a bad woman, to be sure, but she never killed a baby.

In Remy's bathroom, I looked into the tub and for a second imagined the water had turned red. I felt a shock in my heart and prepared to run. Naked, I wouldn't even stop to gather my clothes before leaving the shelter. I glanced at the water again; it had turned clear. Relieved, I sat on the tub's rim, picked up Ella's box, rummaged through the obituaries and read a few. I dropped the papers, fluttering like feathers, into the water. The epitaphs floated until, like wet tombstones engraved with wavy names, they grew heavy and sank, rest in peace, to the bottom. I hoped Ella would write me an obituary if I happened to drown today.

I climbed into the lukewarm water, spread my legs, and placed my feet on the tub's opposing edges. My eyelids closed. I tried to assume the pose of one relaxed. My body sank into the water. My head felt waterlogged as it slid below the surface and was submerged. Strands of hair like strings of seaweed floated around me. My ears and nose filled with water. I tried not to think of my most basic need--air. I bit my tongue as my nose released its last bubbles. I extracted an arm, grabbed the hook located on the rug, inserted it into my vagina, and began my efforts at removing the baby. It felt as if I were trying to tear out my insides. The pain emanating from my being's depth seemed continuously new. I wiggled the hook out of my vagina and rose from the water as if baptized to some time and place new. The baby should have been dead, but if I wanted to live, I needed to rise for air.

I expected God in the sun had taken my child to Heaven. Before it departed, I wished I could have held it. I'd wanted to love it. At the last minute, I might have decided to keep it and waited for it to grow old enough to say my name. Instead, like Lady Macbeth, I was guilty of murder. In the bathwater, I expected to see the evidence of what my English teacher called the "foul deed." The water looked pure. The blood should have trickled slowly and sluggishly through my legs if it didn't come in a fast stream. "Oh well," I said to myself. I spotted the aspirin, which I'd wanted this morning, behind the toilet and climbed from the tub to retrieve it. There was no drinking water except that mixed with rat poison. I chewed the pill whole. My abdomen rolled with pain, but the hurt didn't seem bad enough, on the nurse's scale of one through ten, to constitute abortion. As I made ready to leave Remy's place, my mind filled with contradictory

thoughts, and my body was wounded if not necessarily empty. I threw on my coat. The bathtub ordeal was over.

When I lifted the trapdoor, the weather felt the coldest it had all winter. Still, I unbuttoned my coat and swung my arms back and forth to invite in the air, as I strode downtown. I left the man in the bakery truck, who waved too obviously, alone. My classmate, Horse, skipping school and driving aimlessly up and down the street, agreed to take me home. We rode without talking. The wind blew against the pickup, and I expected a storm. The trees clustered between the passing houses appeared as if they might be pulled out by the roots and soon tossed through the air. In the country, the fields lay frozen; otherwise, the farmers would have lost their topsoil. Such weather must be God's wrath; I turned away from the window, rested my hands in my lap, and made an effort to look innocent.

When we arrived at my house, Horse pointed out his gas gauge rested on empty and paused at the mailbox. As I got out of the vehicle, this time, I felt the cold and left my coat closed. The wind continued to blow with a hopeful sound. In the front yard, the sun searched through the elm's branches and stretched out its last feelers. But my mother's car was already gone.

I couldn't go back, but what was the point in moving forward? At that spot, I fell to the ground. I cared about the state of my body, since I was probably pregnant, but I wondered more about the shape of my soul. God had to be real. Faith was belief in things unseen. I closed my eyes and lay on my back. The sun ripped through the clouds and hit me with the full force of afternoon. I looked in the sky and sought God in the sun. Like the rich man and his camel too big for the entrance into heaven, I was destined to have

little success. My pupils penetrated the ball's center and then shriveled to the size of a needle's eye. The light shone brightly, but the rays of sunshine seemed cold.

The End

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VITA

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Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE SISTERS AND THE UNDERTAKER'S SON: A NOVEL
MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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MANUSCRIPT WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Pages in Study: 293

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English, Creative Writing

Scope and Method of Study: *The Sisters and The Undertaker's Son* is a first-person narrative about a fifteen-year-old girl, Shine, from a small town in central Illinois. The time is Christmas, 1979. At the opening of the book, Shine's family goes bankrupt, an older sister Shine has never met shows up on the doorstep and ruins Shine's birthday party, and a great aunt dies but fails to leave Shine's family an inheritance. In the book, Shine attempts to form various relationships, including one with her unhappy and secretive mother; her absent, truck-driving father; her attention-getting half-sister, Rowena; her precocious sister, Mosha; her unthinking cousin, Arnold; and the moody, dark undertaker's son, Rembrandt. Shine even sits atop the Second Baptist Church and waits for "God in the Sun" to appear to her. She wants to be recognized and loved, and she will resort to greater and more desperate measures to achieve her goal, including dropping out of school, getting married, and trying to rid herself of Rowena forever.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Toni Graham
