

DITTAMONODO  
(THE BOOK OF SPELLS)

By

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PREFACE

In the attempt to write a "critical introduction" for my first novel, Dittamonodo (The Book of Spells) I find myself in a difficult· virtually insane position. Were I to comment eruditely upon the debts I, as a writer, owe to other writers, expound upon their "influences" on the work, my critical introduction would be almost as long as the novel itself. I will simply say that, just as Celia Tripp--my funnel here for the surreal and swirling madness--admits, in Book III, I, too, have "copped" freely. I have, in point of fact, stolen stuff--or, rather, to be literary, "made allusions"--right and left. I have pranced to the literary corpses of Dante, Blake (poor schizophrenic William with those angels asquat the trees), Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Pope, Faulkner, Joyce, Baum, Carroll, Stein, and a cast, probably, of dozens more. I have rifled their mouldy purses and shaken the gold out, letting it fall to the floor of the crypt. (Shades of Poe!) This done, the only question remaining is: in that awful darkness there, do those coins roll and glitter on the granite, or merely thud?

This I will not decide myself.

It is the book's task--and yours--to decide the ultimate validity of the literature hinted at in the allu-



sions as it relates to death and human mortality; just as Celia must decide for herself which philosophy to embrace in Book III, so you must make a choice, too.

One of the reasons I have difficulty with writing a critical introduction to my own work is that, at some level deep inside, I simply do not believe in the beast. The critical introduction has always struck me as a sport, a freakish mutant (head twisted around, a single, blinking eye trying to look back through a mass of matted fur). I do not enjoy the company of such creatures, any more than did Henry James--though I know he went back as an old, old, creaking man and added them to his novels. One might mention here as well the New Critics. Though I am not one of them, I must agree with their abhorrent distrust of the preface. The book, somehow, must speak for itself! It should stand on its own hind legs (in a New York alley, off publisher's row, preferably), whip its covers wide like a tattered raincoat. It should flash one, sizzle or fizzle completely on its own merits, because--and this is important--all the talking in the world, fore or aft, will do no good if the book is bad, if it stinks like a rat in the attic or a body in Muddy Bit.

This is my third "critical introduction" to Dittamonodo (The Book of Spells). I prepared the first for inclusion with this dissertation copy of the novel and the second to be read at the defense. Although I was not requested to make any changes in the novel itself, everyone

on my committee hated both introductions. I wrote the introductions with an eye toward the book itself (what it meant to me), but my committee members shook their heads and said, "This is not what the book is about." In a sense, this was a rather gratifying turn of events for me, as a writer, because in the best literature I have ever read, each reader takes away from the work what is important to him. The book then "means" on a thousand (a million, perhaps) different levels; the reader "individualizes" the work, making it his own.

So, at this point, all I can really say about Dittamonodo (The Book of Spells) is that it is a novel about what it is to be human and to be alive. This was all I ever wanted to write about; it is why I became a writer in the first place, switching over permanently eight years ago from the practice of architecture to literature. To be human! To be alive! What a magnificently complex and confusing thing this is. This is the stuff of the best literature that has ever been written. And I feel proud and delighted to be, at least, attempting to produce writing that deals, at the deepest levels of all, with this subject.

I would like to thank the following people for their help with this project: Gordon Weaver and the members of my committee, Paul Klemp, Leonard Leff, and Robert Darcy. I appreciate their support and intelligent reading of the manuscript; I also am grateful that they allowed the book to evolve along its own course. I would also like to thank

a couple of other readers who, throughout the course of the book, offered some valuable suggestions: Marinelle Ringer and Harvey Homsey. For his emotional support, I would like to thank my husband, William A. Shute; without his faith in me, I doubt I could have written the novel; without his love, I suspect, Celia (and I) might have chosen a different ending of the three presented in Dittamonodo (The Book of Spells) than what Celia ultimately opts for. And, finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my family. My sister, Rebecca, has all along furnished me with emotional and financial help, enabling me to buy that extra ream of paper when I needed it (I used twelve for the drafts). And my parents, Thomas D. and Margie L. Westfall, have, as always, been my foundation, giving me the love, support, and wherewithal to do so much of what I have accomplished in my life, including this novel. Ultimately, Dittamonodo is for them, for the fact that our family was so vastly different from the Tripp clan, and that, I think, has made all the difference.

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DITTAMONODO  
(THE BOOK OF SPELLS)

Book I

Finally, this alone is certain: in spite of everything, I loved my brother. His madness, the horror he brought to Harlow, even the death of our family--none of it mattered when it came to this. I loved Jule all his life, I think even before his life, for when I've said it all, admitted everything, I no doubt loved Jule before he was born, when we like two small, secret fish swam together and gradually became something human. Probably, I loved him even then.

I have no memory of it, of course, but once Jule said he could recall the translucent cast of my skin there, how transparent I was and glistening. He

said my heart beat against my ribs like a tiny, clinching fist and its sound was the first he heard. I said that was ridiculous; it had to be Mother's heart if it was anyone's, hers being so much bigger than mine; but he said, no. It was my heart, and his, too, because didn't I know they beat together? Couldn't I sense they started at the same instant in the womb and would beat in tandem until we died? Sometimes, he said, it made him almost deaf, this sound our hearts made. It echoed in his skull like the noise of a savage, clubbing the walls of his cave.

Julian, you must know from the start, was always different. Odd, you could say mad as a hatter, mad as a March hare, "touched by the hand of the devil hisself"--as I've heard it said in Harlow--delusional, schizophrenic. It doesn't matter the term you use. But it isn't fair to say, as Lee did (Lee, who was then still my husband, was drunk in the kitchen, barely bleeding, but so distraught his cries woke the baby), that I never saw Jule for what he was, that, in fact, I never looked at anything unpleasant or ugly close up but always from a distance, always standing back with one eye shut, the other corrupted by all the things I've read and want to believe. It isn't fair to say I wouldn't see a tiger until it had bitten down to bone.

That's what Julian did. He was the great seer,

the great story-teller, the shaman who made a myth out of everyone and everything that ever hurt him. He was the one who believed that life, if it was like anything at all, was most like a story. He actually believed you could find the beginning and the end by sorting out the confused middle. At least, I think that's what he was aiming at in his talks with God--with Balaam, Orku, Noab the Great, Snowbelly (most of all with Snowbelly who, though a lesser angel in the scheme of things, had quite considerable talents: could cough at will and whither leaves on the limb, could urinate buckets of sleet to drive sedans from the road). My brother, not me, was the one who turned it into a fiction. It was his disrupted thoughts, his rituals, his ugly, little mortifications of the flesh--it was Jule himself who called upon the Eternal and got an answer. God knows, I never did.

Sometimes now, when I think back to those years in Harlow before I ran away (and they force me here at the hospital into thinking this), I see myself as a ghost. A brown-haired, tiny spectre along for the ride. It would be excessive to say I felt I had no identity there. Even ghosts, if they can see themselves, have that. But there were so many times in Harlow when I wasn't Celia, not really Celia, a person on my own.

I'd walk to Hazlitt's Drug for a peach ice cream

and someone would say, "There goes the little Tripp girl." Old men who loitered on the square would look at me and see my grandfather who'd loaned--or refused--them money for a barn. If my brother had done something recently (say, in the summers, when Jule became as passionate as Orku, as green and alive with ideas as the god himself, a royal pain), it wasn't Celia then who sat with her legs swinging from the cannon in the park; it was "that Jule's sister"--the one who was so very good, when he was so very bad.

In those days, it was all a very neat, precise system, comparing me, yin and yang, to Jule. It was the kind of easy cataloging people in small towns like Harlow, Oklahoma are supposed to be famous for. Sometimes, I admit, even I fell into it. The only problem was, it wasn't true. It wasn't that I made a conscious choice to be good--or, God knows, that Julian made the decision to be bad. (How could he, after all, with Balaam tossing up his withered hands, saying, "I give up, kid--I give up"?) It wasn't, you see, that I ever made the choice to do right. It was a far more common thing than that. Quite simply, I was terrified.

Exactly when it started, this fear, I don't know. Sometimes it seems it was always there: the trembling heart, ice in the bowels. As a small child, I can remember literally quaking when an awkward, dirt-rough farmer,



a friend of my father's, bent down to say hello. I recall my tongue swelling like a fruit in my mouth when someone bigger (my mother on the stairs, my grandfather with his quizzical cigar) asked me a question. My older brother, Eddie, used to chase me through the wheat. There were thunderstorms and the howl of night trains, a revival once in a tent where I felt skewered, where I looked down and for a terrifying instant could see Brother Wendel's flames licking up beneath my seat, actually felt myself slipping. And there was Julian, of course: all the broken windows, the blue tick pup in the slop jar (dead--so I must believe that Snow was behind that, too), the small, encrusted cuts that etched, as if by magic, a tracery on Jule's arms. Always, you see, there was this great fear inside. And it was this that made me quiet and good.

Once, when Snow had said something particularly horrid to Jule, something about me that was awful and untrue and made my brother cry, I went to the mirror in Mother's room to see the fear myself. I climbed on top of her bureau and for the longest time that winter morning--maybe an hour or more--just sat there, staring. I looked at the small round face, the gray eyes gazing back, the lips that were a little too thick to be pretty. I stared so long in the mirror, it began to seem to be not my face there at all, but another child's, the image of some

other little girl who lived somewhere else, who didn't know anything about angels or death and wasn't the least afraid. Only then was I able to control it. With this trick, I could mask the fear, make the pale flesh passive, no matter what, placid as milk. (And it was a trick; of course, it was. A fabrication, make-believe, utter pretense, but it worked. And it was almost surprising how well it worked, how quickly. For a little while later that morning, when Granddaddy was standing in the doorway to Mother's room, amused--"Admirin' yourself in the lookin'glass, pun'kin?" he asked--I was able to forget about Snow for a time. I could look at my grandfather calmly, the fear completely swallowed. I could nod my head, yes, Granddaddy, yes, of course, and the old man never saw it was a lie.)

In any event, I believe this is why they thought well of me in Harlow. Because of this trick with my face. When they heard me thank Mrs. Hazlitt for the nickle ice cream (Essie Hazlitt who the day before had yelled at Jule) or saw me look demurely at my shoes in Granddaddy's bank (this, when he was quizzing me) they no doubt thought, How polite. But perhaps I'm imagining this, too. In truth, when they saw me walk into town in my cotton skirt, my hair combed perfectly straight and baretted into the shape Mother liked, they might have been thinking of their beef in the freezer, of a soap

opera, or nothing at all.

All I really know is that I ran away on the inside first. I let myself retreat.

If you want the truth (and that is all I'll tell you here), I let the bigger things--my parents and grandfather, Eddie, Jule's ghosts, even Lee, when it was time for that--stun me into a kind of silence. And if my falling into stories was a retreat, too, a trick of mind to match that of the face, I might now admit it. But you must know this, as well: if it was bad to fill the silence with books, to pretend as a child I really lived in Kansas and would, with the next storm, be blown somewhere else, if it was terrible to secretly name myself Alice or Wendy or see my body as little Beth's and lay on my bed in the hot afternoon pretending--no, believing--I would not live to see twenty and therefore needed no plan, if it was awful to have no voice of my own, then Jule was the only one honest enough to see it and tell me I was wrong.

And that's what you have to know. Right from the start, you must understand that most of the time, he was fine. Better than fine, actually, because he was smarter than they were, more intuitive, accurate, quick as a fish in water. My brother and I came from the same egg (I do believe this). We were not just twins, but identical-fraternals, for he looked so much like me. We had as children the same low timbre in our voices. Our fingers,

slender, exquisitely sensitive things, were identical, too, except that Jule, when he touched the down of a nestling or the springy vein of a new leaf, did it with a kind of reverence I have never seen anywhere else--not even in my own child, who is curious and quick, too, and honestly touches joy, as well as leaves, with her hands. This you must know about feeling. It is important to know that when we were children, Jule and I, he would sometimes creep into my bed and pull the story from my face (Alice's adventures, the fraudulence of Oz, Guinevere lanced to the heart); he would touch me as if to say, This is honest, this is real; and the gray eyes that looked into mine were my own.

So when he said--and this is the first really crazy thing I remember--that he could feel colors on the wall, that the yellow was slipperly like oiled glass, the red so prickly and mean it burned his palm, I thought it was a game. I didn't see any colors there. Beyond our scant shadows, the wall in the nursery was empty and white. And I certainly didn't feel anything with my fingers, except plaster, though I tried. Jule said the red was hungry; it was crawling onto the yellow, eating it up. He said, Can't you see how hot it's getting, in the middle, where it eats? I think I laughed. I told him, Well, look up at that purple on the ceiling, Jule--which he did, then looking back at me, genuinely confused, said What?

What, indeed.

What was it that happened--to Jule, to me and Annie in the attic? What in hell was it that happened? It's been months, and honestly, I still don't know.

I think about it all the time, of course. I really can't help but think about it, because for one thing it's all they ever want to know here. Their questions echo off sterile tile; even at night, they do not turn off the lights in the hall. They want to know where he is. Where is Michael, Celia? they ask, again and again. Where is the child? But I tell them, That's not the right question. It isn't even close.

Still, I try to do what they want here. They say if I'll just remember it right, if I'll face it and say it as it happened, it will be better. The pain in my fingers, under the nails, will start to fade away. I want, desperately, to believe them.

And I've tried. Really tried.

No matter how I feel, I try to make my face as placid as milk, as expressionless and bland as the walls. I let the doctors' white tablets dissolve on my tongue, instead of spitting them out (as some of the others do--Mr. Falconer for one, who launches into furious diatribes, who screams at the orderlies Dis, dis, dis, dis! and starts scuffles in the medicine line). Look, I try to cooperate and do what they want. It's the only way I'll be saved. So I sit in groups Falconer and Charlotte and Warren (who roams the halls with tales of Betty Ford, I sit in groups and listen

to stories. In the mornings, I dig up worms in the lettuce patch (this is therapy, too). I even go to the crafts room and make trashy, clay pots--though I resent it if the therapist says of them, "How nice." These ceramics I do are, anyone could see it, odd, lumpy things. They shatter very easily, and I hate it when after I've thrown one on the wheel, the gray clay dries beneath my nails. It's cold and I have to pick it out with whatever I can find, because it hurts. It gets hard like dried, river mud (I've told them this), and it hurts me very much.

But that isn't important. It isn't the real issue, which is still, of course, a question: What happened? (How is it I come to be here?)

Certainly, I know the basic facts of the situation, how it began, or rather--to borrow a distinction from Jule--how it began in this part of the middle.

I know that on Christmas Eve, my parents and Granddaddy were downstairs getting ready, fixing the punch, putting carols on the stereo in the big parlor, that sort of thing. I know that Eddie and Pam and their little boy, Michael, had already arrived with their presents. They were all dressed up and, I would guess, jovial. Somehow, I imagine Michael racing from room to room in the cavernous house, just as Jule and I had done other Christmasses; I imagine him frantic with joy about Santa, though really he was too old, at eight, to still believe in that. In any case, it's

what I'd like to believe, that it was all very typical and festive that night, with Granddaddy lighting a stogie in his chair, with Mother remarking that the punch needed nutmeg and Daddy, for once, answering back. I can't quite visualize what Pam and Eddie were doing, but I want to believe they were happy in those moments before Jule came down from his room.

I do not think I need to say what Julian did that night, not in any detail (though sometimes the images come to me in my sleep; I dream I am screaming--or rather, I'm not, but want to--and wake up). In any event, I didn't see it. I was still in Nebraska, happy, putting stars on the tree for Annie. So I didn't see what happened. And were I now to relate the colors that night, it would be like Jule's red on the wall again, purely fictive and dishonest (in spite of what the psychiatrists say). It is enough simply to tell you that Michael survived. He was all right the next morning when the Darbys came up the hill to wish my family. . .whatever it is people wish in the season. At least, he was still alive, inexplicably unharmed. I believe he was playing with a toy truck when Virgil and Musette found him. I know that--afterward--he had opened some of the gifts.

I know other things too, mostly trivial. I know they never found the shotgun Jule used (it was Granddaddy's double-barrel, taken from the gun case). They did find Jule, of course, that very day. He was still on the property,

in fact, sitting under a tree near Muddy Bit. It was so cold the creek had a layer of ice, and Jule's fingers were almost frozen to the handle of the shovel. (He had tried, apparently, to make a hole near the house, had given up on the frozen earth and gone to the Bit where he broke through the ice with the tool and his feet and almost lost them both). In any case, he offered no resistance to Sheriff Randall or his men. But then, by that time, whatever resistance he might have offered them would have been--what? A toying? A game like children play with crashing trucks?

I know that Lee spent all day Christmas driving up to the little town in Nebraska where I lived, where I had worked (a grade school librarian) for almost five years, raising Annie alone. I certainly didn't expect to see Lee that day, standing in the door pale as ash, paler than the snow that drifted around him, paler even than the words "something terrible"--which was all he could say for a while.

And so, we came back. My child and I came back to Harlow, came back into something so far beyond what I understand or have the capacity to believe that I still-- nine, ten months later--have no real clue about it, except this. (And I've tried to tell them this here. I've said, Damn the pots! Damn the lousy, clay pots! They have nothing whatsoever to do with anything. . .can't you see?)

But listen. If I had to find the core, the nucleus, burrow down and find the seed that would explain it, that



would come closest to the truth, it would be this story:

When Jule and I were seven or eight, my grandfather took us out to a farm some miles beyond Harlow. It was early spring. I think it was the first really warm day, because I remember being hot, as well as bored, sitting on the porch with this old couple. They were talking about baseball and rain and the prospects this year for cheat grass spoiling the harvest. The woman gave us iced tea, and though I didn't like it with so much lemon, I drank it anyway, out of respect. After a while, the conversation lulled and started turning toward money. I could see Granddaddy "sharpenin' up his shrewd-nerve" (a family jok, though true; you actually could see a change come on his face). So I asked if we could go and play.

He said we could, but we were not to go far or get lost. So Jule and I skipped off the porch, went out beyond the garden to the fields nearby. They had just been turned and still had that deep, earthy smell. Jule and I started running between the furrows, our feet making clouds of fine, brown dust. The sky above us was so azure and still, the warmth on our skin so pleasing, it almost seemed as if we were the only two people in the world that day, racing along the straight even rows--I think I was even ahead of him, laughing, when suddenly he caught sight of something that made him stop.

Jule cried out to me, and when I stopped too, I turned and saw him standing in one of the valleys, holding

something in his hand. It was a snake (I don't know which kind), sheared in half. Where the front part was, with the head, I don't know; probably it got buried beneath a crest. But what I can't forget is the image--how Jule looked, his thumb and forefinger tenuously pinching the flaccid thing, a small globe of what seemed like red jelly, dangling off the end.

The expression on my brother's face was one I would see many times again (it was there even in the attic with Annie and Michael). He wasn't exactly shocked. He wasn't even what I would call afraid. What he was, if I had to put a word to it, was caught.

He was horrified, clearly horrified, to be touching the bloody thing; there was a part of him that wanted to throw it down. But there was another part, too, equally strong, an aspect of his mind that wanted to show it to me, to lift it up as Moses did the serpent--no, stronger even than that--wanted to throw it in my face and force me to look at the dead thing he had found. He couldn't both, and so, was caught.

It lasted only a second or two--actually, it was so tenuous a moment it almost doesn't seem real at all--then Granddaddy was coming up behind Jule in the furrow. He was only slightly annoyed when he told Jule to "drop that damned thing."

It fell into the dirt and Granddaddy grunted slightly as he toed it with his boot. He looked at me (this was

before I learned to be placid). He frowned a little. He brushed a glimmer of sweat from his forehead and then, to nobody in particular, it seemed, said, "Cut worm forgives the the plow."

A moment later, he said we were finished, so come on. He turned and started walking down the valley he had come, the fine dust clinging slightly to his pants.

As we went back, I could see on Juley's face he didn't understand (not the figure of speech, of course; he knew perfectly well that Grandfather didn't really think that bloody half-thing in the furrow was a worm). As we walked back to the house, I tried to step in Granddad footprints. Juley was smashing a crest. I could smell the dust and occasionally, in that dust, a breath of new pasture grass.

"Still," Jule said, in a voice so small I almost didn't catch it, "it couldn't really know it was a plow."

## Chapter One

The rabbit came up with the light.

This was Jule's idea, that fear was an animal living in your belly. It was tiny and warm and clawless (I had always seen it as a white rabbit), and most of the time, it just lay there, curled up, hardly breathing. It didn't know much. In fact, it was rather a stupid beast until someone came along and hit you with a rock or chased you through the trees to the Bit, and then it knew. It knew plenty. It quivered and started thumping to come up.

Mine came up with the lights on the hill. Though it was nearly midnight, all the windows, from

the ground floor to the attic, were blazing in the snow. I saw it when Lee turned from the highway onto the frozen road. I saw that even the Christmas lights were on and blinking from the hill, and for the first time in a day and a half, astonishingly, something inside began to quiver. I almost felt sick.

Annie was whining in the back seat, "This Grans?"

But the confusion was so intense--how could there be lights?--I couldn't answer. For a moment, I even wondered if Lee had lied.

Then he looked at me, his high forehead reflecting the glow of the dash. He was clearly exasperated. I could see, even beneath the exhaustion in the way he sat and the fact he was fighting with himself not to show it, he was still angry I hadn't told her better. Worse, he was furious I wanted to come here at all.

"Can I sleep with Cherry at Grans?"

What I had told her in Nebraska was they were gone. She seemed perplexed. Her brown hair tumbled across one eye as she fingered the nose of her doll. Grans had "gone away," I'd said.

Later, at a gas station somewhere in Kansas, while she slept in the car, Lee came over to the

restrooms and when I came out, he said, "Lord, Celia-- she's old enough to know the word 'dead.'"

What I wanted to say was, How would you know?

But there were two old men standing near us, watching. They weren't even pretending not to listen. And the truth was, I knew Lee didn't mean to be cruel by what he said. He was just so struck by what had happened, he was gray. He seemed too old for thirty four, too tired, but perhaps this sprang from something else--that little scene at the truck stop when he'd told Annie to wash her hands before she ate and she just stood there, in the aisle, like a stone. It was so obvious, her question: Who is this man? To order me about. Maybe it was this that made his face seem old. In any case, that beaten look was there, so all I did outside the restrooms was touch him. And it came as a surprise, even to me. But I did touch him--just for a second, my hand cold and awkward on his arm. I looked down at the dirty, scuffed floor and said, "Lee, she's only five."

Later, when we were on the road again, the snow let up for several miles. The country was flat and white, an occasional house or silo in the distance, but beyond that nothing. I cracked the window to get some air and said, "Annie, they've passed over. Do you know what that means?"

In the back seat, doll on her lap, she looked very solemn. She nodded her head. A moment later,

she said, "Passed over what?"

"Like Snitch," I told her.

"Oh."

I lit one of Lee's cigarettes, as much for the acrid feel of smoke in my throat as anything, and I remembered the way her fingers looked as she stroked the old cat's head, sun streaming over both of them through slats in the window. She had been so hopeful.

"They got sick and stopped eating, Mommy?"

I looked out onto the fields. There was so much white, it almost blinded me. I couldn't think anymore. I said, "Yes, darling. Something like that."

I didn't know what he wanted me to say to her. Annie had never met Jule, at least not when she would have remembered him. She didn't know Snowbelly (any of Jule's gods) or thumping rabbits that didn't live save in the forest of cartoons. It's terrible to say, but she didn't even know "Grans"--any of them--except as names on birthday presents, occasional cards.

What Lee didn't understand, what he couldn't fathom, because he hadn't been there, was how much hope there had been in her fingers, how great the belief on her face. She'd loved that damned cat, more than anything, but he died. He stopped breathing in spite of the medicine spooned on his tongue, his lips curling into a parody of a grimace, a tortured smile that stayed with me for the longest time. The damned cat just stopped breathing.

And what was I to do then?

The night I found him, stiff beneath the limb of the scratch post, I couldn't bear it. In the pale, unmoving fur, I saw her face, how she would look to me for an answer in the morning--and what would I say? What could I say in the face of her tears, her not really, Mommy, not Snitch, her fingers nudging him to make him move? Honestly, I felt half out of my mind. I paced around the living room, trying to come up with something to do. In the end, I hid him.

His fur was still slightly warm when I slipped in into the plastic sack. I took him out in the dark to the trash. Had he known, Lee would have hated me.

As it was, the next morning, I hated myself. Annie ran from room to room, calling for him. She asked me, and I said first, "Oh, I don't know." Then: "He's around." Then (God, how I began to despise myself): "Snitch got better last night and went out. Maybe he's lost."

Annie ran out to the garden. She tore me into shreds with her cries of "Snitchy!", her searching beneath this bush and that. Finally, I couldn't stand it any more. I started crying, in spite of my best efforts not to. I stole out to the garbage can, dug him out from beneath the canteloupe rinds. It was one of the worst things I've ever done, sneaking him back into the house so she wouldn't see, allowing her to think by my silence (no, worse than that: by my feigned surprise, by the wetness of my cheeks) that I'd just discovered him, beneath the couch.



Lee would never have understood this. As it was, all I understood for a long time was the guilt, an oppressive, foreign chill when I looked at her, when I smiled in response to her childish, totally blind trust in me (my lips curling up like the cat's). To make it up, I got her Cherry, the most expensive, though perhaps not the prettiest, doll I could find. Annie was playing with her most of the trip home, to "Grans."

It was already evening when we made it to Oklahoma. Lee and I didn't say much to each other, though every once in a while, he'd ask how my back was, if I wanted to stop for a minute, stretch my legs, rest. I told him I was fine. And to be truthful, I didn't feel any pain. Normally, a car ride this long should have sent me into spasm, the muscles in my back constricting into a Gordian knot of anguish. I had some aspirin (having long ago shucked the Percodan and Demerol; that, no easy feat), but the bottle was buried in one of the suitcases in the back, and the truth was, I didn't feel much of anything. Shock, you could call it; but whatever it was, I was glad for it, grateful for the numbness, the feeling of being even less than half there. I was able to sit back and float, to listen, with half a soul, as Annie sang (softly) car-songs--row, row, row your boat; "fairy zhock-a"--low, nonsense tunes to Cherry. I was able to hear her breath coming softly in the darkness when she finally fell asleep.

She didn't wake until we began golting up the hill, the colored bulbs twinkling down on us. At the top, Lee parked the car, then hesitated. His hand rested on the key. In a low voice, he said, "Celia--this is crazy."

I didn't answer that. I felt as if I would like to cry so near the house, but oddly there didn't seem to be enough behind my eyes to do the job. I just sat there, staring at the string of lights on the porch. Vaguely, they seemed obscene.

"To take the child in there, Celia," Lee said, "when God knows we've got plenty of room."

"I know," I said. "You've both got room."

He groaned a little at this, and really I couldn't blame him. I was the one, after all, who'd left.

"That's not what I mean at all," I said quickly. "Don't you see?" I asked, a kind of helplessness (I couldn't keep it out) creeping into my voice. "This is my home."

We argued for a moment--nothing heated or even terribly felt, just a tired banter, as if between machines, preset in their response. Finally, he began to shake his head. He sighed, "All right. All right. Whatever you want." He turned off the engine, then hesitated again. He touched my coat for a long moment. "But wait here a minute, will you? I'll go see what's happening."

I had no idea what he was talking about. It was like the lights in a way, so unexpected that anything should be happening here at all. Lee got out of the car and slammed

the door. A gust of cold air poured in.

When he was gone, Annie leaned over the seat. In a voice that was almost hushed, she said, "Mommy, why's he so mean?"

I shook my head and turned to watch him taking the steps two at a time. All the curtains in the big parlor were drawn, but when Lee knocked on the door, I saw a shade of movement within.

When the door opened, it was Doc Eisenhower who came out, his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. He stood there in the yellow light of the doorway, stood there stiffly, with something like a towel in his hand. Lee started talking to him and I could see Doc peer out to where we were sitting. He turned back, sharply, to Lee, and began vigorously shaking his head, side to side. Lee was saying something else, but Doc threw up his hands, as if disgusted, turned round and went back inside, closing the door.

For a moment, Lee stood on the porch, slowly rubbing his hands. Suddenly, he bounded back to the car. Another frigid blast, then he was in, starting the engine. To Annie, he said, "Sweetie, you and your mother are coming to stay at my house for a while." His voice was very strained. Almost as if it were an afterthought, he added (and it was clear, this was only something to say, some noise to fill the empty air in the car), "You'll like it there."

I started to say something.

But he cut me off with a shaky gesture of his hand. He gripped the wheel, as if for support, and began slowly backing the car around. "Celia, Queenie Hartsmith's in there with Doc."

"Queenie?" I said, not at all understanding. Annie was now clinging to my shoulders, jerking on me. It was so black at the bottom of the hill and the motion of the car, the thud, thud, thud as it crept down the frozen dirt road, so rhythmic, I had to steady myself, my hand on the arm rest, my feet pushing up on the floorboard; it was almost sickening. "Queenie, Lee. . .why?"

For a second, he was silent, his face contorted, grimacing. Then, almost in a whisper, almost as if he were saying it to himself, he said, "Oh, God. God dammit. God damn his soul to hell."

Days later, of course, in Lee's house it would become obvious to me. I would know what Queenie Hartsmith, the town's only mortician following the death of her father, was doing. I would know what she was doing with Doc in the middle of the night.

Sylvia was at the kitchen counter one afternoon, trimming the membrane from some liver. In her sweet, unintelligible way, she was trying to make conversation with me. She was talking about Lee, his habits, his this and that. When I didn't respond, she began talking about

the girls' basketball team at the high school, telling me how it wasn't nearly as good as when she had been captain three years ago. She wasn't paying much attention to the knife, and at one point, a small red piece squirted off the cutting board. Sylvia said, "Shit."

Then, with the grace of an athlete, she grabbed a wet dishcloth, bent down and scooped it from the floor.

## Chapter Two

The worst part was their pity. Those first days at Lee's I had to mask myself against it, hardening my face simply to look at their eyes.

At first, they seemed to come continually. They sat in the overheated out, embarrassed, people I had known my whole life. And it became a ritual almost, their consolation--sadness and shock spilling out into hopeless words. So very sorry. Nightmare. What can be said? Sometimes, with the old ones, there would just be knowing silence. A spidery hand might nest around mine.

I would sit through all of this in the small living room, nodding as if I knew what they meant, what their hands were trying to tell me. But what came through

most wasn't sympathy, though clearly they tried hard enough in Harlow to give it. What I really noticed were the trivial things: the smell of wet, wool coats still buttoned, perfumes that lingered after the women had gone.

In the other room, Annie had the tv on much of the time. The slam, bam, take that, you creep of cartoons floated in, battering stooges, a game show's compulsory laughter. On the dining room table, partly visible from my chair, food in tin wrap began piling up. Sylvia, amazed at the sheer abundance, began haunting the front door. And after a while, it was just too much for me. Oddly, the old injury started hurting again, my back growing stiff and sore, the pain radiating to my neck. I would sit there and forget to nod sometimes, though I don't think anyone noticed. Even Brother Wendel when he came and, holding my hand, said "the will of God" and such probably thought I was listening, taking comfort in his words-- when, in truth, all I could see was the cheap scene behind his head, Sylvia's matador, painted on black velvet, sticking a bull.

Had there just been the pity, it would have been intolerable. But those first days were surprisingly full. There was so much I had to think about and be responsible for, so many people who wanted answers and direction. Not just Annie, which I was used to, but others. Again, in my life, there were others.

Doc came over early the first morning. I was still in my bathrobe (actually, it was Lee's, mine having been forgotten at home), and Lee and Sylvia left us to drink coffee alone in the kitchen. I hadn't spoken with Doc, of course, for five years. By now, he was well into his seventies, but somehow he didn't seem older to me. If anything, his face seemed a shade more youthful, his sharp features having become more refined in the interval. There was still not an inch of slackness about him, so teutonic he was, even in gesture. One of the first things he said, after we sat down, was, "Celia, I'm sorry. I tried."

I nodded, and it didn't really matter what he meant; with him, it would be the truth.

"I tried to tell them about committing Jule, but your mother"--and here, a trace of childhood German slipped out, he was clearly that upset--"she would have nothing whatsoever to do with it. Or your grandfather either."

"Then it really was much worse? Toward the last?"

He thought for a moment. "No, I wouldn't say that. I don't know, really. Perhaps." He sipped, furtively almost, at the mug. "What I meant was,



I've been speaking with them, on and off, for years. Even before the accident. And afterwards, I thought then, that with your leaving, it would have been a good thing to find a place for your brother."

I looked down at the table. "And Daddy? Did you talk to him about it, too?"

"Of course! In fact, he was the one I talked to most. Your father," he said, "was quite a complicated man, very intelligent. Quiet, yes, but still I felt he could deal with Jule on a realistic level--something your mother could not. I will say this for Edward, he was quite a logical man."

I closed my eyes. Logical? Logical to be a ghost? And that was how it was, really, Daddy forever planted in a chair, so silent when Jule came home with a note from school, when there'd been a fight, even that time when Jule came to the bank like an Indian, his cheeks striped with dung. Always, on my father's part, this mute contemplation. Perhaps it was simply he let my mother be the one to pace around. Perhaps it was laziness--no, it wasn't that--him letting her argue for the both of them.

I swear. I swear to God, Edward, if anything happens to that child, I won't survive;(she would say).

To this, silence.

Or, It's a lie! They're jealous of Jule because he's so bright. That's why they make these. . .these terrible things up!

And not even a nod.

My God, Ed. Don't you love your own son?

Logical? I hated it. And then Granddaddy would jump in, Mother manipulating him, winding him up as if he were a toy: All that kid needs is a job. Oh, yes, indeed, a job. And all the while, Daddy sat, mute as a ghost, as if we weren't his family at all.

"You shouldn't blame your father, Celia," Doc said, and I was surprised it was that obvious. "I'm a physician, but even I am not equipped to deal effectively with a problem like Jule's. I told them that. A hundred times. I told your mother, it takes years of special training. . .even then, we do a lousy job."

"He did see doctors," I said, trying to control the anger in my voice.

"Oh, sure. But only from time to time, and never long enough, I think."

"And how long is long enough? His entire life?"

"I don't know, Celia. . .I really don't. Perhaps it's an academic argument anyway, treating this with psychiatry, probing the past. The best scientific

theory" and here, he gave a sad, almost disgusted shrug, "--no, it's not even that. A guess. The best guess now is that schizophrenia's a genetic disorder, a scrambling, before birth even, of the brain's cells. Certainly, we know it runs in families, occurs generation after generation, not unlike heart disease or cancer. Thank God, there are medications that sometimes help--"

"He took those."

--and sometimes they don't. Or, in Jule's case, their effect is so strong as to diminish personality--"

"He was a zombie! He couldn't even read--"

--and that's not good either, Celia. No one would say it is."

I could feel myself now getting very angry; at what, I wasn't precisely sure, but it was there, boiling up, so strong it made my hands almost tremble. And that was like Jule, too, on the doctor's medications, the shaking limbs, the frightened, utterly lost, eyes, the words that came slurred and barely audible: "Wha're they doin' me?" What, indeed--with their Haldol and Thorazine, all the pretty pills--what, indeed, but killing him before my eyes? "All right," I said, trying to keep it civil, "all right. But what happens now? Lee said there'll be a hearing in Jefferson."

"Yes," Doc said. "I've already spoken with the

prosecutor there. I've explained the situation with your brother, as much as I could, but I think they understand. The judge will want a complete psychiatric evaluation before proceeding further. In a few days-- if they haven't already--they'll be transferring him from the county jail to Vinita, where the state hospital is. My guess would be, when the final report comes back, the order will be for indefinite committment."

"No trial?"

"I wouldn't think so," he said. "But listen, that's a blessing."

Our coffee was growing cold; then Doc said, not unkindly, "Enough of this." He asked me how I was sleeping. I told him there were dreams. "Normal," he said. "But do you want something?"

I must admit, though it made me feel small, even thinking it, the idea was tempting. Something to swallow, a hole to oblivion. I set the cup down on the table, and for the first time in a couple of days, I think I even smiled. "You. . .you doctors are real wizards," I told him. "But I don't think there's anything in your black bag for me."

Before he left, we talked about Michael. Eddie's son, he said, was a bright, happy, unaffected little boy.

"Genuinely an engaging child," he said. The problem was he was still this way, bright and happy even now, three days after the deaths. It was almost unbearable to think about what he must have seen that night in the house.

As it was, he was now staying at Doc's. "Heddy is lavishing the kid with affection, love," he told me. "And, for the rest, it's shock. Of course, it's very deep shock." Doc seemed concerned about it, but not overly so; he was, at least, not frantic about it, as I would be if Annie, in similar circumstances, behaved as if nothing at all were wrong. "Often, Celia," he said, "with great trauma comes great denial. This is what Michael's doing now. Denying it. Actually, it's quite a common thing in children, in varying degrees, you understand. Still, for children, not unusual--it even happens with adults." And here, he mentioned Tisha Perry who was almost a legend to us in Harlow with her laundering, her pathetic little ritual of washing and setting out her dead husband's clothes. "Not that Michael will keep this up till he's an old man, you know. It will resolve itself, Celia. Probably fairly soon."

We parted then with the understanding I would come that evening after dinner. There were things about

the child needed to be settled--the quicker, he said, the better for us all.

A while later, the condolence calls began. I spoke with the Hazlitts briefly, with Emmaline Ford who came through the light snow on a walker, then the Darbys-- Virgil, as rough about the edges, as hulking as ever from so many years with machines, his hands trying to speak for him, waving about, for his words were nearly incomprehensible, so slurred were they with the sounds of the Delta, the accent of grief; Musette, sitting beside him, cried.

That morning, even Bertie Swann from the bank stopped by. And I must admit, I was surprised to learn they'd closed it.

A thin, anxious sort of man, loquacious, Bertie had worked in the bank for almost thirty years. He never got on well with Daddy (that was no secret to anyone), but he worked hard and respected--no, that's too weak for it, actually he loved--my grandfather. Exceedingly loyal, he had the quality of character Granddaddy admired most and rewarded, and over the years he had pushed Bertie up, from teller, to new accounts, to loans, to trust, and so on. Once, when Granddaddy had been in a particularly generous frame of mind, he even elevated Bertie to the rank of "spotter"--though I imagine it must have terrified the little man, those high-speed chases toward coming

storms, Granddaddy behind the wheel of the finned Plymouth, chugging bourbon, laughing at dips in the clouds. What Bertie would have done had they actually found a tornado, I couldn't begin to guess. For Granddaddy, of course, it was just great, sublime fun.

That morning when he came to Lee's, I could tell he'd been crying. His eyes were pink and swollen and I don't recall us saying anything of much importance. Bertie said it was "awfully inadequate" even trying to say what he felt. I said I knew it, and after a while, he rose to go.

He was putting on his hat, taking a long time about it, when the thing my Granddaddy prized most could no longer be suppressed: "What about tomorrow?" he said. "Should we keep it shut down?"

"What?"

"Why, the bank." He stopped adjusting his hat. "No one minds about today, of course. But what with Christmas, us being closed Friday and now today," he said, slightly shrugging, "and then, too, we'll be shut down for the services. . . Well, it'll work a hardship on folks if we're closed tomorrow, too."

I nodded.

"So. . . What do you want us to do?"

"Why ask me?" I said, and even as I said it, I knew, of course, the answer. And it's funny in a way, but I had yet to think about that part of it. Oh, certainly, I was aware of it, had always been somewhat aware--we even talked about it as kids, Eddie and me, though Jule would have no

part in such discussions, the very idea making him too afraid and agitated. The bank, the acreage scattered "hell over high water" (as Granddaddy put it), Daddy's investments in the mill and oil, even the house on the hill. It was odd, but I had yet to really consider that. The money.

Bertie started to say something, but I couldn't listen anymore. "Do whatever you think best, Bertie. Open up keep it closed," I said, making a flaccid little wave with my hand. "I don't care."

"Pine. It has to be a simple pine box, 'cause he told me, your grandpa did, he said, 'Queenie, if you plant me in one of them ten grand jobs, like you did ol' Henry Mills, one of them gawdawful brass contraptions what costs an arm an a leg and ain't for nothin' but show--an' for your pocket-book, gal!--you mark my word, I'll be back! Waste my money on a fool's paradise, an' you'll see. You'll be goin' 'bout your business of a mornin' an' ol' Jess'll be back, right 'long side you, messin' you up ever' which a way!'

"'Course," she said, "he was down to the tavern when he told me this, and maybe it was a much for the fellas he was treatin' as for himself. Still, I do believe, knowin' your grandpa as I did all these years, it's as he would have wanted it. Plan and simple. No fanciness or brass."

I looked at the picture in the little catalog she'd brought. It was such a simple thing; honestly, it was. But at that moment, it was like when you're having a dream.



People are there with you in the room--Queenie and Lee and Brother Wendel, sipping tea in the corner. They're people you've known a long time, people you may even respect. ( And I did feel this way toward Queenie; I respected her, for she had such skill. Never mind the jokes we made about her as children--Mrs. Hartsmith, Queen of Darkness, Queen of the Underground, that sort of stupid thing. Never mind that. Queenie was, honestly, a good person; she was honest and so skillful with her trade that once, when there'd been an accident on one of Daddy's farms, when one of the hands fell beneath the thresher and was mortally wounded--so skillfully did Queenie ply her art that later, at the service, you couldn't even tell the man's head had been off; hell, with the colors applied to his face, his nails clean of dirt and trimmed, he didn't even look dead. The point is: Queenie did her job in giving people what they wanted. She did her job well and never pushed.) So, it struck me as odd, there in the living room, as I listened to her, to Lee and Brother Wendel between sips of tea, it struck me as odd that though they were telling me things I ought to know, none of it made much sense. In fact, the words that poured out of their mouths were nonsensical, were in another language, almost; it didn't go much beyond the ear.

"This one?" I asked her, indicating the plain, blocky box in the middle of the page, the one that seemed least adorned.

"That's right, sweetie," she said. "The 'Easy Rest' model. I think Jess would have liked that one best."

"But what about Lillian?" Lee said. "I mean, should they. . .match?" Lee was sitting very close to me on the couch, so close I could feel the warmth of his leg against mine, though we were not touching. "I don't think Celia's mother would go for that one. It's so. . . so. . ." (He struggled for a word other than cheap.)

"Austere?" Queenie suggested. She shook her head, her jowls earnestly quivering. "I agree, Lee. And I've thought about that. Turn to page fourteen. There's one there called 'Eternal Beauty.'"

Just then, Annie wandered into the living room, dragging Cherry behind. By this time, it was getting on in the afternoon and she was bored, restive. She saw the "picture book" we were looking at and suddenly her eyes brightened; I knew I had to think about something quickly, head her off. She started toward us, and I said, "Honey, you've been inside too much today. Why don't you get Sylvia to put your coat on and take you out back?" I shut the catalog, sliding something (I think it was Sylvia's Mademoiselle) on top of it.

Annie crawled onto my lap. "I don't want to."

"But I want you to," I said. "Go ask Sylvia to take you outside."

Annie buried her face in my chest. In a whiney tone, loud enough for everyone to hear--especially Lee--she said, "I don't like Sylvia. She's mean."

"Oh, Lord," I said. "Don't be rude now, Annie. Sylvia's Daddy's friend."

Brother Wendel put his cup down, with a clink.

Annie started to cry, and to be frank, I think I would like to have joined her. I put my arms around her, embracing even her doll. I pushed my face into her hair (faint traces of cigarette smoke), whispering, "Don't act like a baby, okay? Don't embarrass Mommy in front of all these people, okay?"

She began sobbing--most of it, pure histrionics, I knew, and suspected were directed as much against Lee as at me. I closed my eyes and could feel him literally tense on the couch. Queenie, a mother herself, waited patiently.

"I don't like it here, Mommy," she said, at last, rubbing her eye with a small fist.

Eternal rest, easy beauty--it was all too confusing, too awful to think about anymore. "I'll tell you what, Annie," I told her softly. "You go find your coat and I'll come outside with you. All right?"

She looked up as if to say, really?

I shook my head. "Uh huh."

She squirmed off my lap, a moment later, was gone.

"Celia!" Lee said plaintively, and I didn't have to look to see his exasperation. "Celia, we've got to make decisions!"

I got up, turning my back on him. It was craven, of course, but I must admit I was almost grateful that Annie had made a scene. "Lee, I'm tired," I said. "I can't think anymore. Any decisions that have to be made--you make them. All of you. I'm going to take Annie out to play."

\*

The air was cold and very sharp. It stung, and I was glad it stung, because the small hurt it made at the back of my throat was, at least, something. I breathed it in deeply. I held it until it was warm.

I walked down Madison Street, the twilight gathering into a deep winter blue around me, and I was glad I hadn't let Lee drive me to Doc's. It was good just to walk, one foot in the silent snow, followed by the other.

Madison, 7th, Adams for two blocks, 6th-- they were the same streets I had walked as a child, the old two-story frame houses the same, the cars a little newer perhaps but parked for the night in the same driveways, windows gleaming yellow out to the yards. It was the dinner hour, or maybe a little past, and I looked at the windows, trying to imagine what the Sotherbys were doing in their avacodo kitchen, the van Anders, old Emmy Ford with her cats. I didn't want to think about anything beyond that, the utterly trivial, but it was like that purple cow they tease children with (Don't think, don't think, don't dare think of a purple cow!) and, of course, it was all I could think about, walking alone in Harlow: everywhere

in the eerie white, everyplace--Jule.

Jule as a child in summer, shimmying up that oak. Jule in that yard, catching fireflies, listening to the hum of someone mowing in the evening, to a sound inside that hum I couldn't hear. Jule telling a subtle joke about pears. Jule making a lie of the taunt "duck lips," saying of Eddie's friends, as we walked home, "Oh, what do they know, those jerks--you're pretty, Celia." Jule curled like a fetus under the postman's truck, people gathering, me (too embarrassed to look at their faces) pulling him out.

And in the back of my mind, in a place where all there was was silence, a little stone room not gone into for years, there were other things, too, almost forgotten. The accident that fall, Annie screaming, Lee going after Jule and me so hurt (not just the spine) I had to leave, that sound of finality, gravel scattering in the drive, as my car pulled away. All of it was coming up again. The sullen dust blown off.

By the time I got to the Eisenhalter's, I couldn't feel my feet. I was frozen, and it wasn't the weather, though I pretended it was; I said, "Oh, just let me sit here by the fire for a minute." And Heddy rushed away to make hot chocolate for me;

Doc rubbed my hands between his own, fairly chiding me for forgetting my gloves, while all the time, the boy just lay there on the braided rug, fitting a piece into the jigsaw he was doing (pumpkins or tomatoes or something). He looked at me and smiled, but I could not stop shivering.

What Doc had said earlier was true. I spent several hours with them that evening, watching Michael, talking to him, I hate to say it, analyzing.

What stunned me most was not, as you might think, his denial of the deaths, his seemingly complete ignorance of what had happened in that house. I had expected that though, to be frank, his continual declarations framed in the present tense--My mommy and daddy have a new Bronco, We go camping every June--these hung in the air afterwards, reverberating like a sour string. As bad as this was, what really struck me first at Doc's, and I don't know why I hadn't anticipated it, was how much a picture he was of Eddie. A little tall for his age, athletic, very fair--even down to the scattering of freckles on his cheeks, slightly faded now in winter, Michael was physically the portrait of my older brother. They had the same light blue eyes (my mother's contribution), the same sureness.

Only in intelligence did he really seem to differ. This was something I sensed right away, perhaps from a certain brightness in his eye, a quickness of response. Whatever it was, Michael did seem vastly smarter somehow than his father.

Not that Eddie was stupid, you understand. It's just that he had about him a kind of plodding sensibility. Though he had done things well his whole life, a fact duly applauded by Daddy, he had done, or so it seemed to me, only ordinary things. Collecting to himself a circle of average boys, selling chocolates door-to-door for his class, playing on the football team, even for a season, by virtue of mute, animal strength, becoming its star--all of it, to me at least, was terribly ordinary and common. Even when it came to Pam, who was scatterbrained, perhaps, but genuinely decent, possibly the most decent thing in his life, there was still nothing beyond this average and unconsidered progression of events. Eddie met her, fell in love, got her pregnant, got married, got down, I suppose, to a happy enough life. That it was a life compartmentalized into roles--husband, father, insurance man at the bank--that it was an absolutely mediocre life should not have concerned me, I suppose. But it did.

I had always, of course, compared Eddie to Jule. It was a purely rivalrous thing. It was striking back and no doubt inevitable. Worse, and I began to realize this as I grew older, it was probably unfair, because beyond a shared house, a shared last name and a smattering of genes, they had nothing at all in common. Comparing them really was the proverbial case of apples to oranges. No, I'll be honest: it was mud to a mountain, with Eddie the mud. Hopeless, mediocre mud.

How else to account for the years of stupid cruelties, for those times when, usually egged on by one friend or another, Eddie tried to shame Jule into being, as he put it, "a regular brother"? What is there to explain such "a lesson" as tying Jule to a scrub oak, leaving him alone for hours in the rain? Of course, there were confrontations between us. That time with the tree, for instance, I knew Eddie was lying. He pulled his head in like a turtle, trying to avoid my questions, but the panic inside me grew, and I chased him around the house. I think I even hit him. I said, Tell me, Eddie, what did you do with Jule! I punched him on the back, spinning him around, and then, instead of just coming out with it, screaming or yelling, hitting me if he had nothing else, he did



an unconscionable thing, a stupid thing. He put his head on his chest and cried. Dull, slow, unforeseen tears--he cried and actually seemed surprised he was crying. At the time, I think he was thirteen.

That there seemed to be none of this in his child, this mediocrity of spirit, was amazing. I hadn't seen Michael for a long time, of course, not since he was a toddler running about in damp pants (and then, perhaps, I was too distracted by my own difficulties to notice), but this little boy was bright. He spun around the Eisenhower's den, flitting from one idea to another. He was like a butterfly against the dark wood, so quick and sharp. That evening, he told me in great detail about some rocks he was growing for school. They were salts of some kind--he even gave me the scientific names--and he was growing them at home in a glass bowl. "They're like trees," he said, "the same colors as coral, blue and red and purple. I hope Mommy remembers to water them every day, 'cause if you don't keep adding that stuff to 'em--"

"Michael," Doc said at this, obviously uncomfortable, yet seizing the opportunity anyway, "Michael, where do you think mommy is?" He said this all very softly. "Where is mommy and daddy?"

Your grandparents?"

At that point, Michael was standing very close to Doc. He looked at him, his expression almost bemused. "You know," he said, leaning against his knee.

"Tell me anyway."

"They're home," he said. He sighed and then, for a moment, seemed perturbed. "I've told you that a million times. Mommy and Daddy are home!"

Almost imperceptibly, Doc shook his head. Beside him on the sofa, Heddy was as pale as a statue. "Okay," he said then, in his kindest doctor-voice (at least, that was how it always seemed to me, this low and, yes, patronizing tone he assumed with children, a tone he had often used with Jule and me when we were kids), "why then, Michael, are you staying with us? Why is Mrs. Eisenhower taking care of you, instead of mommy?"

Michael rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Because you asked be to come," he said, then muttered, under his breath, "silly." Suddenly, he flung his arms out like a propeller and twirled away.

And so the evening went. Doc stumbled over the things he said, trying to wedge inside small cracks Michael made in the door. The child would have nothing of it though. He skirted around these indiscretions, as graceful as a dancer. Once Doc asked him, flat

out, why he thought his Aunt Celia had come.

"'Cause I wanted her to," he said simply. "'Cause tomorrow Auntie Celia and me and Jule are going to go sledding--I got a brand new sled for Christmas, you know," and the words began spilling out, faster and faster, "an' tomorrow morning we're gonna go flying down the hill"--and now, his arms were flapping, like a bird--"we're gonna go down and down the hill, a hundred times, an' we're gonna make a snowman an' drink hot chocolate an' fall down an' make angels with our arms, me an' Celia an' Jule an'--"

And Heddy couldn't take it anymore. I really think she couldn't. She jumped up from the sofa, casting an absolutely furious glance at Doc for having been so stupid. She brushed back an errant strand of gray hair from her face and said, to Michael, "Come on, liebling. It's time for bed. Let's not talk anymore right now."

Only after he'd gone, his goodnight kiss, unsolicited, still on my cheek and growing cold, did I fall apart. It was a gradual thing, purely physical. I sat in the chair, saying nothing, and after a while, it seemed I couldn't catch my breath. I tried very hard to catch it, but the harder I tried, the more

it escaped me. It started coming in furtive spurts, faster and faster. My hands squeezed the upholstered arms until they were white.

Doc said, after a moment or so, "Good God, Celia, you're hyperventilating! Breathe shallow--do you hear?" I tried, but when that didn't work (it was like I was slipping, falling into a well of brackish water), he ran into the kitchen, bringing back a paper sack which he thrust upon my face. "Breathe into this," he said. "It isn't that bad with the boy--I promise you--it isn't as bad as it looks! Just breathe slow as you can in the bag."

I did as he said. It smelled of fish.

Later, when it seemed to be over, he took the bag away. He brought out some brandy, a couple of glasses, and because he wanted me to drink it, I did. His voice was very soothing. It was smooth and professional, even compassionate. I tried to relax because he told me I should. I felt like a little child again, sitting in that chair, shaking my head: yes sir, yes sir, yes.

I did everything he wanted me to that night except agree (definitively) to take Michael as my own. I did not agree to do that, though he said, "Celia. . .really, there is no one else."

### Chapter Three

From the time it was first brought up till Wednesday, when the funerals were to be held, I thought of little else.

There was no family to speak of. Pam's parents, I knew, were both deceased, her father having died in the oil fields when she was still a child, her mother passing away a few years ago from lung cancer. She had a brother, several years younger than she, but he was a Marine stationed at the embassy in Thailand, and from what I had gathered, they were not at all close. Lee did speak with him on the phone, but the connection was bad, all static, and he would not be coming for the services.

He did send a wreath though; I saw it later at Queenie's; there was a card that said simply "Jack." Doc said there was a great aunt living somewhere in Minnesota, but she was in her sixties and, as he put it, "hardly suitable to be the guardian of so young a boy." There were also cousins, too, several times removed, but where they were, even who they were, no one seemed to know. Besides (as some damnable part of me said whenever the face with its sprinkling of freckles, its quick blue eyes appeared in my mind) you can't just pawn the kid off on strangers--he's blood.

But that's what I wanted to do, a part of me. And when I spoke of it, at last, there wasn't any help. Sylvia at least had the decency to shut up, to sit at the table like the child she was, out of her depth and aware of it. She said nothing all the while Lee, with his accountant's mentality, tallied up the options. One ("Who else would take him? A friend of Pam's? Somebody from the church?"); two ("And if you do that, remember, his share of the estate, whatever that comes to--and it could be as big as yours, Celia--it would all be in somebody else's hands. Do you want to split up the bank?"); three--and God, the worst ("Adoption? An orphanage? Hell, are there even orphanages anymore?"). To this last one, I think I said, "Don't be absurd."

But what it boiled down to was, I didn't want him. Whatever else Doc said, Michael was a spooky little kid, and this frightened me when I thought of Annie. I felt terribly sorry for him, of course. It made me absolutely cold inside to think about what he had been through, what he would go through no doubt before it was over, if indeed it ever really would be over. But the point was: I didn't know him. I didn't love him. Not at all.

And it wasn't as if I had been here all the time, watching him grow up, having picnics with his family, pushing him on swings. I hadn't seen the kid for five years; he was a total stranger to me. Worse, at the back of my mind, barely articulated, it had begun to seem after that first evening that Michael wasn't really such a mirror of Eddie; he was more a reflection of Jule.

It was absurd, of course, and I told myself this. But his mercurial form would dance when I'd close me eyes; the thing in my bowels would quiver and I would think, Not again. God, I will not go through this again. And then the lids would open. The brass lamp would be there, behind it, an empty wall; I would hear Sylvia cracking eggs in the kitchen and I'd know, at some completely rational

level, that Michael was traumatized, not schizophrenic, not like Jule.

This was what I knew. The child was shocked. And honestly, who the hell wasn't anymore? Hadn't Lee, usually so precise, forgotten and locked his keys in the stationwagon? Hadn't his hand trembled in rage at the coathanger when he tried to open the door and, that failing, wasn't it he who, cursing, slapped the side of the car as if it were a face? Hadn't I seen Annie in the last few days regress to thumbsucking, to whiney temper-tantrums over nothing at all? Hadn't I been the one of an evening to reach in the oven for a boiling casserole without pads? God only knows what I had been thinking about (actually, I don't think I was thinking about anything), but it took a couple of seconds for the searing pain even to register, and then when I screamed and dropped the dish on the floor, my burned hands flapping in the air, it was Sylvia's turn to fall apart. She yelled ice, ice, oh shit, ice and, in her confusion, looked in the breadbox.

How different was any of this from Michael, from his hyperactive charade? Except it wasn't that, though sometimes it felt that way, his memory taciturn, as stubborn about the truth as



a gambler who has lost. It wasn't fair to think of it as a charade, a game; if anything, it was a fantasy of desperation, a childlike longing churned into a belief that everything was still all right. Mommy would indeed make him hot chocolate again. His sled would glide on the ice. Things would still be normal enough somehow for his Auntie Celia and Uncle Jule to build a snowman in the yard; we'd push in a carrot; maybe we'd even laugh as we shoved in the broom.

What finally decided me on the issue (and it is a thing so characteristic of me, I'm almost embarrassed to acknowledge it) was something entirely out of my control. The night before the funerals, while Annie slept restive beside me, I had a dream.

In the dream, I'm in some foreign, terribly backward place. I walk down dirty streets, congested, like alleys (a bazaar?), hordes of little brown people scurrying around me like mice. There is heat, lots of noise, music coming from someplace, really discordant stuff--bells and wailing and cymbals all jumbled up together. I don't know where I'm going, but I am definitely going somewhere, because I'm falling out of my sandals, I'm in such a hurry; there is a pain in my side. Hands reach out, men with small,

slanty eyes (orientals? Thais?) pull me into their stalls, trying to get my money for cake mixes and lighters. I tell the one with lighters, I don't need any, I don't smoke anymore, it's just that Lee has them sitting around the house all the time and there's nothing else to do, but he doesn't believe it. The caterpillar over his eye (it looks like an insect) arches in the middle. There is laughter and he points to some rags piled in the corner, to something under the rags that is moving. It frightens me and I run away. I run down, God, I don't know how many blocks, and it's funny but at the end of them (it's almost like a needle getting stuck on a record, the same phrase playing again and again) the same scene repeats itself. I stop a few yards from the street sign. I try to read it, but the names look like numbers turned on their sides and they are moving, too, are completely incomprehensible, they are changing so much. I stand there, puzzled, then my eyes travel down the pole and there he is. Albino. Dwarf. He doesn't have any hair, just horrible, colorless skin. He looks more like a swollen worm, in fact, like one of those white grubs you find under a rotting log, than a man. But there he is, naked and bloated, the only color on his body a few delicate, blue veins

that pulse beneath the skin of his temples. His penis is soft and small and it's odd because clearly he doesn't have anything to sell, no cakes or lighters or wares of any kind, but he holds out his hand like the others, expectant. I shouldn't be afraid (the bloat, I know this, is facade; he is really quite insubstantial and I know I can toss him into the street with a flick of one hand), but I am. I'm terribly frightened and I run away. I lose my shoes. On the hot pavement, I step in things (droppings, glass) and still I keep running, keep running into him, it's like swimming in mud, no current, just weight, the heavy weight of it pulling you down. And there's nothing to be done, it's beating your head on a rock, only there isn't even pain anymore, the cuts don't hurt, there is no blood. There's nothing. And so, my purse. I start to unlatch it to give him the money, but something kicks me in the side, it hurts, cries out. I turn, and in those odd few moments between sleep and waking, the dwarf vanishes into the darkness of the room, the furnace clicks on, all there is is Annie.

That, suddenly, was when it hit me.

It could have been Annie. If she and I had stayed in Harlow, if Eddie had been the one to take

his family and go, to Nebraska, to anywhere else, anyplace other than here, it might have been Annie in that house with Jule, not Michael.

She was mumbling something in her sleep, her feet kicking beneath the blanket. I put out my hand to quiet her and the idea became as fixed in my mind, as inescapable as the dwarf: Would no one then want her?

That morning we woke to rain. It was still very dull and gray, but when I opened the door for the Eisenhalters and Michael who, dressed in a dark blue suit, looked more like a miniature businessman than a child, I could feel that it was warmer out. Already in the yard snow had begun to wash away in places, patches of brown grass and dirt peeking through.

The church services were scheduled for ten. We still had a couple of hours before we had to leave, so Sylvia made coffee for us, brought out milk and some breakfast rolls from the cupboard. All you could taste was the cloying sweetness of drizzled sugar, nuts that didn't taste like nuts, but the children loved them, Michael putting away three before Doc told him to stop or he'd get sick. When they were finished, Lee sent them into the den to watch television.

I had already told Annie, of course, a little about Michael. In fact, we talked about it that very morning before we'd even gotten up from bed. I explained that he was her cousin, that they would be friends, but right now he was having a difficult time understanding what had happened. I told her he would be coming to live with us and she would need to be patient.

Her eyes widened at this. She asked, "Why?"

"Because he's lost his parents."

"Forever?" she asked.

"What?"

"Will he live with us forever?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, sweetie. But while he is with us, you'll have to be especially kind--you understand?"

"Will he cry a lot, Mommy?"

I shook my head. "Yes. Sometime, darling. Maybe not right now though."

"I cried for Snitch."

"Yes."

"I cried a lot!"

"I know."

"Specially when we put him in the shoebox."

I nodded.

She was silent for a moment. She looked past me to the fuzzy, gray light of the window. She seemed as if she were about to cry.

"What, darling?" I asked.

She avoided my eyes.

"What is is, Annie?"

In a small voice, she said, "But you won't, will you?"

"Won't what?"

She seemed not to want to say it, her small face screwing up into a grimace. "You won't go away, too!" she said, vehemently. Then, looking at me, added, "Will you?"

"Oh, no, darling," I told her, almost before she could finish. I hugged her as tightly as I could. "Of course not. I won't go away! Don't you even think about that."

She hugged me back, burying her head. She started to sniffle. "Promise," she said. "Promise Mommy."

"I promise, sweetheart. Mommy won't ever go away and leave you--you're my best friend, you know that. I couldn't leave you!"

"Really?"

"Of course!" I said. "Listen, nothing--nothing like this is going to happen to us. Don't worry about it, okay?"

We sat there for a moment in the bed. I felt her begin to relax a little. This relieved me, but I felt somewhat guilty, too, having dumped so much on her so fast. "You won't mind, Annie, that Michael will be staying with us?"

Absently, she shook her head. She looked at the window again. "You s'pose he's cold?"

"What?"

"Snitch!" she said, "Snitch! You s'pose he's cold down in that hole?"

Later, when Michael and the Eisenhalters arrived, Annie was shy. At the table, she sneaked covert glances at Michael over her roll; he would look back, catching her, and she'd lower her eyes and pretend to be absorbed in eating. A couple of times, she looked at me. Almost imperceptibly, I nodded to her above the clatter of silverware and cups, dull conversation. After a while, when he'd catch her looking, she started to hold his glance.

After Lee sent them off to watch tv, I told Doc and Heddy what I had decided. He shook his head as if he had expected it all along; Heddy seemed relieved.

"But what do I do now?" I said. "I want to help the boy, but I don't know what to do, what

to say to him."

"Well," Doc remarked, "the funeral will help. In fact, I should think it would be very hard to maintain complete denial. Especially at the gravesite."

Lee shook his head.

"Then, too," Doc continued, "having another child there with him, accepting, even participating in the ritual--"

"What?" I said.

"Another child," Doc said, "Annie."

"Oh, wait! Wait just a minute," I said. "I have to put my foot down on this. Annie's far too little to be going to something like--"

"Good God!" Lee said, ready to explode. "What do you want to do, Celia! Wrap her in tin foil till she's twenty-one!"

I started to answer this, to say something really bitchy. No doubt it was on my face before I could form the words, but, oddly, I didn't get the chance.

"Oh, please!" Sylvia burst in. "You two just keep after each other, don't you! " For a second, she seemed surprised she had spoken. She started to blush; then, it was as if a damn had broken, she lost all control, slamming her coffee mug down on the table, brown residue slopping out. "Don't either of you have any respect for the dead!" she cried. "All you ever do



is fight, fight, fight! Even when you don't say it, you're thinking it--it's all over your face--oh, who can get in a dig this time, who's gonna get the upper hand! You don't care about anybody but yourselves! You don't see how hard this. . .this. . ." (she was sputtering now) "this shit is on anyone who has to hang around listening to it!"

"That's enough now!" Heddy was banging her spoon on the table. "Everyone--that's enough!" She looked at us; she looked like a school teacher, admonishing her class. Then, softer, "Everybody just calm down. Look, I know this is a stressful time, but we have to make allowances" (here, she looked at Lee), "we have to be gentle with each other."

Sylvia looked as if she were going to weep. I couldn't tell if it was a sham (I don't think it was), but, in any case, Heddy was clearly not going to let her go further. She looked her straight in the eye and said, "Come on, dear. Let's you and I go check on the children. Come, compose yourself--it's all right now."

She led Sylvia away like an errant child. Lee looked at Doc and seemed embarrassed. Then, slowly, very awkwardly, as if his arm had a will separate from his mind, he put his hand over mine, his palm hot and wet, uncertain. He squeezed my

hand and actually allowed his to remain in that position while he said, "I'm sorry, Celia. I'm an asshole, you know?"

I looked down at the messy table, not answering.

"It's just," he said, "I think you try to protect her too much. It's like you want to keep the whole world away. And you can't do that, CeeCee--God, nobody can do that for any child."

The littered plates, stained, crumpled napkins, the forks strewn about, even the slice of Doc's thin arm--everything on the table began to grow a little fuzzy to me. Things were suddenly swimming together and I was surprised, horrified to be surprised, that wetness was collecting behind my lids. It was heavy, burning. It started spilling out and I tried to stop it but was not successful--at least, not unless you believe, as they say, that tears are tonic for the soul. I couldn't stop it though, once it started. It spilled down my cheeks, and the funny thing was, I wasn't even sure why I was crying.

Maybe it was for my parents, for Granddaddy, for Eddie and Pam who would never know that Michael looked like a Rotarian in that suit. And maybe it was for the name--"CeeCee how wonderful you are!" and the way he'd say it, half a joke, half true, when

I'd knead the tightness from his neck and say, "Bald is sexy," when I'd fry okra in the pan, when I wasn't doing anything, but being me was somehow reason enough. It was there so many times, even in bed. See, see how wonderful we are together, I would think. This will never end.

Whatever the reason, I was crying. For the first time since it happened, I was actually crying, too stunned to stop it. And it was for my family; of course it was. It was also for the name I hadn't heard in five years. Lee's hand was squeezing warmth into mine, and I cried for that, too, because he was right. I did want to protect Annie. I wanted to wrap her like the tender stem of a sapling so that nothing could ever touch her. And world? The whole world, he said--what was that? What kind of world was it full of insects and hungry beasts, disease that begins at the root, everybody, all the time, going away?

That morning, while he held my hand, Doc nodding his silent approval, I think I cried for everything I had and ever lost. Yes, absolutely--also for Jule.

Brother Wendel's voice was like silver that day. He spoke from the pulpit to a house so full that children sat on their parents. Farmers, shopkeepers, oilmen, the poor, white and Indian, three generations of friends and even enemies--the very blood of Harlow

preached forty minutes of fire and conviction, compassion, too.

And I have to say that, because it's true, and I was grateful that he didn't say of Jule what everyone was thinking. Yes, he likened Jesse to a patriarch, a soldier of God battling Satan with dollars instead of a sword; yes, he said my mother was like her name, a flower that did not sew or reap and yet was arrayed; my father was a Hebrew scholar, a good and quiet man, Eddie and Pam, examples of grace--but he did not say what people believed: that Jule was accountable for their deaths.

In fact, he spoke obliquely, when he spoke of it at all. He said they were vessels of the Lord, broken not so much by the act of one--"a crazed soul deserving of pity and prayer"--as by the sin of Adam which was begat down, generation to generation, father to son, through the seed. It was an act of continuing Fall, even in Harlow, this jewel in the wheat; even here, he said, as God looked on, the sin from the Garden still lived.

He spoke so obtusely, his metaphors slid like quicksilver over Annie's head. I looked down at her, from time to time, in her plum dress (she had nothing black and I'm not sure I would even have thought of

it at the time when I was putting things into the suitcase), but she was a good girl at the church. She didn't fidget much. She looked at Wendel, at the large, wooden cross hanging in the window behind his head, and seemed to understand very little. I slid my arm around her waist. We listened, the two of us, as Wendel spoke of Paradise, said into the hush that they would be there, all of them, and we would see them one day in golden fields where manna fell like rain. I closed my eyes, trying to see it: Mother in the damp, not covering her head, not caring if the hair fell lank and awry. I tried to see it, but I couldn't and opened my eyes. I looked at Michael, sitting on my other side, the little blue suit. He had been a good boy, too, throughout the service, attentive, respectful, quiet. So I looked at him; he looked back, his face unnaturally grim, struggling. For a second, it almost looked as if he would laugh.

The coffins stayed at Queenie's until the trip to the cemetery. I was grateful for that, as the five of them would have dwarfed the church and made me feel, an hour earlier, as if I were dead, too.

And that's the point: I really didn't feel much of anything until it was over, just a kind of

numbness, the ritual confused, kaliedoscopic, event jumbled into event.

There was the clavalcade to the spot north of town, car lights coming on just as the sun was coming through a hole in the clouds. There was the limousine piloted by Queenie's son who smelled of too much scotch, and me trying to hug Annie and Michael at the same time, doing it woodenly. A hundred cars struggling to park, people swarming out, skirting graves, most of them, and patches of mud. There was Wendel and the holes, the coffins up on sawhorses-- though you weren't supposed to see that, but the wind was blowing, the drab bunting fluttered up.

I listened to it--"dust to dust to dust." I was a part of it, but I didn't feel anything until later. When it was over, people swarmed around me as they had around the holes. A hundred hugs and shakes of the hand, a thousand teary phrases of regret, and then it was done. We were ready to go home. And Lee and I and Sylvia, the Eisenhalters, Queenie and her son, even the man whose job it was to run the bulldozer at the cemetery--we all looked. We looked everywhere. But we could not find the children.

## Chapter Four

I had already begun searching the woods that bounded the eastern edge of the cemetery, calling for her, when Lee caught up to me.

"This is going nowhere," he said, panting slightly, his eyes betraying a mix of anger and growing worry. "They wouldn't be playing out here--I don't know what on earth made us think that."

Something snapped in the underbrush a few feet away. I looked but could see nothing beyond a tangle of branches and wet brown weeds. The clouds had congealed again above us. It had started to mist.

"I'd bet he's taken her home."

"No," I said. "She wouldn't just run off like that, not without asking me first. Besides, it's a long walk back to your place, and I can't see them just--"

"I wasn't thinking about my house, Cee. Eddie's is closer, not even half a mile away. Hell, they'd already be there by now," he said, glancing at his watch. "We've been out here half an hour."

"You think?"

He shook his head. "Look, you and I'll go. We'll leave Sylvia here, just in case. And if you want, Doc's got his car--he and Heddy can go down the highway." He made a grab for my arm and locking on, began to pull me through the undergrowth, back to the cemetery. "We'll check Eddie's first, and then, if they're not there, we'll go back to my place." We were stumbling down a small culvert, slipping in snow and wet leaves. "And then. . .I don't know. If they're not there either, maybe we should check the big house--"

"Oh, they wouldn't! Surely, Lee, he wouldn't want to go back there, you think?"

Lee shrugged. "Don't ask me, Celia. I can't figure that kid out anymore than you."



"Lee," I said--and I don't know where it came from, but I had to ask because it had been there, curling around my mind, a cold wormy doubt of a thing that got colder and more insistent the longer I looked in the woods. "Lee," I said, "you don't think he'd hurt her."

"What!" he said, as if taken completely aback. "Hurt her! Oh, God, Cee--no! No, I don't think he'd do anything like that." He said it with such authority, with such complete certainty that he was right, I almost felt a little ridiculous for having suggested it. "He's an eight year old kid, for God's sake! What in hell makes you think he'd hurt her?"

I had no answer for that. I just started calling her again--"Annie!"--kept slogging on.

When we were almost clear of the trees, still out of sight of the cemetery, Lee suddenly stopped. He grabbed my hands, pressing them, and the worry was clear on his face. He said, "Look, Cee. I know this has been hard on you, harder than I can even imagine, this, this tragedy."

I turned my head away, could feel the muscles in my arms stiffening.

"But, listen," he said, holding me even more tightly, "you can't let this thing, this terrible,

Godawful thing Jule did, make you crazy, too."

I tried to pull away from him.

"You've got two kids to think about now. The money. All the responsibility. What I'm saying is, Cee--you can't just let your imagination start running wild again--"

"Again!" I screamed. "Is that what you think!"

Lee looked at me blankly.

"Do you think I left because my imagination went 'wild'? You think I imagined you going after Jule with a knife!"

"I've told you a thousand times! He had the knife! I was trying to get it away--"

I jerked free from him. "Come on, Lee," I said, bounding over a withered branch that had fallen. "Come on! We're wasting time."

When we were driving from the cemetery, I looked out the window. I wanted to say, Hurry up! Instead, I forced my face to be placid. I said, "It didn't look that way to me."

"What?"

"The knife."

"Oh, God. . ."

"Don't 'Oh, God' me. I didn't imagine that. And I didn't imagine all those other things either. Do you think I dreamed up the car going off the highway, Lee? My God, Annie was with me--she could have been killed" (even now, the memory made me cold, spurred me on). "I almost was! And while we're at it, " I said, as he turned onto the paved road, "let's not forget why I was driving that night in

the first place--"

"Don't start."

"Or are you going to tell me I 'imagined' you and that Doreen woman, too?"

"Christ!" he said. "Look, I've said it a hundred times before, but I'll say it again. Maybe this time you'll get it through your head. Nothing happened."

"You brought her to the house, to my house."

"Oh, I don't pretend it wasn't on my mind. God knows, it was--what had it been, Cee? Five, six months since we--"

"Yeah. That excuses everything, doesn't it?"

"No, not excuses--explains," he said. We came to a stop light. Waited. "You still don't see it, do you? You no idea what it was like for me. You and the baby, you two all the time, you just shut me out completely."

"Shut you out? Don't be absurd. You're the one who doesn't understand. God, Lee, I never even thought I'd be able to have a child--"

"Yeah? And what doctor told you that?"

I turned away from him. Hurry up!

"That's the perfect case in point," he said. "Your imagination--"

"Go on, the light's changed."

He accelerated, slowly.

I drummed my fingers on the armrest. "You don't know what you're talking about, Lee."

"The hell I don't," he said. Then, slowly: "I know that after the baby was born, you didn't care anymore. You

were never interested in making love--"

"Is that what you call it?"

"You were never interested in me."

I shook my head slightly. What I wanted to say was, well, here they come, the violins, the same old song--poor Lee, poor little Lee, nobody cares. I wanted to say that to hurt him. But I didn't, maybe because he was already hurting, still hurting after all these years. I wanted him to hurry up--Where were they? But, as always, he drove carefully, deliberately, and it was so obvious, the pain on his face, so obvious that he couldn't hide his feelings, that, in fact, he didn't even believe you should. Where were they! Whatever the reason, I resisted the impulse to attack him further. Instead--and it was surprising to me that my voice came out as softly as it did--I said, "Well, it's not like you were the model of patience."

"Patience?" he said. "Cee, you made me feel like a rapist."

At this, I threw up my hands.

A few minutes later, at Eddie's house, I did feel a bit ridiculous, even slightly guilty when we found the back door ajar and, rushing in, saw him pouring chocolate milk for Annie at the breakfast bar.

I was so relieved, I didn't even scold them. I just threw my arms around her small, shivering form, hugging her, amazed at the copious smears of mud.

A little redundantly, Michael said, "Annie fell."

Lee went back for Sylvia and to tell the

others that everything was all right, "the sheep have been found." I stayed with the children, partly to clean Annie up, partly to have some time alone with Michael, who didn't yet know I would be caring for him now.

I had never been to Eddie's house, he and Pam having bought it after I left. The thing that struck me was how much it was like my own place in Nebraska: a small, fairly new tract house, three bedroom brick with tiny closets, a tiny feel to it with its low ceiling and deep carpets, a feel that was comforting somehow, manageable.

It didn't take fifteen minutes before I felt I knew where everything was, Eddie having carried over his sense of neatness to this place, too. His desk in the small alcove off the living room had its perfectly clean, white blotter, a notepad with figures and doodled boxes. The calculator and telephone stood sentry to either side, and as for the pencil holder with its number two leads, I didn't have to pick them up to know that each was sharp.

Everything in the house was immaculate. The bathroom even had a lingering trace of pine as I ran Annie's water in the tub. I made her sit on the toilet lid, began unlacing her shoes, pulling off the wet, muddy dress. She only half-cooperated.

She was tired obviously in addition to cold and becoming very cranky.

"Mommy," she said plaintively, "when are we going home?"

"Your father's coming for us in a few hours."

"No!" she wailed. "I mean home!"

As to that, I had no answer. That we would be going back to Nebraska, of course, was definite. I couldn't even entertain the idea that we would not, so I said, "Soon, sweetheart. Mommy's got a lot to do here first, but as soon as we can, we will. And you can go back to school again--"

"Kindygarden."

"--that's right. And you'll be able to sleep in your own bed and play with all your friends."

"With 'Lizabeth an' Jenny an' Ellen, too," she said, reciting the names as if not to forget them. "But I'll tell you a secret, Mommy. I'm not ever gonna talk to Justin anymore. He's too mean!"

The bathroom was steaming up, and I had to laugh a little. I bent over, close to her ear and whispered, "I think Justin's got a crush on you, Annie."

"Yuk! All he does is look at me, Mommy. He tries to pinch me, too!"

"I know, honey. But sometimes that's how little boys show they like you."

"An' one time, he tried to push me down

on the playground!"

"Well, I hope you pushed him back."

"You bet! Me an' 'Lizabeth an' Jenny an' Ellen, too. We pushed him back good!"

"Good for you." I turned the water off and got her settled into the tub.

She splashed a little, half-heartedly, as I washed her down. Then, almost as if it were an afterthought, she said, "Well, I don't care what anybody says. I don't think Michael likes me."

"What?"

"Michael!" she said, exasperated, for clearly I should have been reading her mind. "He pushed me, Mommy! He pushed me in the mud when I told 'im it was too cold to go swimming."

"You are never--I want you to understand this, Michael--you are never, ever to take Annie to the Bit again. I don't even want you going down to that creek unless you clear it with me first. That's the rule."

He stared at me, blankly.

I was very angry, and maybe it was wrong, given the circumstances, but I didn't even try to hide it. "Well, answer me! Do you understand?"

His eyes narrowed. "But I never meant we

should really go swimming today!"

"I don't care. You kids are just not to go there anymore."

"But Aunt Celia!" he cried, and he was becoming so clearly frustrated, so outraged, that it struck me he was telling the truth. "I just wanted to show Annie where the beavers were last summer. I didn't actually mean we should go swimming in the Bit. Gaw! It's freezing outside--that's crazy!"

"Annie says--"

"--I don't care what she says! Annie was up on this log, foolin' around, and she fell off. She started crying, she's such a baby, and now she's blaming me! I didn't do anything to her!"

Suddenly, he looked as if he were almost ready to cry. It was the first time I'd seen him so close to a real emotion, I felt sorry for him. He seemed very small somehow, almost fragile, so I said, "Okay, Michael," to diffuse the moment, "All right. I believe you. It's just that Annie's a little kid. She's not a big kid, like you. And you have to be careful what you say. Little kids'll believe anything--"

"But it was just a joke, us going into the river!"

"I believe you!" I told him. Then, I reached over, trying to give him a hug; it was so apparent



he needed it. He let me, but it was odd the way his body stiffened in my embrace. It actually grew hard. I released him. "I do mean it though," I said. "I don't want you kids going down to the Bit."

He shook his head. "Whatever you want," he said sullenly. "She's your kid."

"That's right. She is."

I had already put her down for a nap in Michael's bed, dressing her in a pair of his pajamas that were too large but at least were clean and warm. She'd said she wasn't hungry, but Michael was, so I went to the kitchen and found some peanut butter and potato chips. The bread was a little stale so I toasted it first. I set a plate down before him at the breakfast bar, a glass of milk, then joined him. He picked up a corner of the sandwich, examining it, and it seemed as good a time as any, though I must admit the words, when they came out, sounded nervous and uncertain.

"You know, Michael, that you'll be living with Annie and me now."

He ignored me, opening up the sandwich, sticking chips on the peanut butter, patting them down.

"I'll do my very best to take care of you. It won't be like what it was, I'm sure, and I

don't mean to say I can replace them, but I will take care of you."

He bit into the bread, a mighty hunk. He chewed it, half-chewed it, opened his mouth, still full, and said, "This is good. You want some?"

I shook my head. "No. No, I don't care for any." I thought for a minute, then decided on another tack. "What did you think about the services, Michael?"

He drank some milk.

"Well. . .how did you feel today? At the church."

"I dunno. Bored. Those beavers made the neatest damn in the Bit last summer! That is, till ol' man Wilkerson found 'em and chopped 'em with an ax."

"What?"

"Not the beavers, Aunt Celia," he said quickly. "Gaw! All the sticks an' stuff. He chopped up their nest 'cause he said it was making the water back up in his pasture."

"Oh," I said, nodding. Suddenly, I wanted a cigarette; I wanted it very badly, but I knew from the clean smell of the kitchen, there'd be none to be found in the house. Somehow, it seemed

right to pursue it. "Listen," I said, "I know you're a very smart, little boy. I don't think much gets past you. I think you know why we went to the cemetery today. You do know it, don't you, Michael?"

"Sure," he said, taking another bite. "I know."

"Okay," I said, sucking in air instead.

"You know. And I know. Now, you tell me."

He seemed surprised, almost embarrassed.

"Why, Auntie Celia," he said, his tongue brown and sticky, "we went to bury your parents."

I think I closed my eyes, I was so grateful. I was scared, too, but Doc had said it would happen this way. The funeral, particularly the service at the gravesite, would be the thing to shatter that wall of denial he had built. It would be like old, shoddy brick: once the mortar began to crumble, the whole thing would tumble down. It was discomfitting, of course, to be the one to do it to him, to shatter the illusion. For a second I just sat there scared, thinking, this is it, here comes. Then: "Who else got buried today?"

"Your grandfather, Celia."

I held my breath--just a little further now.

"Michael, who else?"

"Your brother and his wife?"

Yes. Oh, yes. I reached over to touch his

hand. Very softly, I said, "Yes, that's right, Michael. My brother and his wife who are--who were your parents."

The look on his face was hard to describe. His eyes narrowed, and for the briefest instant, there seemed to be a flash of recognition there, like pain; then it was gone. It vanished from his face as suddenly as it had come, and what replaced it was a look of genuine surprise, honest puzzlement. His jaw even dropped a bit. "What?" he said. "My parents? Mine? Oh, no, CeeCee," he said casually; it was almost as if he were explaining a misconception to a child, so sure and deliberate were his words. "I don't have any parents. I've never had parents, I thought you knew that," he said. "I've always been alone."

I was not hysterical when Lee came back a while later. But I was close. I was damned close, closer even than what I was at Doc's, though somehow I managed to keep the air going in and out of my lungs.

What I was doing was scurrying about the kitchen when Lee came through the door. I don't know why, but I was rearranging things, saying,

"This will never do" to the cereal boxes that littered the bottom shelf of the cupboard, transposing them with the coffee stuff from the shelf above, pulling bags of spaghetti and dried beans out and dumping them in little heaps on the counter. "This is very illogical, Pam's kitchen," I was saying to Michael who through it all (even with my back turned, I could feel the steady gaze of his eyes) just sat there at the breakfast bar, taking it in. "This will not do at all."

Lee made him go off to play video games. In a little while, electronic noise began echoing through the house. He made me sit down and went off in search of something to drink, which he didn't find, of course, Pam having converted Eddie years ago into a tea-totaller like herself (her father had been drunk when he fell from the rig). "Why is everybody pushing booze on me!" I screamed.

Finally, Lee gave up and sat down.

"He said he stopped ships in the ocean, Lee." My voice, as I said this, was so frantic, the chords spasming, I couldn't control it above a whisper. "He said the men were so scared they'd pee their pants when they saw him. 'And you can let 'em starve, Auntie Cee'"--I said, trying to recapture

for Lee the high-pitched casualness of his tone--"but that's too slow. It's lots more fun just dumpin' 'em in the water, 'cause that way the sharks'll come, too."

"He actually told you this?" Lee whispered.

"Yes! And then he said sometimes it was better just sticking to animals. Lions and elephants and things. They aren't half as smart as people, he said, but they're twice as fast. They have better instincts when it comes to hiding. They make it more of a game."

I told him everything Michael had told me. I told him about his flying over the jungle, dropping bombs, his killing those little kids in Atlanta--even old Mr. Bailey, the school janitor. He'd died last year of a coronary occlusion (Sylvia had already told me all about it). But no--Michael said it wasn't a heart attack. Mr. Bailey died because he was a mean, old man. Michael had been standing in the hall and had wished him dead. "Lee, I don't think I can handle this. Honestly. I don't know what to do!"

Lee sat there, silent for a while. Then, slowly, he started nodding his head. "Well," he said, finally, "in the first place, you don't have

to handle it, Cee. Not by yourself." He took a deep breath, would not meet my eyes. "And in the second place, look--I don't care what Eisenhalter thinks. This is a helluva lot more serious than Leticia Perry's longjohns. Doc may be damned good at country medicine--sure, he can set a broken collar bone with the best of them. But he's not a psychiatrist. Not by a long shot. And he should damned well stop pretending that he is."

"I know," I whispered. "I know." And, of course, it was true. I couldn't get it out of my mind, all those times with Jule. Doc not seeing it. Maybe not knowing what he saw--So, you have a tummy ache? What have you been eating, dear?

"I don't think we ought to jack around with this anymore," Lee said. "It's crazy just sitting on our hands. The kid's not getting better. He's obviously getting worse."

I shook my head. My stomach hurt.

"We ought to call somebody in. A child psychologist. Somebody professional."

"Yes."

"I'll get on the phone this afternoon. I promise you, Cee. I'll find somebody to help him."

From the living room, we heard the electronic blasts of aliens being obliterated. This and what

followed: squeals of childish laughter.



## Chapter Five

Lee finally found someone, a woman in Oklahoma City who had read about it in the papers. He liked the way she listened on the phone. "Tragic, tragic," she said as he filled in the gaps, and "yes, of course I'll see the little boy--Michael, did you say? When can you bring him in?" Lee told her anytime, and she said she could see him the next day at ten-thirty.

We left Harlow around nine that morning. It was bright out and clear, still cold, but not damply bitter the way it had been. I can't say

I was exactly happy on the trip, but for the first time in days, I felt, if not content, at least settled.

The sun warmed the side of my face through the window. As we drove down the highway, everything seemed to stand out, sharp and clear--other cars, little towns and farms, brown grass sweeping up the embankments. Maybe it was the motion of the tires on the road, the fact that we were finally going somewhere, finally doing something concrete and real--whatever it was, it made me feel better. I could actually listen to Michael, in the back seat, chattering away, pointing out silos and bridges, abandoned homesteads that dotted the land, their small houses shells, their sheds and barns roofless, decaying structures slanting toward earth. I could honestly listen to this and not feel frightened. We even made it a gam. Who could spot first three horses in a field? Who could find a satellite dish? A stock feeder? A holding pen for cattle? (I do not need to tell you, I suppose, that Michael won.)

Gradually, the farms began giving way to the city, to stone and cedar houses nestled in scanty woods, hoping for invisibility. We cut onto the freeway, estates becoming mobile home parks and subdivisions of cheaper houses, these giving way to schools and churches and chicken stands; finally, spaghetti bowls of concrete swirling up, the warehouse district, a pocket or two of

slums.

Alicia Friedman's office was downtown, and though we had to wait nearly an hour beyond the time she told us (her receptionist apologizing for the holidays--"she had to work someone in before you"), I liked her immediately.

She was a tall woman, perhaps forty, and when she greeted us finally, coming out into the waiting room followed by her previous patient, a little girl about ten, she had about her an air of competence, a composed and at the same time gentle professionalism I found reassuring in spite of myself.

She introduced herself to us. Then, just as the little girl who came before and her mother were ready to leave, she broke away for a moment, making a special point of hugging the child goodbye. She said, "Now, Martine, you'll remember what we said about feeding your puppy everyday?" The girl nodded solemnly; Doctor Friedman said, "Okay, kiddo, I'll see ya' next week." She turned next to Michael, smiling a little. She bent down to his level and asked if he would like to come into her office to talk.

I was impressed that she gave him the choice, relieved when he accepted. I don't know

what I had envisioned--Michael suddenly recalcitrant, stone-faced, clinging to the arms of the chair (yes, the way Jule had done one time in another office, more opulent than this and years apart, with a different doctor, yet-- I couldn't quite remove the niggling doubt--perhaps somehow the same). In any event, Michael went with her willingly. He didn't even look back at us when he left.

We waited another hour, or no, perhaps forty-five minutes. I thumbed through a battered Reader's Digest, trying to read the anecdotes about families and soldiers that fell flat on the page. Lee, I think, looked at the walls.

When they finally came out, she said she wanted to speak with us. "Georgia here"--she motioned to the receptionist--"will be glad to look after Michael." So we went, Lee and I, into her office, a large airy room painted subtle pink. Most of the furnishings there were scaled down, appropriately child-sized. There was, of course, no couch on which to lay down, but in the corner stood the requisite fish tank, a soothing, vaguely uterine contraption. The walls were crowded with clown prints, satin balloons and animal posters with clever sayings; one was of a kitten clinging frantically to the knotted end of a rope. Toward the back of the office, where her

own desk was and around it grown-up chairs, photos of cool sylvan spots ended abruptly in a bank of diplomas.

When we settled in, she said, "I don't know, at this point, I'll be able to tell you much beyond what you probably already know."

Lee looked at me; I didn't respond.

"Michael," she said, "is a disturbed little boy. Very disturbed. But I have to say this as well-- and you may be able to take some comfort from this-- considering what this child has been through, no one could expect anything else."

Dr. Friedman went on to fill us in on the session with Michael. She repeated, almost verbatim, the same tales he'd been telling me yesterday. But she cleared them up a little, explaining that "such fantasies as being a pirate or a big game hunter in Africa or. . .what was the other?" she asked, glancing at her notes, "Oh, yes. G.I. Joe. Images like this, for someone Michael's age, are really very natural. All of them, you see, connect with the idea of power. And this is what's been stripped away from him, as it is from any victim of violence. So, for a child who no doubt feels more powerless than he has ever felt in his entire life, such images can actually be healthy. Michael is able, through

fantasy if nothing else, to see himself as powerful, a superhero--to borrow a term from the cartoons. He is able to destroy his enemies, yet cannot himself be destroyed."

"What about Oscar Bailey?" Lee said.

"The old custodian?"

"Yes. Celia said Michael thinks he killed him."

"Uh huh. Well, that's a little more complicated. I gather that Michael never cared for him--"

"Mr. Bailey was always a surly old man," I interjected. "We didn't like him either when I was in school."

She nodded. "Then it would be quite possible that Michael had, at some time or other, wished him dead. Or, at least, out of the way. In very young children, it amounts to much the same thing, of course. In a fit of rage, they close their eyes and Mommy is blotted from the universe. Michael is a little old for that kind of thinking, but still children his age do have a tendency to see themselves as the center of things, to hold themselves responsible where no responsibility exists. Old uncle Joe dies of cancer--I was a bad boy at his house last week, therefore I caused uncle Joe to die. Or, Mommy and

Daddy are breaking up--they're getting a divorce because I haven't cleaned my room. The logic is skewed, of course, but its very common for children to think this way. So it seems to me that part of what Michael is saying when he claims to have killed Mr. Bailey is simply a projection of this." She leaned back in her chair, began drumming her nails on the desk top. "But I must say, I don't think that's all of it. Not in Michael's case. And you see the key to this isn't really the custodian, but all those others he's said he's killed. Those murdered children in Atlanta."

"He told you about that," I said.

"Yes. He's quite an open child, actually. Very verbal and articulate. But to get back to what I was saying--these deaths, unlike the others, indicate vastly delusional thinking. Essentially, there is an enormous level of guilt there, just under the surface."

"Guilt?" Lee said. "What has Michael got to feel guilty about--hell, he's the victim here."

"I know," she said, and now she was rubbing her hands together. "But its the same thing that happens in any big tragedy. Airplane crashes. Ships going down at sea. Anything where there's massive loss of life. The survivors, grateful though they

may be, question why they survived, when so many others didn't. And there is, of course," she said, shaking her head, "no easy answer to that. Still, it's a very normal thing to wonder about it. Almost inevitably, those lucky few, the survivors, emerge with more than just their lives. They come out of it with guilt."

"So," I said slowly, "that's why he's claiming to have killed all those people? Because he feels guilt about his family?"

"That would be my guess," she said. "He feels this guilt intensely and has to attach that feeling to something. It's sort of like cause and effect in reverse. The feeling, you see, is here," she said, patting the top of her desk. "It exists, at some level, conscious or not. It never really leaves him. And as we all know, and Michael certainly is no different, feelings are caused by real events. We feel remorse because we have done something bad. Something, usually, that has hurt others. Of course, that Michael should connect this feeling with murder, anyone's, is not at all surprising. Considering what he's experienced.

"But there may be many other factors involved here--not just this. But now," she said, smiling



slightly, "I feel as if I'm just stumbling around in the dark, going after it blindly, because I don't know what really happened that night. Is it possible," she asked, "that when the killings started, Michael ran away and hid? Is that why he survived?"

Clearly, it was a rhetorical question. I don't think she believed we knew the answer anymore than she herself did. Still, it was a helpless feeling, to have to sit there in the chair, my fingers intertwined, mute.

"If so," she continued, "he no doubt sees his running away as an act of cowardice. It doesn't matter, of course, that he couldn't have done anything to stop it, that he's only a little boy--that anyone would be helpless in such a situation. But if he ran away and hid somewhere, he probably blames himself for not at least trying to save his parents and the others. He may even believe that, by running away, he helped to murder them, too."

"Oh, no," I said. "Surely, he doesn't."

She shrugged a little. "It's possible. Then again, it may not have happened that way. He might have been spared for some other reason. What was his relationship with his uncle? Were they close?"

I looked to Lee, and he looked back almost as helplessly. He lit a cigarette. "I think I may have seen him and Jule in town a few times," he told her, shaking out the match. "But, well, since Celia and I divorced, I, uh, haven't really maintained much contact with her family. Not on a personal level, at least."

"And you don't know either?" she asked me.

The muteness spoke for itself.

"Well," she said gently, "I need to know more. Michael obviously is going to need therapy. But if I had the facts, as many as we can find out, before going into it, I think the process would be sped up considerably. At least, I'd have a better idea how to approach the child, the kind of avenues to pursue. I'd like to have a sense of what he was like before. How he did in school. His friends. Hobbies--anything would help. But right now, what I have to go on is sketchy."

I nodded, and before she even said it, I knew where she was heading. My belly began to tighten and quiver.

"We must find out as much about that night as we can," she said. Then, to Lee, "I think, Mr. Sawyer, you've told me everything the police

have told you, is that correct?"

"Yes," he said. "We really don't know anything more."

She was silent for a moment. The hour began to chime in the monkey-face clock. "Well, then," she said softly, fingering a ring, "it may be necessary to go to the source."

The trip home was quite subdued. Before we left, Lee bought Michael some comic books at the pharmacy downstairs. He also filled the prescription for tranquillizers he'd bullied the doctor into believing I needed. (In fairness, she was diplomatic about it; she listened to my objections--Lee has such a habit of exaggeration, I said--to which she responded, "Well, I'll write you a prescription anyway, for something very mild, and if you ever do need them, at least they'll be there.") At the pharmacy, I didn't speak to him at all.

Nobody said much of anything on the way home. I guess we were both going over the things she'd said; and it was hard to remember everything, she said so much, so quickly.

We had agreed, the doctor and I, on one point: that Michael should move back, as soon as it was practical, into his own home, into a place he

knew and felt comfortable in. Control, she said, was very important; Michael should be able to feel he could control his environment. I had told her I'd already planned on moving there. And it was true. I had thought about it the day before. Eddie's house was small, but comfortable enough, and at some level, articulated or not, I'm pretty sure I decided on it while I was bathing Annie. It wasn't my fault I hadn't mentioned it to Lee, and he embarrassed us both when he burst out with a series of stunned objections. Finally, I settled the issue with, "Be practical! Where would we all sleep?" And Lee, of course, had to agree. In his two-bedroom bungalow, there really wasn't room for three adults and two children, a fact made painfully clear by Sylvia's (and no doubt my own) growing testiness. Still, he couldn't let it rest without a parting comment, a disgruntled, "Well, at least, thank God, you've dropped this nonsense about going back to your parents' house!"

It wasn't until we got home later that afternoon that we really started to argue; and it wasn't over the sleeping arrangements, either.

I had been thinking about it, off and on for days--maybe even years. You should go see him,

a part of me said. You should clear it up with Jule. This idea, this internal nagging really (because, though more intense, it wasn't unlike the feeling you get when you've put off your taxes too long, or when you wait beyond all reason to take a pill you need--no, more to the point, when you keep taking those you don't) kept coming up. Even when I tried not to think about it, which was often, it was always there, like Michael's guilt, I suppose, a thing just under the surface. And at odd moments, usually when I was doing nothing and nobody was around to distract me with petty decisions and shoes that needed lacing, I would find myself thinking, I should see him, must see him, must find out why.

Except, of course, this last thing isn't true. I never really believed, not even in the private fantasy I orchestrated beneath my skull (Jule crying in the jail cell, reaching out to me, helpless behind shadowy bars), that he would know why. I never believed he would be able to make sense, even for himself, of this horrible, bloody mess. Even so, it kept presenting itself. It was like a bird flying into twilight, it kept soaring into view, just as it sometimes did in Nebraska when I'd sit in the back yard of an evening, watching the sun set, Annie, delighted, a few yards

away on the swing. I need to see Jule again, I'd think. I need, once and for all, to find out why. How is it such things happen?

But I never did, of course. In truth, I knew he didn't want it either. And, in a way, I think that had been the final blow to me--worse, even than Dory sitting on my couch. It happened a few days after the accident, when I was still in the hospital, hardly able to move and so doped up on painkillers and relaxants I could scarcely think.

That night, Jule had come by--my guess was to talk, but he was so agitated, he started "slipping" (this was Mother's euphemism for incoherency). He paced around the empty room, slipping from one idea to another, and usually I could bridge them--in fact, I had always been better at that than anyone else, even as a child--but that night I couldn't follow. I tried; I really did. But the harder I tried, the more apparent it was to Jule that it wasn't working, and suddenly, he was furious. The whole thing degenerated into an argument of sorts, a fierce, one-sided castigation of my "stupidity," as he put it.

I tried to explain, but my tongue felt so thick in my mouth, and this just enraged him more. He was like a wild thing there, waving his arms, saying Noab said this and Orku that and Balaam just

didn't care anymore, he wouldn't listen, he was too old, too much a skeleton to intervene. Spittle was forming at the corner of his mouth, Jule growing angrier and angrier at how dumb I was until he fairly screamed at me, "Get out! Get out! He'll hurt you if you don't!"

Even drugged, I understood. I lay there on the board-bed, knowing perfectly what he meant, seeing it in his eyes, the fear and retribution, but I did not want to accept it.

"He'll hurt you, Cee. He says he will!"

I wanted to shake my head, but the collar was too tight. I was almost choking when I tried to say, No, I don't believe you. It came out, "don' b'lee," but he knew what I meant. Unfortunately, I knew what he meant, too.

One of the doctors, I forget who, had said it was a sign of fragmentation of personality; another saw it as a way of escaping blame for his acts. It was hardly important, though, the cause. The only thing that mattered was, in times of great stress, Jule would slip further. Especially when he was scared ("They chased him to the creek!" he once cried to Mother; "They tried to drown him there, but he'll get them, you'll see, you'll see, you'll see, he'll get them!"), especially when he was frightened and

couldn't understand why people were so mean, he'd start changing the "I" to "he," slipping into the third person to let "him" make the threats. Jule had done it dozens of times before, I knew that. But up until that point, he'd never done it with me. Not in twenty-three years, had he ever threatened me.

"Believe it, believe it," he told me that night. "He'll hurt you. He hates you so much he'll hurt the baby, Cee--he'll hurt the baby, too."

For a moment, we just looked at each other. Jule's face was frozen into that expression I had seen so many times. He grimaced like some tortured thing in a trap; and then, even that changed. He slipped into something passive, almost reasonable. He said, "Go, Cee. Go now."

A moment later, he was gone. And for a second or two, it almost seemed he took everything with him. My mind struggled desperately with the confusion--the king of gods too old to care? Noab setting fires and deposed?--but all that made sense was Annie: "He'll hurt the baby, he hates you that much."

Somehow I managed to pick up the phone. I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but while it rang, I had to say to myself, Damn your pride, your fucking



pride! When Lee answered finally, I told him that Jule was very upset; I said, have Annie sleep in your room, understand? I'm sure it was as slurred as the speech of a drunk, but Lee did understand finally. Perhaps too well. Though Jule, of course, never came to the house. He never again came near the baby, or for that matter me.

I suppose it was inevitable then, that when Lee and Michael and I got back to Harlow that afternoon, the idea would surface and become a fight. Lee and I had gone into the kitchen, taking off our coats, and without any preface at all, he said, "You're not going to do it, Celia. I don't care what shit she says. I forbid it!"

"You what?"

"I mean it. If I have to tie you up and sit on you--"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"--you're not going near that madman."

"Oh, and I suppose you think you are! Do you honestly think he'd tell you anything, Lee? He won't even tell the police! You think he'd tell you?"

"It's damned sure somebody has to find out. If only for that kid's sake--"

"You mean me?"

I must admit, neither of us was aware Michael was standing in the doorway. I think it shamed us both for him to have witnessed such a scene. But Lee was very angry. He almost lost his temper with him when he said, "Michael, please leave the room!"

"You're always kicking me out!" he yelled.

Lee tried to calm himself. He stroked his hand over his mouth. He said, "You don't understand--"

"Oh, yes I do," he said. "More than you think!" He turned and stomped away into the hall.

"That's great," I said. "Wonderful."

I started putting my coat back on.

"And where are you going!" Lee said.

I went to the back door. "I don't know. Out!"

It was an hour or so before sundown. The wind was kicking up and already colder. I walked around for a while, trying to cool off. I made my face as placid as I could, and honestly I don't think anyone looking at me would have known I was even angry. Pretty soon, I was freezing, in spite of the wool coat, so I started walking faster. I don't think I really intended to go as far as I did, but before I was even aware of it, I had gone through

the town, was out crossing the highway, headed toward Muddy Bit. From this distance, it looked so forlorn, the huge, white thing on the hill, its windows dark and vacant as eyes through a fence.

It's funny to have remembered that. But that's how it seemed, walking nearer the house. It was just like that time Mother made me go with her to see Jule. She was snippy that day, saying "He'd much prefer a visit from you, I'm sure. Sometimes, I swear, it's like you're his mother."

All I wanted was to be left alone. I don't even remember why, exactly. Perhaps it was just that Jule and I had recently entered high school, the accompanying rush of adolescent hormones making me fiendish about my privacy. But that was what I wanted that day--to be left alone, by myself, in peace with my books. I don't think I'd even spent much time with Jule before he'd left, but there she was, standing at the foot of my bed like a harpie, badgering, cross-examining: "Why won't you come to the hospital! I need your help with the boy!"

I don't think I was feeling well that day, but somehow it seemed easier just giving in. I dropped my book on the bed without arguing and went with her to that place west of Tulsa where Doc had

convinced her to put Jule--"Temporarily, Lilli. Just for a few weeks to run tests." (Jule, I recall, was going through one of his worst phases then, Snowbelly pushing him into all kinds of ugliness, Orku, having sprouted wings that summer, hovering above, sighing like the summer wind, yes, yes, do it, man; honestly, it was one of the worst times of my life, with Orku spiralling above us both like a winged seed, aglow in the dark, green like sap). Doc wanted Juley "placed" for a while. And, of course, it was just a temporary thing, what with Mother wringing her hands all the time about the smell in the bathroom, (it made me nauseous even to think of that), what with this orderly or that, the lousy food, the lousy therapy, the lousy something.

At any rate, I did go with her that autumn Saturday, Noab's leaves aflame with color, boughs of red and gold along the highway. I don't think we said much on the long drive. I don't think my expression changed once the entire time, but she was probably too preoccupied to notice. Finally, we got to the hospital, we came to an iron fence, a gate, and had to wait to be admitted. We waited quite some time, Mother fuming at the blatant lack of regard--"to say nothing of common curtesy!"--and to avoid her display of righteous ire, I looked out the window.

Several people in what looked like pajamas had gathered behind the fence. Most were animated and alert, talking among themselves, not seeming sick at all in the nearly warm afternoon (the Oklahoma weather as crazy as they). They really didn't seem sick to me. But there was one, a bearded

man with his hand down his pants, who just stared at me, his eyes black and empty. I watched him for a moment, watched the play of his hand there, the rhythmic movement. Then Mother noticed. She said, "Don't look! Celia, don't look at that nasty thing!" So I turned away, placid again. A few minutes later, I made her even madder by getting sick in the car.

The windows of my parents' house looked like that-- eyes to a vacant soul. Black, lacking warmth. It's funny, but even the feeling of sickness came back, the closer I got to the house, the same queasy tightness in the belly. For a moment, it was so intense, I wondered if I might actually get sick on the road. But I pushed it from my mind (just as then I had pushed away Noab's golden bough, Orku above my bed like the spirit of a bird, Snowbelly's ruthless, growing ice); I pushed it away. I veered off into the woods and took a shortcut back to Lee's where Sylvia was waiting in the door, saying, "Shit--oh, Celia--shit!", so panicked she was white.

## Chapter Six

What is it? Hangs?

I don't know, but I think I knocked Sylvia into a wall. I ran away from them, into the bathroom. I locked the door.

What does it mean?

Nothing but smallness there, warmth and wetness with yellow ducks on the walls, behind me all noise and pounding. I crouched on the floor, hugging my knees--such a mess, my bottom wet, such a mess to make them clean you could still smell it, soap and water and wet towels hanging, you could smell it, how clean the children were even after they'd gone.

But what can it mean! To hang (like that towel)?

"Shut up!" My back was against the door being pounded. Lee was on the other side, pounding and pounding with his fist, trying to hurt me even more. "Go away!" I screamed. "Leave me alone!"

Then, Lee was yelling. He was yelling, again and again, "He's alive--do you hear? He's still alive!" But I was too tired to listen anymore. I couldn't bear the voice. I was sick to death of it and so tired that had I the choice at that moment, had Annie not been on the other side crying, Mommy!" and screaming, too, I could have taken that towel hanging near my head. It would have been easy. So simple just to grab it from the rack and wind it tight, hook it onto something--ceiling light, bar, beak of duck, anything would do. It would have been so terribly easy to have taken that towel and hung myself. To go the same route as Jule.

I don't know how long I stayed in the bathroom. Maybe a long time, because finally Lee stopped yelling at me (Sylvia forcing him with the fierce whisper, "Shit--you're making it worse!").

After a while, Lee was speaking gently to the door. "He's in the hospital, Cee. The police have taken him to the hospital in Jefferson. They're looking after him there. He's alive, Cee. Alive, do you hear?" He

said it maybe a hundred times, and after a while, I probably even believed him. My heart, in any case, stopped trying to escape up my throat. I began to feel numb and stupid, sitting in a puddle from the kids, wondering if I made it myself.

Out in the hall, Annie was whimpering, "Mommy, come out!"

I don't know how long it took me to open the door, but when I finally did, I was myself again, so placid even the brief surge of embarrassment faded quickly into numbness.

Annie, her face streaked and teary, thumb in mouth, came running up to me and wanted to be held. Instead of bending down, I picked her up, paid for it with a sharp spasm in my back, but I didn't care. Her soft, substantial warmth gave me something to hold onto. She felt solid and somehow real. At that moment, it almost felt as if she were the only real thing in the world.

"You okay, Mommy?" she asked several times.

I nodded. Finally, I let her down, but she clung to the hem of my dress, wadding it tightly in her fist. She would not let go even as Lee led us into the den where I sat down on the couch, mute. Annie climbed into my lap and nestled her face between my breasts. She said, "I love you, Mommy," and



then Lee was there, standing in front of me.

He said, "Here. Take this." He took my hand, turned the palm upward. The white flesh dwarfed in his. He dropped a green and black capsule on it and said, "Take it, Cee. You feel better. God knows, we've got to do something."

It's strange, but it didn't even frighten me now, this pill. It just felt weightless there in my palm, weightless a moment later on my tongue, like a feather floating on water as it slithered down my throat. It's funny, but it didn't frighten me at all like the Percodan did, the Demerol that months and months and months after the accident that winter would lay on my palm, saying, "Take me--take me, you bitch," would lay there heavy, urgently speaking until I took it and having taken it then felt small. It's funny, but now I felt nothing.

Michael turned on the television--some old rerun of a war movie, black and white men, casting black shadows, the shadow of raised guns. After a while, Sylvia said she was going to the kitchen to throw out the dinner ("It's just burned to hell!"), to get another started for the children, because Lee said he didn't want any, and I said nothing, which left Sylvia to remark, "Well then, I couldn't possibly eat, either."

The kids were in bed by nine. Michael was in the master bedroom, and Sylvia was in the hall. She was putting on her coat, making quite a show with the pen and paper, saying to Lee, "Here's Gloria's number. Now, if you need

pick up the phone and call." His concern was so effusive, such a poor mask for her gratitude at being able to get out for a while, I think it even turned off Lee. He seemed almost as relieved as she had been after she left the house.

Lee was to sleep on the couch in the den. I took another tranquilizer and an hour later helped him with the sheets. My arms felt leaden and unresponsive, but as we made up his bed, I said, "You know, I'd sleep here myself. If it weren't for Annie."

Lee nodded. His smile was actually gentle when he said, "I know. But this is okay for a night or two." I didn't see how, tall as he was, he would fit there, and when I mentioned this, he said, "Hey, don't worry about it. If worse comes to worse, I've got that old air mattress around here somewhere-- you remember, don't you?"

And suddenly I did. I think I even smiled slightly though, in truth, I never liked it much. It was comfortable enough to lie on, yes, but Lee was always wanting to take it somewhere, to the lake or woods where he thought the leaves would make it private, but they didn't. And I would tell him this as he lay me down and put his hand beneath my skirt; I would say, "But Lee, Lee, what if they come?"

"Who?" he'd ask.

And I didn't know who, but said, "Hunters. I have no idea--kids or something."

And he'd say, "Don't be paranoid, Cee. Nobody's going to come. Just relax now, will you?"

And I'd try. I'd look past his ear to the canopy of leaves, deep green, and let him do what he wanted. Sometimes I'd even try to smile.

"Hell," Lee said, as he tucked the sheet under the cushion. "I wonder where I put that thing. Cheap, old plastic--you remember how I'd have to patch it all the time?"

"Yes. Of course," I said. "But you should have told Sylvia. It's big enough for two."

He shrugged and tossed his pillow on the couch. "Didn't occur to me," he said, then blushed. (Lee was forever doing that, blushing like a child, an errant little boy, whenever he told a lie.)

Later, he said, "Come to the kitchen. I'll fix some tea. It's herb stuff--Sylvia swears it won't keep you awake."

We sat there for a while in the yellow light, listening to the hum of the dishwasher, the spurting whoosh of water behind the door.

Lee said, "You feel like talking about it?"

The tea had cinnamon in it. I let it sit there on my tongue, burning, before I finally answered. It was a lie, but I said, "All right. I want to know. What did they tell you?"

He took a breath. "They called shortly after you went out. Actually, it was Jim Randall I talked to. I guess they called him from Jefferson, figuring he'd know how to reach you."

I looked in the teacup, at the tiny, forlorn leaves resting at the bottom, brownish red. "He was the one, wasn't he?"

"What."

"Jim. He was the one who found Jule in the first place, wasn't he?"

Lee looked at me oddly. "That's right--I've told you that before, Cee."

I looked in the cup again: red leaves, heard the dishwasher humming like wind, its door yellow, above me, yellow light. Noab's colors.

"Anyway, Cee, what I've got is second, maybe even third hand. But Jim said one of the deputies found Jule around three this afternoon--"

"Did they say what he was still doing there, Lee?" I asked. And really, I didn't mean to keep interrupting him, breaking into his story--it's just the light was so yellow there, the shadows on the table so distinct, from

somewhere, the faintest breath of cold. It all came together to make me feel slow and stupid (yes, maybe too, it was the pill); but the point is, as I sat there in the kitchen, I felt it begin to slip away from me, like green slipping away from leaves in the fall; it was just all slipping away. I was very tired. It didn't make sense. My voice was slow--even to my ears, it sounded odd--when I said, "Doc told me they were going to take him to the hospital. To Vinita. There would have been people there to watch him. Don't you think?"

"I know," Lee said softly. "I know. And that was my question, too. I asked Jim why they hadn't moved Jule before. . .this. But all he could say was, what with the holidays, things were probably behind schedule."

I lit one of Lee's cigarettes. The smoke rose up.

"Well, it happens, Cee," he said, not really apologizing, but he was close. "People go out of town and stuff. The order apparently never came down to take him to the hospital. Hell, I don't know what's going on."

I shook my head. "I see," I said slowly. "So it's nobody's fault."

"That's not what I meant!" Lee said, an offended, surprised look on his face. He was sitting there like Balaam (to hear Jule tell it), offended and surprised when Orku had vanished, when Noab was done and Snow began battering the door. "That's not what I meant at all," Lee said. Then: "Celia. . .are you all right?"

"Oh, sure."

"Look," he said, "maybe we ought to save this for the morning. Talk about it then--"

"No. No, no," I said, forcing myself back into the hear and now of the kitchen, shaking my head. "No, no, Lee, it's not going to be any better in the morning. You'd better tell me about it now." Suddenly, I realized I'd been tapping the floor with my foot. I stopped, felt embarrassed, said, softly, as evenly as I could, "Go ahead, Lee."

"Well," he said, a bit uncertainly, "they found him in his cell about three this afternoon. They were able to get him down quick enough--"

"How?"

"What?"

"How, Lee, did Jule do it?"

"Oh, God, Cee--"

"How!"

He breathed in sharply. "With his shirt, I think. Apparently, Jule used his shirt. At any rate," he said, quickly, "just let me tell you what I know. They took him to the hospital, and I called there. I talked to a nurse in the emergency room--couldn't get much out of her. She kept saying I'd have to speak to the doctor. But they couldn't find him, so finally she told me that Jule was in intensive care, unconscious--"

"Coma?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. And it was obvious to me that he was growing more upset, more agitated by the moment. "I'm just trying to tell you what they told me. Jule was

still unconscious, as far as she knew. She didn't think, though, he'd broken anything--"

"His neck, you mean?"

Lee shook his head. "Yes! If you want the details, yes. Anyway, she said he was moving his toes when they examined him, so that meant probably he wasn't paralyzed. He had a tracheotomy, and apparently there was some loss of blood, but she didn't seem too worried about that. As far as anything else goes, Cee, she just didn't know."

"Or," I offered, "she wouldn't tell you."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

We sat there for a moment. Lee didn't say anything else. The cinnamon tea was red.

"You said there was blood?" I asked him. And, again, he was looking at me strangely. "Blood, you said? Did they botch that, too?"

"What?"

"The airway, Lee."

"Celia," he said, "uh, I don't think we should talk about it anymore tonight. You're obviously very tired--"

"Tired?" I said. "What makes you think I'm tired, Lee?" I stared at him. "No, you started it--I want to know everything! What about the blood? Tell me about that."

Lee bit his bottom lip.

"Well, dammit. Tell me."

Lee was shaking his head, slowly, from side to side, like he didn't want to say it.

"Tell me. 'Fess up."

Lee squinted. "From the way she talked, it sounded like they'd done something at the jail for Jule. It wasn't anything the hospital did to him, Cee. Apparently, they gave Jule an emergency airway at the jail. But even before that. . ." he said, trailing off.

"What?"

He grimaced slightly. He said, "Oh, fuck. You're going to have to know sometime. Jim Randall said the Sheriff over at Jefferson wants to talk to you about it. He thinks there may be some bearing on the case--or, I don't know. I don't know what the hell he thinks. Really, Cee, I don't know anything."

"What are you talking about Lee?" I said, and for the first time since we sat down, I didn't feel the tiredness. Perhaps it was the pain in Lee's voice now (it was so obvious he wanted no part in relating this), but I began to feel wide awake, the adrenaline now beginning to overtake the pill, flushing out the fuzzy, entangling webs. "I don't understand, Lee," I said, and now there was a kind of franticness, a slight hint of that, in my voice, "what you're saying."

"Look, Cee, before Jule. . .before he did what he did. . ."

"Yes?"

"Before he tried to hang himself, he left a note."

"What?"



"He wrote something on the wall! The Sheriff over there wasn't sure what it meant--shit, it probably doesn't mean anything, Jule writing it."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell Jim the message--only that, apparently, it was for you. The Sheriff in Jefferson wanted to know who 'Cee' was. That's all I know."

It took a moment for this to sink in; even then, it didn't make sense. I looked at Lee, my head swirling with confusion. I said, "Okay, okay--there's a note. Fine. But what about the blood? What does the damned note have to do with that?"

Lee, his elbows resting on the table, put his head into his hands. His voice, when he spoke, was more tired, more plaintive than I had ever heard. It was like Balaam's voice, old, exhausted beyond measure. "My God, Cee," he said, slowly, "you don't get it, do you? They're not going to give someone like Jule a pencil to write with, a pen--anything sharp. Even in Jefferson, they just don't do that sort of thing."

## Chapter Seven

Once, I saw a woman made of rubber in a car. She was one of those toys, you know, a thing made for sex. I saw her in the city, but I suppose it could have been anywhere, in any car, blue Buick or not. And the fact there was a man beside her, his arm flung across the seat-back, talking up a storm, was almost incidental, because what I remember most was her face. I have never forgotten it--it was so heart-like, as bland as Valentine candy and shaped that way, but more to the point, I think, like a human heart, just out there, so exposed.

I know she wasn't real. The oval blush on her cheeks was painted on. Her eyes were abnormally blue and

wide and those were painted, too. But there was something about her, nonetheless, that struck me as honest.

I think it was her mouth. It was the only truly three-dimensional part of her I could see; her lips were rubbery and painted very red. They pursed around a deep hole (I guess it's all there really was to her: just this tunnel in her face that led to emptiness and air, someone else's breath--the man in the passenger seat beside her?--having blown her up); but there was just this hole there, and the lips made a perfect "O" around it. O, O, O, O, O! It was all she would ever say. And this coupled with that wide-eyed innocence, the embarrassed blush on her cheeks. . . it was almost as if she had been created to be eternally surprised.

I know it's odd to have thought of that. (I remember in the city feeling sick--I ran away). But that's what came to me in the jail in Jefferson. I thought of that thing in the car and felt sick. I felt like I couldn't stand, as if I were made of rubber, too, and what was I to say?

It was MacKenzie's fault, of course. He was such a slob, this sheriff, his desk piled high with scraps and unfinished reports, with memos, even coupons ripped from the paper--all this stuff, this junk--and yet, in

all that litter, not the thing from Jule, the message MacKenzie promised us (promised Lee on the phone) he had faithfully transcribed.

"Lois!" he bellowed out the door to his secretary. "Where the hell's that paper!" Then, to me: "Oh, 'scuse me, ma'am. It's just I keep losin' stuff an' it makes me crazy!"

Lois appeared in the doorway and he asked again, where that "slip o' paper" had gone. She threw her hands up, twisting them palms to the ceiling, shrugged, then walked away.

"Oh, damn. Damnation," he said, muttering to himself.

Lee and I waited while MacKenzie looked. We waited almost five minutes, the sheriff growing more vociferous, more profane and self-critical by the moment.

Finally, he said, "Well--I tol' those fools on the third floor to clean it up. Oh, damn. Wonder if they've done it yet."

Even before MacKenzie said it, I think Lee knew what was on his mind. Lee started to say something, but the sheriff burst in with, "Lissen, ma'am. I know this is a helluva thing to ask. But would you mind comin' up to the cell and just lookin' for yourself?"

Lee blew up. "Fuck that!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sawyer," MacKenzie said. "But

this may be important to the case. Maybe your wife can help us figger it out. Now, I don't know--maybe it's just ravin' on the wall. Maybe it means nothin'."

Lee was biting his lip.

"But, Mr. Sawyer, it comes down to this. People have died here. An' we need to figger out why. We need to figger out who even," he said, and then turned to me. "'Cause I'll tell you somethin', ma'am. I'm not a hundred percent sure your brother did it alone. I'm not convinced of that at all."

I think my jaw dropped a bit.

"'Course, I'm not sure he didn't do it by hisself. That's possible, just lookin' at the evidence in the house. But what I'm tryin' to say is--hell, we need to look at everything. We won't be doin' our job if we don't. An' I'm sorry, ma'am," he said (and I do believe he meant it), "I'm very sorry I have lost that paper."

Lee was so angry he was white.

"So will you come?" he asked me. "Those fool trusties'll be up there with soap an' a brush, tryin' to earn their cigarette money, 'cause I tol' them to wash it off."

Really, I had no choice. Even Lee, I think, knew that. And in a way, it wasn't as bad as I had imagined--my God, the visions I had seen in the car that morning as we drove over to Jefferson, the visions I had seen in my sleep the night before: so much red there, the walls enshadowed and fairly dripping with my brother's blood, such

horror of words. But, of course, it wasn't like that at all.

Lee held my arm (he almost cradled me, the way the man in the Buick cradled the rubber girl) as we walked out of the office, behind MacKenzie's swooshing thighs, to the elevator. Before we reached it, we came to a locked metal door, a pan of glass sandwiched in the middle, eye-level and bullet-proof, no doubt, as it was crisscrossed by threads of steel. There was a young deputy sitting behind a desk near the door, and MacKenzie unholstered his gun, said, "Here, Bob," and gave it to him. He punched a button and the door opened automatically.

MacKenzie used a key on the elevator.

We rode up to the third floor, and really it wasn't as bad as I had thought. There were maybe twenty cells there, stuffed with me, a few of them, obviously, sleeping it off (this was the season to be drunk, you know). There were a couple of cat-calls as we walked down the corridor, a few vaguely obscene remarks from the men caged there which MacKenzie silenced quick enough with, "Fool, you want your teeth knocked out!" or something to that effect. Above us in the ceiling, the fluorescent lights buzzed (they, encased in cages, too) and beneath them, riding on the currents of cold light, there was only the faintest trace of urine and despair.

Really, it wasn't as awful as what I had imagined. The concrete floor felt spongy beneath my feet, not hard. I was almost sinking in, and to distract myself from this,

from the hard pressure of Lee's arm across my back, his tight, hurting grip on my elbow, from the awful thoughts that even then were trying to tunnel, like worms, into my brain, I looked down at the soft floor and tried to imagine Noab's colors there--what oranges he would use, what brilliant yellows.

Even when we got to Jule's cell, to the black, straight bars that run up and down, floor to ceiling, dividing space from space, the bars that should they pierce the jail and run forever that way (God, I actually remember thinking this), should they extend and run as perfect lines straight through the universe, would come back someday to meet themselves--space, you know, being an empty thing that is curved--even when we got to the cell at the end of the hall, to that tiny, empty place where Jule had been, it wasn't as bad as I feared.

Then, Lee was saying, "Celia--are you all right?" And MacKenzie was swinging open the door--a grating, metallic groan--and the colors on the floor vanished into gray, the bars became eight feet high.

I wrested myself from Lee and walked inside. The cell was small and empty. The trustees were God-knows-where, God-knows-doing-what; but they weren't here now. Nor had they been here yet with soap and water, a stiff-bristled brush, though I must admit that was my first thought upon entering the cell where Jule had been. My God, I thought, they've washed it away.

The point is: I looked around the tiny cell, I forced myself to concentrate on the three concrete walls, I looked and didn't even see it. Not at first, I guess, for what had I expected there? Three-foot letters dripping gore? The sensational stuff of horror films and cheap novelletes? The stuff that had filled my head for the last twelve hours.

It's almost embarrassing to say, but MacKenzie had to point me to it the message was so small, so tiny, almost lost among earlier grafitti that had been written there-- the fucks and cunts and so-and-so sucks cocks, the names (Joe, Harry, Ted, Tyrone), for a good time, call MacKenzie=4-6969! Kilroy is here--all the stuff that had been written once, washed, yet still not faded from the otherwise barren walls.

Jule's letter was over the bunk. Someone had already rolled up the black, plastic mattress, rolled it up like a leaf, exposing the iron-webbing of the bed. And to be honest with you, the blood he had written it in didn't even look like blood. It had browned-out in the intervening hours so that now, if it looked like anything, it looked like it had been done in a ragged, magic marker; it had the same sepia color of a crayon.

I forced myself to concentrate. I read the message two, three times. I looked over at MacKenzie (Lee was hanging back near the bars), I looked at this fat, hulking man and said, "What?"



"Look again, ma'am," he told me. He walked over to me. He stood so close I could smell the peppermint on his breath and the scent of his cologne.

I looked again, but it stayed the same, small symbols smashed together:

llasyalswons--eec

6 + 1 (M2)

AHAYWEH

evol,

j.

This was my brother's letter to me, to the world, to this world at least of concrete and iron bars and lights that buzzed above the head like insects. I read it again, as I was instructed to, then turned to MacKenzie and said, "What in hell do you want from me?"

"Don't you see it, ma'am?" he asked, and if you looked carefully, at the corners of his mouth, at the corners of his eyes, you could see his excitement growing. "Can't you see what he's doin'?" he said. And I swear, his chest was literally puffing up inside his shirt; what he was swelling with was pride.

I stared straight at him. "You mean that he's writing stuff backwards?"

The response, when it came, was weak: "Oh." The sheriff seemed surprised, a bit deflated even, that I would recognize so quickly what might have taken him hours to "figger" out, hours and hours, sitting on the webbing, looking at the wall.

I looked at Lee, at the crossbar above his head, swatch of blue.

"Is that what you mean?" I asked MacKenzie. (And yes, it was a rotten thing, mean, utterly hopeless and impotent, to stick the knife in deeper, twist it, deflate him even more. But listen: At that moment, in Julian's cell, I hated that man MacKenzie--I hated him more than I had ever hated anyone in my life.)

There he stood--so obtuse! So dense and sloppy and so at fault!

He was such a stupid man. He was so stupid that, at that moment, he didn't even know where the danger lay. And I'll tell you, the real threat to his life lay not in the convicts, those men with hollow eyes behind the bars who said, "Pussy, pussy" to me, as we walked past, who gyrated in their blue shirts and said, "Get down, mama!" or "Oh, baby!" The real danger to MacKenzie stood a spare six inches before him, was at that moment smelling the peppermint on his breath, hating his very soul. For I do believe that had he not checked his revolver downstairs with deputy Bob, I do believe that had he been armed, I might have grabbed the gun away and shot him dead myself.

Instead, I looked at Lee again--it was suddenly all so clear. I looked at the tiny patch of color above his head. (And, oh, I am feeling lost now. I feel as if I've fallen down a hole and can't get out, it is so awful trying to explain.) But, you see, there wasn't a message in my brother's cell, as MacKenzie thought, as Lee no doubt

thought, Lee who was still hanging back near the bars, silent and looking lost, too. There wasn't a message in that cell, in the jail. There were two.

The first, you know. Jule's letter, the writing on the wall, his grafitto. Backwards or not--it seemed crap. It didn't matter (at least, at the time, I thought it didn't; as I stood there in the tiny concrete box, I really believed it counted for nothing). The words, to me, meant nothing, or rather they meant what words always meant, when Jule was cik, when he was crazy and out of his head and playing with symbols. This was the message I had to be shown. And once it was pointed out to me, I deciphered it, recognized it. I dismissed it as crap, almost immediately.

Oddly, the other message--this not in words and therefore quite real--I had seen right away. No one (not fat MacKenzie or Lee or the other prisoners) had to point it out to me, yet its significance was elusive at first, for it was small and colored like the summer sky, and who on earth would question that? But there it was. There it was, hanging by a thread above Lee. It was just hanging there, this bit of chambray, identical to the shirts of the other prisoners, the men that said "pussy, pussy," that wrote cunt on the wall.

All at once, I knew what it was. I closed my eyes and saw him. I saw him pace the cell like a caged and frightened animal, saw him trapped here, saw him bite his arm, the small, blue vein, to get the blood and, that

dripping, saw him dip his finger in the red, with it write love on the wall. (That this love was backwards didn't matter. That I was making this up didn't matter. I saw it!) And then, Jule, more hopeless in his own mind, more alone than he had ever been before, thin and insubstantial as a wisp of smoke upon the bed, then Jule, silently, prayed to Balaam, mouthed Balaam's soundless words: I give up. Then he abandoned the world--and me. He took off his shirt (such whiteness of skin there in the cold cell, such hopelessness there wasn't even sweat, not the merest glimmer). He took off his shirt, wound it tight, like a rope, let it dangle in a flaccid loop between his hands, and quite calmly walked to the bars.

It was all becoming so clear to me. This--and the things leading up to it. It was all coming together in my mind, threads woven into whole cloth. Everything began to come together and form a pattern in my mind that, once there, was ineradicable:

Fat, dumb MacKenzie.

Fat, dumb MacKenzie putting Jule in a cell at the end of the hall, away from the other prisoners (from someone, the pussy-man, perhaps, who might notice).

Fat, dumb MacKenzie with his peppermints--masking what? Alcohol? Christmas booze?

Fat, dumb MacKenzie's desk, downstairs--littered with papers and junk, so much junk that anything could get lost there. Absolutely anything.

Maybe, by this time, I was becoming paranoid (Lee had almost suggested as much, covertly, in the woods). Maybe I was growing paranoid; but you know the story, right? If you had a hundred million monkeys at a hundred million typewriters for a hundred million years. . .eventually, you'd get the works of Shakespeare. All the plays. Hamlet. Macbeth. Every one. That's the science of probability, the science of improbability (if you wish to be precise), but eventually, with so many toiling monkeys, you'd get something on the page that would make sense.

Well, it occurred to me suddenly, standing in Jule's small cell, that this man MacKenzie was probably to blame. It was probably his fault that Jule attempted suicide.

How improbable was it, after all, that the judge had sent the order for Jule to be taken to Vinita? (Doc had said this was what they'd do.) How improbable was it that buried beneath a memo on the plumbing or stuck behind a coupon for forty-cent bread lay that very order? Take him to a padded room where he'll be cared for, it might have said; take care, MacKenzie, for he's a danger to society, blah, blah, and to himself. Look: if there could evolve the works of Shakespeare, by chance alone, from apes. . . how improbable was it that MacKenzie, pressed for time, disorganized, drunk, just fucked up with my brother?

Do you see now why I would like to have killed him? Why I would like to have gone at him, tooth and nail, fang

and claw? It was very nearly primal, what I felt: this murderous rage. Especially when he stood there telling me the obvious, when Lee came over, too, to take a peek.

"Ma'am, you see," MacKenzie said, "if we put a space there between the 's' an' the 'l' an' another one between the 'a' an' the 's'--an' then red it all backwards, what we get's a phrase."

God, how I hated him!

"Snow. . .slays. . .all," Lee said, slowly, clearly puzzled.

"There ya' go," MacKenzie told him. "Right on the dollar. 'Snow slays all.'"

I was still too enraged to speak.

"Of course, it may mean nothin'," MacKenzie said. "But, ma'am, I have to ask it. Does your brother have a friend named Snow?"

## Chapter Eight

I denied everything, of course.

I told MacKenzie I had no idea what Jule meant by "Snow." I told him that the message on the wall was as cryptic to me as it was to him, that to my knowledge Jule knew no Snows, was not now a friend of anybody named Snow, nor had he ever been, blah, blah.

"And yet, Sheriff," I said, after a moment's deliberation, "you know, it's possible. It's quite possible he does have a friend called that. Because, you see, I've been gone for five years. I've had no contact with my brother. I do not know his friends."

MacKenzie nodded.

"Who knows?" I said. "Maybe Jule does have a buddy-- Albert Snow? John Snow? Tyrone Snow? No one comes to mind immediately. But--as you yourself have pointed out--it's a lead. It's probably worth your time to investigate it," I said, "track down all the angles and whatnot."

MacKenzie nodded yet seemed unsatisfied. "What 'bout you, Mr. Sawyer? You know any guys name of Snow he might have run with?"

Lee thought for a moment, clearly came up blank. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I honestly don't. I've lived in Harlow most of my life. But, honestly, I haven't kept up with Julian. Not since Celia left. And even then," he said to me (and it was only half an accusation), "you never told me much about Jule. Except that he was crazy, of course, and hell, we all knew that." Lee was genuinely perplexed. "Snow?" he repeated. "Have you looked in the phone book, Sheriff? I mean, there's about five thousand people in Harlow, and I certainly don't know them all. Perhaps there's a Snow in the white pages."

"Or, in the yellow," I offered.

"Fact of it is," MacKenzie said, "I've already looked. There's four listin's there. Some of 'em, I'd take to be Indians, 'cause there's a 'Snowbear' down, and a couple of 'em live out of town, not far from the reservation."

"Yes," I suggested. "Maybe Snow's an Indian. A Chippewa or Creek."



"Maybe," he said. He took a deep breath, dramatically, exhaled it. "'Cause I'll tell you something. We got a problem here. Maybe now a big problem."

Lee squinted.

"We been over that house with a fine-tooth comb. I've had my boys go over ever' inch of that property--inside an' out. We haven't found the gun your brother used. We looked, and we just haven't found it."

"Maybe Snow has it," I said.

MacKenzie thought a bit. "Sure," he said, "that's occurred to me. If this fella Snow exists, and if he was in on it, it's possible he's got the gun."

"But Sheriff," Lee said, "I was under the impression Jule acted alone!"

"Well, that's what we thought, too. Originally. I mean, I been in on this case with Jim Randall almost from the beginnin'. An' before this," he said, gesturing with a wave of his hand to Jule's message on the wall, "we thought he acted alone. In a way, I still do. It's just a feelin', something you get in the gut, but I'd almost bet my life, your brother acted by hisself. An' yet. . . there's a few things that are puzzlin'. There's stuff that just doesn't fit, an' I can't get a clear picture of what happened."

"Like what?" Lee said.

"Well, in the first place, we know he went out an' was diggin' a hole--oh, maybe, two hunner' foot from the house. It was Jim's idea he was goin' to hide the bodies,"

he said, then added: "I'm sorry ma'am, to speak so of your folks--hope you understand."

I nodded.

"Jim figgered your brother was tryin' to hide the evidence, so to speak. But the ground's too hard this time of year to do much diggin'. Then, too, we know he went down to Muddy Bit Creek. We know he was breakin' through the ice, but we have to ask--what would his purpose be?"

"He's insane, Sheriff," I said. "What purpose beyond that would he need?"

"Jim an' me speculated, at first," he continued, "it was to put the bodies there. But nothin' was ever moved from the house. In fact, it doesn't appear like your brother ever went back inside once he left. So, the question is--"

"Did he drop the shotgun there?" Lee said.

"Maybe," he said. "I mean, it's possible. An' of course, we asked him, too, Jule. But he wouldn't say nothin' when he was here. Fact of it is, most of the time, he just sat," he said, kicking at the bunk with his boot. "Just sat right here with this silly look on his face an' wouldn't say a word. So, yeah. We think he may have dropped the weapon in the water."

A pause.

"Well, do you," demanded Lee, "plan to look for it?"

"Of course we,do," the sheriff said, now growing

slightly annoyed. "We didn't see any big rush on it though. Not at first. We were goin' to drag the creek soon as it got a little warmer out and the ice cleared. But now," he said--and he moved a bit closer to me, so close to the wall his shadow obscured Jule's message-- "now, we're thinking we might ought to hurry it up."

Lee was clenching his teeth.

"Understand," MacKenzie continued, "the evidence in the house suggests one--just one--perpetrator. But I've been at this game long enough--I'll be running for my sixth term come November--I've been doin' this long enough to know that physical evidence isn't everythin'. An' the point is, if there was two of 'em, Jule and somebody name of Snow, well, then we've got a different story, a whole 'nother ball game, if you will. Hell, he'd have to be as crazy as your brother, ma'am. To do what was done in that house."

"Uh huh," I said, my face completely devoid of emotion, my voice nearly so. "You'd have to chase after this lunatic, Snow, wouldn't you? I mean, you'd only be doing half your job if you didn't. And that'd make you--oh, what's the term for it?--unprofessional."

"That's right, Mrs. Sawyer," MacKenzie said.

"Tripp," I told him.

To which he said, "Sorry." Then he turned to Lee again. "That kid, Michael--he still the same, Mr. Sawyer?"

"Yeah," Lee said. "As I told you the other day, he's still. . .a mess. The doctor we took him to said it might be a long time before he remembers. For all you can get from him now, it's like he wasn't even there."

"What a shame," said MacKenzie. "I've got younguns of my own. Damn, what a pity. That kid's the only one that knows what happened that night. God, how I'd love to get in his head, for just a minute! He might be able to clear up this Snow stuff once and for all."

"I doubt that," I said. And for the first time since the conversation about Snowbelly began, I wasn't lying. I wasn't baiting MacKenzie or goading him into utter impossibilities. (To be frank, the idea of this dumb, fat man, this excuse for an officer of the law, badgering Michael, pestering him, was almost too much to bear. That child had problems enough, without adding this nonsense too it.) "What I mean," I said quickly, floundering for words for MacKenzie was looking at me very closely now, "is the doctor said he was probably hiding. She said he was in a closet," I told them, looking to Lee for confirmation-- which he gave, albeit a little uncertainly, with a slight nod of his head. "At any rate," I said to them both, said it and really believed it then, would have staked my soul (had I ever believed I really possessed one) on the fact that I was right, "it seems unlikely to me that the boy would know anything about someone called Snow."

What I wanted to do, of course, was torture him.

I wanted MacKenzie to go driving around the countryside, hunting up Snows, talking to Chippewas and Creeks, and God knows whoever else he could find. I wanted it to bother him as he slouched there on cold windy porches, facing even colder stares as he asked his stupid questions. How lovely for the flaccid gray of his brain to believe there might be two! Jule and another madman, another schizophrenic, in conspiracy together. How lovely for him to fret about the safety of his own "younguns," wrapped snug in their beds--for the madman on the loose still had Granddaddy's gun; how nice to have him lay awake at night and say to his wife, "Sugarpie, what if. . .?" There was nothing more I would have liked than for MacKenzie to chase down ghosts, Jule's hallucinations, wild geese that would never light on the branch of living trees.

I wanted him to hurt as much as I did. (It was a pain that even now seems to dreamlike to remember--had I actually hidden in the john? looked up and considered that limp towel as an option? made water there? Had I actually done that for the pain?) I wanted MacKenzie to suffer as much as I was suffering still; though, of course, I knew that was not possible.

So, how to describe it?

When we left the jail--me with Jule's message scrawled on a piece of paper, for MacKenzie had asked me to "Think about it, ma'am, an' if you come up with any ideas, give us a call"--when we left, we went to the hospital a few blocks away.

Lee didn't want to go. He tried to dissuade me with, "Don't you think it's an imposition? Having Heddy watch the kids all day?"

I said, "Don't be stupid--we're going. At least, I am."

"Well," he said with half a shrug, "I doubt they'll let you see him. When I called this morning, Jule was still in intensive care. The nurse said he wasn't being allowed visitors."

"I'm not a visitor!" I snapped.

To this, Lee almost sighed, "Cee, they're only trying to take care of him. If it's best he shouldn't be disturbed right now, I think we should respect that."

"Oh, you don't know what you're talking about," I told him--the as usual, though unstated, was I think apparent in my tone.

The hospital in Jefferson was probably forty or fifty years old. Serving the outlying counties (as did the jail), it was a large, sprawling red-brick thing, monstrously cold yet efficient enough for it was there that Granddaddy had his appendix out (and later annoyed the nurses) and Mother her rhinoplasty. In a way, this huge red thing, squatting now on its winter-dead grass, was almost a part of the family. Eddie had been delivered there to a round of proud cigars and forbidden, French champagne (Daddy sneaking it in beneath his coat). There, Annie and Michael both let loose their first squawking

cries (I frightened to hold her, amazed at the smallness of her fingers, their strong, fierce gripping of mine). It was also the place where Jule and I were to have been born, like Eddie and the children, had things gone right from the beginning.

But I couldn't think about that now. There were too many other worries--such as the woman on the fourth floor with pendulous breasts, the woman in white who sat at the nurses station and told us "No" with such calm authority, it made me want to slap her face. Either that or cry.

She presented the argument carefully (had she been coached?), saying much the same things as Lee had on the way over, except that now she pointed something out I hadn't even considered. She leaned across the counter, breasts squashing down; she pointed a little way down the hall to a young man, his chair tilted at an odd angle against the wainscoting, in front of ICU. The man looked bored, had a magazine spread across his muscular thighs. The woman in white said, "Listen, honey, even if I'd let you in to see your brother, he"--the man with Sports Illustrated--"wouldn't let you pass."

"Cop?" Lee said,

A nod. "They do it in shifts--all day, all night. One or another of the deputies just sits there, waiting."

"But Lee!" I said, the excitement inside suddenly growing, the very relief of it. "Lee, you said Jule was still unconscious!" Then, to the nurse, quickly: "You mean he's all right?"

(Lee, I think, closed his eyes.)

The nurse, looking puzzled for a second, then frowning, said, "No, honey. That's not why they're guarding him." She looked back down the hall. "Honestly! I'ts just plain stupid."

"Celia," Lee said (and the way he said it, with such patronizing sadness, as if he were explaining something to a child, the very way he said it made my feet begin sinking, my knees almost buckle beneath me--I had to brace myself against the counter as if that were the disappointment), "it's just the law. I wouldn't think Jule's. . .condition would make a difference about the deputy."

"They do it," the nurse added, quietly, "whenever we have a prisoner on the floor."

Oh, how to describe it?

The woman in white was speaking. Her breasts joggled as quick lips formed the words. "Lounge," she said. (And how do I say how much I suddenly wanted to sleep then? To lay on a poppy-red couch and close my eyes and not be bothered anymore.) "Wait." (For what? How to tell you that my whole life had been spent this way? Hopeless passivity. Hopeless waiting. For it was true. I had waited and waited, read my books and waited, knowing nothing



else to do, for the ghosts to go away. How to say that it was a failure? I knew that now. Knew it. And I do not want you to think I was mad, that I had "lost it," as Jule had "lost it"--unless you can tell me, precisely, definitively, without hesitation exactly what that "it" is--look, I do not want you to think I was as lost as Jule, but what I wanted then, suddenly, was for Balaam to come back. I wanted him to grow strong again, to stop being such a simpering ass; I wanted him to grow strong of limb, have thighs as richly muscled as that young man in the chair, reading; I wanted the light green of his face, the brilliant blue eyes, hands pink and white as petals, strong enough to blast the others into oblivion.) "Doctor will come." (Oh, how to tell you, by that time, I hated them all!)

The rest of the time in the hospital was like a dream. Lee and I in the empty lounge, waiting. The nurse bringing coffee. Strong brew. Mud on my lips.

And then the doctor came. I forced myself to pay attention, was surprised he was so young, this Dr. Manning. Thinking back on it now, perhaps he was too, as his manner was nervous and uncertain, at first. He kept smoothing his black hair against his head; he paced around the lounge, describing Jule's "status," and when he spoke, he was not good at meeting our eyes.

He explained the situation--perhaps the best he could--in medical terms, latinate phrases that seemed at first too abstract to be terribly ominous: "emergency

tracheotomy. . . comatose, yet evidencing peaks and valleys on the EEG. . . fractured larynx, irreversible aphasia. . . oxygen deprivation."

I knew, of course, intellectually what many of the words meant, could match up syllable with syllable; but it wasn't until he began speaking in plain English, embellishing the simpler words with still simpler detail (the stuff which flutters the heart) that the picture for me grew clear--frighteningly, horribly clear.

Jule had been given an emergency airway at the jail immediately after they'd cut him down. (Apparently, one of the other prisoners had slid the deputy a shiv, crudely fashioned from a spoon, and it was this the deputy had used to cut a passage in Jule's neck. A Bic pen, broken in half, served as a breathing tube--"hardly sterile," as Manning said, "but it did the job.") Probably it was the airway that saved my brother's life. He was unconscious when he arrived at the hospital, was still in a coma now, but the machine was saying, "something's there--some kind of thought," for there were brain waves, jagged peaks and valleys popping all over the graph. What level of thought this was, what quality, Manning refused to say. No one really knew how long Jule had hung there without air. So really, Manning told us, the fact he crushed his voice-box in the fall and would never speak again--this was tragic, of course, but it constituted the least of worries, as such words (were Jule able to speak) might now be those of an imbecile child.

It was too awful to think about, too horrid, and at this point, I believe I left them.

I got up, leaving Manning to deal with Lee or Lee with him, and wandered out of the lounge, past the nurses station. I wandered down the hall.

I imagine I must have been dazed and looked it. I must have looked lost and utterly harmless, as lost things tend to be, because the deputy with his rippled thighs put down his magazine but said nothing to me. He just sat there, precariously balanced against the wall, watching. He let me come and stand beside him, limp and harmless, gazing into the cubicle fronted by a pane of big, green glass. He let me see my brother.

Or rather: the tubes that sprouted from him, that floated from his throat and arms and groin into machines, blinking and pulsing with sound as if they had lives of their own.

It was a hellish sight. It was like a nightmare, mythic, almost bestial, for try though I might, I could not see Jule's face among the snakes that coiled round him. I could only see the hardware, the room as a whole which made no sense, and superimposed on this my own reflection--me--floating in the glass.

I think I put my hand up to the cool, green surface. I think I balanced myself, for it was too awful to consider. Julian brain-damaged? Retarded? A baby now. An infant by the side of the road, lost for words and squealing moo-cow, moo-cow, moo! at the sight of a Shropshire ram.

## Chapter Nine

"This is the worst it gets," said Lee.

We were at the kitchen table. It was late. The children were asleep, having worn themselves out at Heddy's, having worn her out too, for she was pale in the door when we arrived to collect them, too tired and upset to say much beyond, "Kids. Where do they get such energy? And the language," she said, almost in a whisper, "the language that boy uses, Celia, is. . .oh, I've never heard such things from a child!" For a second, she seemed to want to say something else--there was a peculiar look in her eyes--but Michael and Annie were putting on their coats, coming to the door, chattering and anxious to leave, and to be frank, I was too tired and still too upset myself to care what Heddy had to say.

Now, it was late. Very late. I was still feeling shakey, if that's the word, as we sat at the kitchen table. We were drinking bottles of Perrier--this, for the water had gone out earlier that evening, the pipes sputtering with so much air, groaning at the emptiness. The water had been off more than an hour, and when it was finally restored it came out in a weak stream, almost as brown as the Bit. Lee, standing over the sink, said, "Hell!" (for this was always happening in Harlow, the water plant at the edge of town a tired thing, too, clad in corrugated tin, always breaking down). Lee said, "Where the shit does Sylvia keep that stuff?" She was still at her girlfriend's house, so Lee had to look around. He went to the pantry. He searched under the sink among the cleansers and scouring pads, bottles of drain cleaner (I had read once that to drink that stuff was like drinking fire, the way the liquid ate the flesh as it slithered down--and yes, it vaguely bothered me, at the kitchen table, to have remembered such a thing, to think this, my hand sliding up to my throat, as Lee said, "Well, shit!" and pushed the Drano back toward the mousetraps). He finally found the Perrier--in the logical place--in the fridge, the green bottles stuffed in the back behind a rusted head of lettuce. He extracted them (leaving the lettuce there), took off the caps and said, "Here. It's awful stuff, but at least it's wet."

I took the bottle he offered me, swallowed a couple of tranquilizers (for how else could I sleep tonight? how

could I lay my head on the pillow with plastic snakes coiling so vividly in my mind?) I took the pills and looked, absently, at the slip of paper on the table--Jule's last message--and Lee said, "This is the worst it gets."

I think I wanted to ignore him. I tried, but he wouldn't let me.

He sat down, took a deep swig himself, and said, "Even if he dies. . ."

Oh, God!

". . .it might be a blessing now. Look," he said, weakly, "I know Jule--"

I stroked the paper with my finger.

--and I know he wouldn't want to go on living. Not like that. Like a . . .vegetable."

The paper was rumpled. I looked at the wrinkles it had acquired in my pocket, then at Lee, with wrinkles of his own, deepening creases on his forehead, and, honestly, he was crazier than Jule to say such tripe. Really, I wanted to ignore him. I wanted to close my eyes and blot the creased face from the kitchen, from the universe, but his words were too relentless and demanding of an answer. What I said was, slowly, "We don't know anything yet."

Lee lit a cigarette. Took a while shaking out the match. "The doctor said--"

"He said," I said, slowly, carefully, "it was a possibility."

"A good possibility, Cee. A very good possibility

that the brain is damaged. You'd know that. . .had you waited to hear the man out."

I lit a cigarette, too. "There are peaks and valleys."

"Oh, Cee. . ."

"Well that's what he said! Peaks and valleys!" I threw the match into the ashtray. Peaks and valleys! The whole thing was beginning to make me angry. And, I don't know. . . .Maybe it was just the fact it was Lee there, playing the foil (Lee, who had once stood in another kitchen, waving a knife at my brother, both of them slightly bloody and very much afraid); maybe it was just my damnable hope, that thing that made me want to wait, beyond all hope, beyond the rational perhaps (for wasn't that shiv in Jule's throat, after all, a symbol of it, too? Had there not been hope-- why bother at all? Surely, I was not alone in feeling this damnable thing!)--whatever it was, whatever the reason, I couldn't let the things Lee said go by unchallenged. I just couldn't sit there, with my bottle of Perrier, and let Lee's hopeless, stupid words, his, oh, yes, it might be a blessing now to die crap hang, undisputed, in the air. I had to argue, had to think. And what I said was, "We won't know anything for sure until Jule comes out of the coma."

"If he comes out, you mean."

Shut up! At that moment, I think I hated him. To shut him out, I took another drink of the water, and God, but it was awful stuff--a fraud, too, I found myself thinking, weak bubbles breaking on my tongue, a fraud, just like Lee

and that idiot Manning, that jerk MacKenzie at the jail (for I'd read somewhere, in France, they add the bubbles mechanically; it isn't a natural thing; nothing springs up sparkling like weak champagne from dirty little hole in the ground). It was all such a fraud--Lee's hopeless, relentless "logic," as phony and riddled with holes as the water, that Jule would be blessed to die.

"Not to change the subject," Lee said, "but you need to think about calling school, don't you?"

(Really, I wasn't listening.) Good Lord, what would he argue next? That cancer was good? That soldiers blown to bits in Beruit were favored? (And here, the image of eighteen year old kids, tubes of Clearasil still in their pockets, came drifting into my mind: What would Lee say, hovering around the rubble, disintegrated concrete? "Hmmm. This is good.") What the hell was he talking about?

Lee repeated his question.

"What?" I said.

"School! Your job, Cee! Look, if they do in Nebraska like they do here, school will be starting next week. Shouldn't you be calling your principal? Let him know you and Annie won't be back?"

To be honest, I hadn't even considered that. And in a way, this simple, banal detail--Rosewood Heights Academy, Mrs. de Grazzio, her wide, bland face on the phone--in a way, the very banality of it brought me back to the discussion, back to the table in Lee's yellow kitchen, where I sat, for a moment, utterly confused. I wasn't even sure she knew



what had happened here. I tried to remember back to that Saturday--Christmas Day--and couldn't recall having told anyone, not even the neighbors, so how would Helen know at school? Now, at Lee's table, I tried to conjure her up, picture her expansive, almost bovine features, see her lips against the receiver, saying "What? Oh, Celia, what!"--but, really, she seemed a million miles away. She seemed fuzzy, not really real at all.

"Celia?" Lee was saying.

"Yes," I told him, softly. "Yes, I suppose I should call."

"And what about Michael?" he asked.

I looked at him. "What? What about him?"

"Well, school. . . We probably should have asked Dr. Friedmann if he should go back so soon or not. What do you think?"

What could I think?

"Well?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging, and I tried to picture him back in his class, racing about the room, speaking of rocks and leaves and that stupid science shit; I tried to see (I think did see) his blond head bobbing up and down among the other kids, his laughter and their confusion, his teacher (Mrs. Robeson? Mrs. Robinson? I couldn't remember her name, though he'd told me it, a couple of times, had said she was a "dumb ol' witch--bad as Mr. Bailey!"); I tried now to visualize this poor woman's horror, her stunned silence, lantern-jaw dropping open, in Michael's whirling

presence. I looked at Lee across the table and said, "God, I just don't know!"

Lee blew out a stream of smoke. He shook his head, the smoke fluttering. "At the very least, you should set up a conference with Clara Roberts. You remember, the doctor said we should."

I nodded.

"And something else while we're at it--"

I pushed at the hair, falling over my face. I was almost too tired to listen anymore.

"--Bertie Swann called tonight while you were getting the kids ready for bed."

Yes, yes. I did remember the phone ringing, Michael in the master bedroom, me tucking him in, and the phone on the nightstand ringing, Michael saying, "Celia? You 'spose that's Jule?"

"Bertie said he'd like to read the wills as soon as possible."

"The wills," I repeated. And yes, that was another thing I had forgotten--or, rather, hadn't even considered. The wills. For some reason, I started glancing about the kitchen, the vision of my parents' house coming into my head. "Lee," I said, "I don't know where they are."

"Bertie's got them. Down at the bank, Cee. He's one of the executors."

"Oh."

I began to stub out my cigarette (a long column of ash having already fallen on the table).

Lee cleared his throat. "And one other thing--"

"Oh, dammit, Lee!" I said, for I was now growing quite irritated at him, at his niggling little details. What the hell now was he planning to bother me with? "Dammit, Lee," I said, "I can't remember all this stuff!" Then, a second later, calmer (or, at least, wanting him to think I was calmer, for he was looking at me a bit strangely): "Look, get me a piece of paper, will you? I'll write all this down."

Lee got up, found half a tablet of paper (accountant's stuff), a ballpoint pen in the junk drawer that wouldn't write, a pencil, quite sharp. He brought them to the table and sat down, looking almost guilty as he had trouble meeting my eyes.

I ignored this. I tried to remember what he had said. Slowly, I wrote:

School. Neb. M's teacher.

What else?

Wills. BS.

Was that all? "Something else you said, Lee?"

He rubbed his chin, the fair stubble.

"Well, what?" I asked.

He looked down at the table top. He said, "I hate to bring it up. But I have to, Cee. It's the business."

"Oh?" I said, thinking, Oh, God. "What else did Bertie say?"

"Not your business, Cee," he said, slightly irritated. Mine."

"Oh."

"Well, don't say it like that!" he said. "It's just that. . ." (honestly, he was having a tough time saying it), "I've been ignoring everything for the last week or so!" (The anger in his voice was slight, but there.) "And it's not that I'm complaining," he said, trying to explain, trying to be honest--for that was there, too--"I haven't minded, Cee. Really, I haven't! God," he said, softly, "I'd do it in a minute, you know? Given the circumstances. Given it's you and Annie. God, I sometimes think there's still a part of me that--"

"Don't say anything else, Lee," I said, almost adding please.

Lee grimaced slightly, then nodded his head. "It's just that this time of year's so damned busy. There's taxes, quarterly statements, end-of-the-year accounts--"

I said, "Really, you don't need to explain it, Lee. I understand." And I did. I really did, and in a way, it was almost a relief to have it out now in the open. I took the pencil and under "Wills" wrote "Eddie's." Lee watched me do it, but just to be sure he understood, I said, "I'll be taking the kids to Eddie's house tomorrow--"

"There's no rush, Cee."

"No, I know there isn't. But it's something we need to do. Look, Lee. You've got your own life. Sylvia. All of it. And for our own sake, I think we need to get out of here, too."

"That's not what I meant. That you had to leave, Cee. I was just trying to tell you--I can't run around all day like this. I didn't mean you should pack up and leave!"

I looked at him.

"It's just the business is suffering. That's all." He lit another cigarette. He almost shrugged. "And, look--this doesn't mean anything, I mean, it doesn't mean anything I'm sure as far as you and I are concerned, but. . .what you said about Sylvia?" he said (and he said it almost matter-of-factly). "She's not my life, Cee. Never was. Sylvia's just. . . ."

"Sylvia," I said, shaking my head slightly. "I know, Lee. I know that."

He seemed slightly relieved.

"Still," I said, "I think we do need to leave."

He started to say something.

"Look," I said, softly, heading him off, "what are you going to do? Sleep on that sofa forever?"

He looked at me a long time. "Yeah," he said finally, "you're right. I know you are." Then, a moment later: "Listen, I'll help you move this weekend. Tomorrow if you want. I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you," I said. "I mean that. Thank you for everything."

We sat there a little longer that night, saying very little, me playing with the pencil, looking at my list, looking at Jule's. In a way, his was no more cryptic than

mine. Just for the hell of it, I started playing with the words. I redid the first line, changing llasyalswons--eec into Cee--Snow slays all. That part was easy. As was the fourth line and the fifth:

evol,

j.

Love, Jule. Those three were very easy.

Lee was yawning. He said he was tired and wanted to sleep. He said it had been a long day, for both of us, and would I go to bed?

I think I shrugged. I wrote the numbers backwards.

Lee watched me do it. He watched for some time, stifling a yawn, and finally he said, "Oh, that's nonsense, Cee."

I didn't answer. (Really, it was quite an absorbing thing, intellectually absorbing.)

"It doesn't mean a damn thing," Lee said. He took another sip from the bottle. "And I don't care what that ass at the jail told you. You shouldn't allow yourself to get worked up over this, Cee. It's just madness."

"It's the last thing Jule said," I told him and kept working with the pencil.

"It's crap," he said (and a part of me did believe he was right, but now--and I think it was the hospital that did it, looking through green glass at the snakes that were sucking on Jule, keeping him alive--now, a part of me was beginning to think otherwise, that maybe there was something here, something in the letters, the odd little

configurations that had--had they not?--been written with my brother's blood. "Good God," Lee said, "that wall might just have well have been blank, for all it means."

I kept jotting things down.

"What are you thinking, Cee?" he said. "You think you're going to find the clue to Julian's mind there? In that. . .that crap?"

I ignored him, for now, again, it was beginning to wear on me, his stupid, relentless reasoning. Might be a blessing!

"And besides, even if you do find something there," he added, a little more gently now, "you know what they say, Cee. 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'"

What fraud.

"Drink your Perrier," he told me, his voice thoroughly exhausted. "Go to bed and forget it." He said something else, too, mumbled his "good night," got up and left the room.

Julian's numbers meant nothing to me. I tried them all sorts of ways, first writing them backwards:

(2M) 1 + 6.

I changed them into words:

two-em one plus six.

Nothing. And yet, the other stuff was written back to front, was it not? "Snow slays all" made sense, of a sort--and that dumb shit sheriff! That ass in Jefferson! Good God, he'd probably read Stephen King, letter by letter, with his

fat, fleshy lips no less moving, and hadn't realized redrum was backwards death till "The End." And that was the point, you see. The end. That is why I went, if you will, a little crazy over Julian's words.

I sat there at the table late into the night. I played with the words hard, very hard, because at that moment in the warm yellow kitchen, its table spiked by bottles of green glass, green like Balaam's face, like that glass which might as well have been concrete or granite for it obscured so much of Jule at the hospital, showing me only the snakes--at that moment, you see, I honestly believed that those pathetic, inscrutable little words and numbers (as sad, as impotent as if they had been carved into granite, a soon-to-crumble slab, and that stuck into the ground), I believed they constituted the end of him. They formed a testatment, his last act of will before he took his shirt off and tried to die. And, yes! I wanted now, more than anything, to believe they were important.

Maybe Lee was right. Maybe they meant nothing. Maybe the blankness of that wall, the sheriff's shadow on it, was all I could ever know for sure. Perhaps.

But it was all I had. It was all Jule left me to go on--that and memories, of course, memories, too. But honestly, those made as much sense as the numbers he had written at the jail, for what could one say, rationally, of a blue tick pup, floating in a slop jar? What could one make of odd geometries (stars and trapezoids, pentagrams)



sketched with a shard of glass, a hunting knife or Mother's best silver carver (the turkey knife on Thanksgiving)--what could one make of shapes like this incised on a little boy's arms? What sense did it make to have an angel named Snowbelly, responsible for all?

Memories failed, like an old man's eyes. The words, you see, were all I had left of my brother.

And words, too--if you want the truth--had been my salvation as a child, for I had always loved them. Very young, I had loved the sonorous, sleepy sound of "Sooner"--Granddaddy chuckling in the library, calling his Daddy this, telling us the story of how his own "Pa" had picked out his land (the best part of the county) a little "sooner" than the others, those stupid, honest folk who had waited for the land run of '98 to properly begin. Soooo-ner! Laughter and cigar smoke in the library. And upstairs, in the bedroom, nestled beneath clean sheets, there were Mother's words, these coming on whiffs of rose-water and talc: her "beaux" (which I knew, very early, were young men--before Daddy--but I saw as bright, wide ribbons, pink and satiny, fresh in the hair); her "dances at the Moose lodge" (and here, I saw the lights, the crepe paper, people and furry Bullwinkles dancing together in a wild, whirling rush); "boxes and boxes of chocolate turtles from my beaux!" (I cannot describe how horrified, and entranced, I was by this). All these words! The fucking words. They had me snared, enspelled, before I was even five.

And later, when I could read--my God, they were everywhere. Beautiful, squiggling things, words to fill the solitude of the bed at night, books not smelling of cigars or laughter or summer flowers, but smelling good nonetheless (my nose pressed deep into the open spine), smelling like church, sometimes, smelling a lot better than the blood on Jule's arms.

Of course. Of course! They didn't explain away Jule's madness. They didn't explain the spells he said, chants to Balaam in his room. I guess, now, they didn't explain much. Didn't really make it easier to be ten years old and ugly, to have "duck lips" instead of people lips, to be so afraid of the attic. And if I'm being honest now--and I did tell you, this is how I'd be--if I'm to tell the truth, they didn't even help (not in the sense of warm arms about your shoulders, not in the sense of a hug and the words, "Cry, if you want. Celia. Cry") when you opened the lid of the big jar out back and found your favorite puppy there, not crying or breathing at all.

Was it all nonsense then?

I remembered once (by the time of the puppy) reading somewhere, in some silly book, or maybe it was one of Mother's magazines that came fresh and shiny into the house each month-- I remembered reading that you could bring the dead back to life. You did it with your mouth. It was a simple thing. So when I found Huck, wet and limp in the slop jar, his fur matted and smelling not nice, when I found him, I pulled him out. I took him to the back porch, put him on

step anyway. I was ten years old and he was limp and cold but that didn't matter. I pushed my face toward his, put my lips around his snout and began blowing life--I believed this--back into his lungs. He small chest puffed out like a hairy balloon. It went out and in (the air released like a sigh), out and in--oh, I don't know, maybe a hundred, two hundred times.

Was it all nonsense then?

At the time, I don't believe I thought so (again, that damnable hope).

For some reason that even now I don't clearly understand, I put him back in the slop jar. I closed the lid. I don't remember much about the next few hours; but sometime that evening, I was back in my room, laying on the bed, and with nary a tear, was falling into other stories on the nubby, patterned spread: one about a kindly man, beset by theives along the road; another about an even kinder man, dying on a tree. Eventually, I even forgave Jule.

Or, was it Snow?

"Snow slays all"--I looked at my brother's message, again and again, at the kitchen table. I looked at his numbers:  $6 + 1$  (M2). Backwards or forwards, upside or down, manipulated a dozen ways, like an equation, they seemed random to me, the mathematics of chaos.

And what to do with AHAYWEH? What do do with line three?

If you said it aloud (as I did, softly so as not to wake the others in the little house), it sounded Indian.

Aha! Yweh!

A ha yweh!

It sounded like Chippewa or Creek; but, to be frank, it didn't seem likely to me that Jule had learned those languages--not with him being frightened so often of strangers (and in Harlow there was a kind of social stratification, a slight xenophobia on both sides still). So it didn't seem likely Jule knew these tongues--especially when most of the Indians didn't know them either.

Ultimately, I had to discount the Indian possibility. I tried another tack, forming the letters (like one of those Scrabble games in the paper) into individual words:

A ha hew y?

We hay a ha?

God, but it was growing tedious. I was concentrating as hard as I could but came up with nothing that made the least bit of sense.

Yaweh Ha!

Good God! What was that? All of a sudden, from somewhere outside the yellow kitchen, I heard a whoosh! Something exploded.

It startled me so badly I nearly jumped from the chair. I forced my hands to the table top (to steady the slight tremble). I forced myself to sit there and wait, listening. After a while, I thought I must have imagined it. I even said to myself, Oh, Cee--come on!

I made myself get back into the message. I looked

at the fourth line: evol. Clearly, this was love, was it not? But by this time, my palms sweating and still slightly shakey, I couldn't be sure. "Evol?" I whispered. "Evol? Evil? Evolve?"

Another whoosh! Another explosion--this one rattling the window pane. Imagination, hell! My God, it sounded like. . .

I jumped up, ran over to the kitchen window, pulled back the flounce of curtain. I looked out. The night sky was black, but. . .there. . .and there! All of a sudden, there were orange-red streaks, slashes in the sky as if from missiles. In the distance, the sound of bombs.

It was so stupid (I won't even admit to you what I thought first--for, good God, just that day, or was it the day before? sometime they had said on tv that there was to be a summit at Camp David very soon--so I won't even admit to you what I thought first), but I began growing very frightened, hands pulling the flounce. Annie--the thought of her small, upturned face--flashed into my mind. For a fraction of a second, I thought of running to her, running into the bedroom, covering her up with my arms.

Then, of course, I heard the pots.

I looked across the back yard at the house behind. I had to squint to see clearly through the naked trees, but Lee's neighbors had come out on the patio. I could just barely see them, standing in the yellow bug-light of their porch. They seemed to be an older couple; they seemed to be in their pajamas. They were beating on

pots, making noise.

Another rocket flared in the sky.

And it hit me, suddenly. I looked at the kitchen clock--two minutes past. I glanced at the calendar below it (Norman Rockwell's Santa, a little boy, his pants falling down): Friday, December 31st.

Or rather: not. Not any more. For it was two minutes past midnight.

I closed my eyes and could see them. All across Harlow, people coming out: some beating aluminum pots with spoons or their hands; some toasting each other with champagne, Cold Duck; some shooting off fireworks saved from July (which was what we had always done, up at the big house, Granddaddy hiding the best roman candle for six months in the attic). It was almost embarrassing. A new year now, the baby exchanged for an old man, each, inexplicably, in diapers. It was almost embarrassing--a new year again, and the people of Harlow (I suppose, everywhere) were out on their patios, drunk or sober, clothed or not, making noise to welcome it in.

I turned back toward the kitchen table, shaking. I looked at the mess. Green bottles, empty, papers scattered about, lists, symbols, dulled lead. Enough! Maybe Lee was right. I was very tired. Maybe the words Jule had written were without meaning, just like everything else.

I turned off the kitchen light. Total darkness.

This is the worst it gets, said Lee.

But he was wrong. Very wrong. For the next morning, we moved to Eddie's.

Lee helped us with the suitcases. He gave the children apples, stocked the refrigerator with soda pop and milk. He made the transition as comfortable as he could--comfortable like an old shoe, an old hat.

And, in a way, it was a comfortable house. It was a small house, a tract house--not unlike my own in Nebraska in Rosewood Heights, not unlike any of the others here that lined the street, their facades slightly different, perhaps, but the floor plans the same, just flipped over, house to house, like mirror images, fraternal twins of brick and wood. It would have been, I think, a very comfortable place to live.

In 96 hours, though, you couldn't. In 96 hours, it was uninhabitable--for the cold and the char, for the smell.

## Chapter Ten

(For the longest time, I thought it was coincidence. I thought it was just the stupidest thing--more absurd than Mr. Falconer here and his dipsomaniacal drivel, his hellish Dis, dis, dis! screamed at the orderlies, mashed potatoes "deconstructing"--his word--on his shoe. Honestly, I didn't see it at first in Harlow, in Eddie's house. Or rather, to be truthful, I saw it, but didn't want to believe what was right before my eyes, right there slapping me in the face. . .should I say it? like Warren here, who slaps his own face from the very guilt of it--whatever it is--and runs about hiding Alka Seltzers in the potted plants, believing he's Gerald Ford. Good God, it seemed so utterly ridiculous, too absurd for words, though at first, I accepted the blame for it, utterly, listen,



I accepted the blame for it. I felt it in my bones, in the rumbling of my guts as I stood there in the cold, blackened mess: My God, I thought, I almost killed the children! I almost killed them! And I blamed myself. I blamed the drugs, blamed them even--awful as it sounds--even as I was bending to retrieve the plastic vials, the blast of water having scuttled them to the other side of the kitchen; even as I was pocketing them, I blamed the drugs and the nap and "Hoppin' John" for the terrible mess of it, it being Eddie's house, what was left of it. I know. I know! It sounds quite "mad," doesn't it? It sounds like something Warren would make up and say in group, his stories as convoluted and shady with illogical, gray detail as the very brain beneath his skull. It does sound stupid--fine. Let me back up.)

In the beginning, things went well enough. Lee, as I've said, helped us move that Saturday morning to Eddie's house. It was a cold, crisp day. The sun shone so brightly and the sky was so blue, it gave Eddie's street (Elm) a rarified look, the houses standing out in sharp relief on trim brown lawns.

Lee went shopping for us. He tried to make the transition as easy as he could, buying Wonder Bread for the children, peanut butter, jelly, sugary cereal in the shape of elves.

Annie was confused at first. She looked at her little bedroom with the big (sagging) bed--this was

Pam and Eddie's room for guests--and said, "I hafta sleep here, Mommy?" I told her, yes. Rather woodenly, I picked up her doll, made of point of showing Cherry the sights of the room (the mismatched nightstands, the tissue box holder, the print of Jesus with a halo above the bed). I said, See? Cherry likes this room. She's smiling. Annie was unconvinced. Michael, of course, was off in his own room that morning, frenetically rummaging about, happy enough, to judge by the laughter.

What I felt during that time was simply a great sense of loss, an emptiness, especially at night after Lee had made his requisite call (sometimes by phone, occasionally at the door). For the first time since this whole thing began, what I felt, quite keenly, was a void somewhere, an interior hole that, like the ulcer of a widower, flared up especially at night, when I was alone, the kids fast asleep in their rooms.

Often, I had the tv on, just for the sound. I found Pam's bag of knitting and tried my hand at it, but my fingers were as clumsy with the red and blue yarns as they had been with Cherry (me, trying to make her wave at Jesus); the fuzzy balls kept getting tabgled on the sofa and I hadn't the energy, by eight or nine at night, to straighten them out.

With half an ear, I tried to listen to the television. It was the same old trip, most of it--cops and robbers, cowboys killing Indians and the other way around, the

pale, fleshy lips of a cowpoke saying, "murderin' heathens!"  
Junk.

What I wanted, I guess, was to be whisked away. I longed for something to engage the mind, to stop the voices in my head. (And no: I am not referring to hallucinations, hearing music in one's tooth or transmissions from Pluto, from the Great Beyond. What I'm talking about are those voices everyone has all the time, those tremulous, barely audible sounds of the past. What I mean is my mother on the spiral stairs; the way her hand floated down to the balustrade while her voice, simultaneously, rose to a frightened pitch--or my grandfather, in the library, his phlegmy half-cough of disbelief. I am speaking here of my own father's silence.) This is what I wanted to get away from--mostly, I guess, from my Daddy's silence which filled the house, slithered about the nooks and crannies, the orderly rooms whenever the children were asleep and the tv not on.

I would like to have had a book, of course. But Pam and Eddie were no great readers. Beyond a worn family Bible (Pam's) and a few religious tracts (my sister-in-law, I knew, was quite active in the church and my guess was distributed these Saturdays at the shopping center), beyond these and some back issues, clipped for coupons, of Woman's Day and Family Circle, the same sort of stuff my mother always read, I found nothing.

And believe me, I looked. I even went so far as to plunder Eddie's desk. I found a letter there he

had started, an insurance brochure that began If you should die (at which point, I closed the drawer and looked no further).

What I wanted, particularly that first night, Saturday, was a book--the longer and weightier, the more intricate and engrossing, the better. (God, but I think I would have even settled for an English governess, orphaned and too beautiful for words, her cruel, haughty master ensconced in a gray castle, as gorgeous as she.) What I wanted was a story to be swallowed up in for a while. I wanted a book--and Michael's room was stuffed with them. It was ridiculous. I--pacing around the living room--had to lecture myself out of the impulse: The kid's a kid. He needs his sleep. You can't just barge right in!

So what I did was watch tv. Saturday night. Sunday night (when Michael's book on aquatic life, written on a fifth grade level, began to wear thin).

The only shows of any interest were on the educational channel. The one about the woman living with mountain gorillas was mildly engaging (especially when she mimicked their boasting gestures astride a nest of leaves). A political debate--local, by this I mean the state of Oklahoma--held my attention for a while, then slipped into cliché, to finger-pointing and so much dialectical rhetoric that I can't tell you now what the issue was, or even if there was one. And then. . .the one I sat through, rapt. The one I didn't want to see, hadn't expected, having no

TV Guide in the house. The one from which, once I started, I couldn't unglue my eyes.

Listen: They have fast food places now. Like McDon or Kentucky Fried--the oriental equivalent. The announcer said the children dress in jeans and study English, score higher on things like science and math than do American kids of comparable age. They have department stores and Walkmans in their ears, but this is trivia--tripe. This isn't really Hiroshima.

God. . .given my mood, the thing that really rivetted me (made my heart beat so loud and fast in my chest I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep that night, without assistance) was the nurses, their own glasses broken, swabbing goop from people's eyes (I won't tell you what that goop was), and shattered buildings, wooden houses turned to dust, even the insects gone. An image I still can't forget. The announcer said the light that morning was more intense than a sun, rising, exploding in the heavens. He said that miles away from the blast, people walking past on their way to work were photographed, their moving silhouettes captured on brick as if on film.

Do you see why I took three tranquilizers? (Or actually: two and a part of a third, for I was really frightened now, Daddy's silence enveloping the house; I felt small and inadequate standing over the kitchen sink, pulling apart the gelatin capsule--this almost melting in the wetness of my hand; I dumped part of the powder down

them up, alone at the breakfast bar, with some Coors Lee had bought, and still later, downed a Contac pill, laden with antihistamine, just to be able to sleep? Just so I could sleep, alone, in Eddie and Pam's double bed.

(I know. I know. You're going to say, now, Celia's connecting the destruction of Japan with that of her own family. And, to be sure, you'd be right. At least, partially. Especially later when flames began leaping from the closet near the master bedroom as, just the day before, Annie had been screaming "Hoppin' John! Hoppin' John!" and would not let it rest. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. I'm afraid I'm not making much sense--and that is the point, isn't it, of this exercise? To make sense?) So, the important thing to understand is: yes, that image of holocaust stayed. It was like the cheap stuff of horror stories (the black shadow of a cat's arching back; power sparking, pole to pole, as Frankenstein's man opens his eyes); it was cheap and shoddy and no doubt too simple to link such vast, living death with my own family, but perhaps that's what I did: the image flashing in tiny, electrical arcs, neuron to neuron, hemisphere to hemisphere, until it encircled all.

That story on Hiroshima was broadcast Sunday night. Monday morning at ten, Bertie Swann, his eyes large and liquid in his head, sat down (tenuously) in Granddaddy's chair in the boardroom of the bank and began sorting out the wills.

It should have been such a simple thing. What's to it, but reading the papers, doing what they say? It should have been so simple and straight-forward, but it wasn't. Not with Roger Whittleson there (the third Whittleson of Whittleson, Whittleson, Bartlemore, Schapp & Whittleson), Roger who insisted on precedent, on following the law to its very letter and "crossing all the t's," Roger who had just returned from two week's fishing off the Baja peninsula in Mexico. (Blue marlin, he said, sheepishly, and apologized for that; he said, Christ! I didn't even know what'd happened! for he and his wife had been out to sea--no way could his office in the city reach him, blah, blah. "Blue marlin?" Michael asked. "Did they wiggle much? When you pulled 'em into the boat?") Good God, it should have been so simple, this reading of the wills. But it wasn't. Roger was unprepared. And Hal Dawkins muttered "Sheee-ih!" beneath his breath (too much a gentleman, even with calloused hands, rancher's hands, to add the "t" to it in front of me and the children). And Bertie sat there, embarrassed, at the head of the table, growing red in the face. It was all just utter confusion! Like everything else.

The wills were to have been read at ten o'clock. I arose around seven--no, that sounds too good, too efficient. Sometime around seven, Eddie's clock-radio blasting in my ear, I managed to drag myself from their bed. Limbs heavy. Stumbling, like a ghost, to the bathroom, I smashed my foot into something (the dresser, I think); there was pain,

but I barely felt it. Even after the shower--hot needles of water on breasts and back, a deliberate turn of the plastic knob, the needles becoming icy--even after this, I still felt groggy. I dressed and got the kids up.

Annie was clean from the night before, but Michael hadn't bathed ("I'm not gettin' in that dirty tub after her!" he'd said, though the tub was not dirty, didn't even have a trace of a ring about it.) So that morning, I told him to go get clean. Again, he refused. He said, "I don't haveta obey you!" And frankly, I was too dragged out to argue.

The kids got dressed (at least, he did not insist upon wearing his red pajamas to the bank), and I started to pour them bowls of Lucky Charms. Another confrontation: Michael demanding French toast. Michael not getting it--but sloshing the milk around the bowl with his spoon, splashing it all over the counter, saying, "This tastes like turds!"

We drove to the bank in Eddie's Bronco--it, as sluggish at first as I still felt, chugging and coughing blake smoke in the driveway where it had sat, unused, for over a week in the ice and snow. At any rate, we made it there. We made it on time, which is more than I could say for Roger Whittleson who rushed in five or ten minutes late and almost immediately began complicating things.

Bertie wanted to start, but Roger would



hear nothing of it, until he knew the coroner's findings.

"You need to see the certificates?" Bertie asked.

"Whut for?" said Hal.

"You don't have them?" Roger asked Bertie, somewhat astonished.

"Should I?" he said.

Roger rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. He glanced at me and the children, then quickly shifted his eyes away. In a low voice, he told Bertie, "We have to read the wills according to the order of the deaths."

"Why's that?" said Michael, in a loud voice.

Roger stared at him, but didn't answer. To the men, he said, "I'll go and make the call."

We had to wait over an hour while Roger, sweating on the phone in the lobby, tracked down Art Mastrow, the county coroner. Bertie and Hal tagged after him, slinging barbs (I would presume) at the young lawyer, comments about "Doing your job right in the first place," and "Ain't you got the sense God gave a chicken?"

The children and I waited in the board room, the kids growing restless in the sumptuousness of the place, fidgeting, running around the mahogany table like Indians, playing finger games. They played I don't know how many sets of "Rock, paper, scissors." Standing a few feet away from me, they hid their right hands behind their backs and, on the count of "One, two, three!" whipped them out, Michael invariably thrusting a fist near Annie's face whenever she

brought out two vaguely-snipping fingers. "Rock smashes scissors!" Michael would cry, and Annie, squealing, would answer "No, no! Do it again!" They did that I don't know how many times.

And it was odd, in a way, because though I was aware of what they were doing, the sheer repetitiveness of the game, I was also not quite with them, though by this time, I had grown wide-awake (painfully so).

I hadn't been in the bank--in this room--for such a long time, years and years, and as I sat there, waiting, the richness of the place, as hypnotic as a drug, began drawing me away. I think that's how to describe it, like a narcotic, for in truth the wood was glowing, the dark, panelled walls, almost alive, undulating with so much sheen, the air redolent with lemon oil polish. There was the smell, too, a deep almost primitive smell, of the leather chair I sat upon and (I swear) the faintest trace, still wafting about the room, of Granddaddy's Cuban cigars. Annie was squealing, "No, do it again!" and, for an instant, I very nearly expected my grandfather to come strolling into the room in his white, wool suit, eyebrows arching in surprise, his voice--"Why pun'kin! You're here!"

"Fool nonsense is whut it is," Hal Dawkins was saying, slightly under his breath when the men finally returned. As Bertie and Roger took their places at the large, glowing table, Hal said to me, "I'm sorry, Celia, 'bout all o' this. I woulda done it myself, callin'

Art, had I knowed."

I nodded. But I must admit, I didn't understand; I didn't see, at the time, how it was possible for Mastrow to have been so exact, so precise as to know that Granddaddy died at 9:52 p.m.; Mother at 9:54; Father at 9:56; Eddie and Pam, respectively, at 9:58 and 10 o'clock. Even Michael seemed surprised, for he leaned over to Annie--who understood nothing of this--and said, "They're guessing." (And, of course, he turned out to be right. Later, much later at the big house, Bertie would tell me the obvious: "Why Celia, Art did it by their ages. I don't suppose there was any way, he could've known for sure. But he must have known we'd need some kind of time, for the documents and such.")

We needed time, all right--I especially. Time to sort through the language spouted off that morning and early into the afternoon, time to put it all together into something that made sense this stuff about testators and testatrixes, contingency heirs, my brother Eddie appointed at litem in the codicils (ad infinitum)--all this stuff on the page, rattled off, that didn't make sense, though Roger Whittleson tried to make you feel as if it did, tried to make you think it would be straightened out in probate court and soon, all the pieces falling together like a child's puzzle: the money in trust for Jule, the property coming down the line to me and Michael, property termed in the wills as "real and personal" (as if there was a difference).

Those few hours we spent going over the wills were among the most confusing of my life. (Well, perhaps, not the most confusing, as you know; those were still to come.) Still, it was awful.

And it should have been such a simple matter, but things kept getting complicated by points of order and state statutes, laws governing heirs who gain property through "illicit means" (meaning, I presumed, Jule and the shotgun on Christmas Eve).

"But that boy ain't been convicted," Hal said to Roger. "There ain't gonna be a trial--not now, anyways. Whut's that gonna do to his share?"

Whittleson said, "I'd prefer not to speculate about that. Not at this time. Not until the case goes its full extent in the courts." Which mean, of course, he didn't know.

Honestly, it was utter confusion--all of it. Confusing enough, the basic wills, with everyone leaving everyone else virtually everything. Now, with most everybody gone, it was tortuous trying to trace the property down (to Jule and me and Michael); but it was even worse, when you tried to follow all the other provisions that, for example, my parents had added.

In the first place, both had added codicils (number 8 for Daddy, 7 for Mother) making Eddie Jule's legal guardian. They did this, apparently, the year Jule and I turned fifteen, with him in the hospital and me at home and Eddie going off to college in the City, escaping, if you will. In any case,

Eddie had been named at litem for Jule should both my parents die, and as such the responsibility for Jule's share of the estate (which Whittleson noted might never be turned over to Jule at all, should he be convicted of the deaths) fell to him. Still, it left the question, left it open, like a dog at the table begging for scraps: With Eddie gone, who governed that trust? Jule's third?

"Not Michael," I said--for Michael had, of course, inherited all of Pam and Eddie's estate. "It wouldn't come down to Michael, would it?"

Whittleson said, "I'd prefer not to comment."

My head was swimming. As I sat there in the red leather chair, breathing in my grandfather's scent (as Annie, her eyes level, just, with the burnished top of the table, sat squirming half a foot away), my head was absolutely swimming! The provisions, the codicils, the words and phrases floated about beneath my skull like unmoored boats--they kept drifting and smashing into one another. And it was embarrassing, too.

It was horrible, embarrassing, utterly mystifying to me what Daddy had done in his will. I could scarcely believe it, but somehow, even in death, Daddy had managed to reach from the grave and slap Bertie Swann in the face. Not once--but twice.

The first came, obviously enough, with the choice of executors. As head of the trust department at the bank,

Bertie was the logical choice. Granddaddy, Mother, Pam and Eddie had all named him to this position. Yet Daddy (and I could almost see him hunched at his desk in the library at home, silently, deliberately writing it) had chosen Hal. Don't misunderstand: Hal Dawkins was a fine man, a good man, but he was totally ignorant of law and property (beyond his own) and, to be frank, ignorant of everything else. Daddy's choice of executors astonished us all, even Hal, I think, who kept asking Whittleson what he should do, kept saying "Sheee-ih" beneath his breath and staring daggers at the lawyer whenever he was put off. To put it mildly, Hal Dawkins was a ridiculous choice, with so much money on the line.

But this was nothing compared to codicil 5. Written the year after Jule and I were born, this provision, obscure and enigmatic in my father's cramped hand, caused a hush, an embarrassed silence around the table when it was read. Hal Dawkins, going down the terms of the will slowly, very slowly, as to enunciate clearly each word, paused before reading 5 aloud. He frowned, eyes sinking back into a nest of wrinkles, then said, almost apologetically to the entire company, "Well. . . here's what Edward said:

To my loving wife, Lillian, I still  
leave her everything. I give her the money,  
the house, my heart and sole. (My father,  
a sometime-reader, never picked up on spelling,  
though later, when I went through the will

I had to ask myself, did he get it right? Did he actually mean to give her the bottom of his foot?) And to Bertie Swann I give the sum of forty silver dollars. (Here, Hal cleared his throat.) Forty bucks I bequeethe to Bertie of Iscariot--he damn well knows why. "

As I said, there was a hush about the table when this codicil was read. Everyone looked at Bertie who at the head of the table was blushing very nearly as red as the leather chair upon which he sat, who dropped his thin, earnest face a bit, and was studying his hands.

Michael laughed.

Annie, not understanding, said, after a moment, "We done, Mommy? Can we go home now?"

And I guess that broke the ice. The lawyer laughed a little and said, "Not quite, sugar. But we'll be done with this old stuff pretty soon."

When we got out of there, a little after two, I was honestly more confused about the estates than when I'd come. Whittleson had said that with so much money at stake (the assets combined ranged, I think, somewhere between two and a half and three million dollars; at least, this was what Bertie guessed at the bank that day, had trouble meeting my eyes) with this, and so many legal questions yet to be resolved, the matter would have to go before the probate court--this, he said, as soon as it could be feasibly arranged. Whittleson said he's be in touch with me, concerning the proceedings, and I think

I told him "thanks"--or something like that--just as the children and I were going out the door.

It was clouding up outside that afternoon. It was cold and we'd parked the green Bronco a couple of blocks away. And I suppose it was funny the way Michael, who most of the time had been quiet and good throughout the long, drawn-out affair, understood so much. Certainly, he grasped the essentials, for as we walked to the car, he kept saying, "You mean, I own the house, Auntie Cee? I own the house an' the televisions an' the chairs an' the lawnmower?"

I think I nodded to him, said, "I guess so."

"I own the bedspreads?"

I was holding Annie's hand. I stopped for a minute, brushed the hair from my eyes, for the wind was blowing us along, from the back. I said, "So, you do understand, don't you? You understand, Michael, that your parents are dead?"

He stared at me blankly.

"You understand they left you this stuff in their wills? You know what wills are, right?"

The faintest hint of a smile began creeping forth. "You mean I own his desk? An' her food process' an' the windows an' the trees?"

"Oh, God," I muttered, and started walking again. Annie was looking up at me. I knew, at any moment, she would begin to ask me what she owned. I headed her off



with a sharp squeeze of her hand.

When we got to the car, I let her go. I began to fish through my purse--forty silver dollars, I was thinking, like Judas--for the keys. No sooner had I found them in the bottom of all that junk than Michael was on me, grabbing the keyring from my hand.

Before I could say a word, for the swiftness of his attack was so startling, he had run around to the other side of the car, was fumbling at the door-lock. "Never mind, Auntie Cee!" he cried. "I own this Bronco! I'll do the drivin' now!"

## Chapter Eleven

I won't bother to recount the ugly little scene that followed at the car, not in any great detail. Let me just say that the children had missed their lunchtime. They were hungry and bad-tempered (I attributed it all to this) with Michael acting, to perfection, the role of brat.

When we got home, I think I was rather dazed, almost deaf from so much screaming in the car. I trundled into the kitchen too exhausted even to remove my coat. I dialed the hospital in Jefferson again--I had been calling at least once a day since Friday and now knew the number by heart, by reflex almost, my finger in the slots going round and round. I spoke to one of the nurses

there. I don't know which one, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Whoever she was, she said the same thing on the crackling line as all the others: No change.

No change. No change, I stood there, slumped there, thinking. No change. Forty dollars, three million--enough money to buy all the care in the world, and it didn't help. You couldn't get at it. It was untouchable. As untouchable as that kid in the car, three inches from my ear, screaming, "Bitch! You bitch! You bitch!"

I don't know how long Annie was standing there in the kitchen, pulling on my coat--no, on my dress, her small hand having slithered up under the gray wool, now pulling on the fabric of my dress. I looked down, eventually. I saw her standing there, thumb firmly implanted in her mouth. Her eyes were wide and clearly distressed. "I'm hungry, Mommy," she said in a little voice, sliding the wet digit out just enough to enunciate the words, sticking it back in when she was done.

Michael was off somewhere in another part of the house, still ranting (quite loudly) about "fairness." I think that's what he said: how I was as unfair to him as Mr. Bailey at the school, how I wouldn't let him do anything fun, like driving his own car. He was saying other things, too, peppering his ravings with absolutely awful words, denunciations of the crudest kind. And I remember thinking: I must do something about this, his horrible language.

I believe I was rather dazed by it all. There were so many things I should have asked the lawyer and did not, things I should have asked Bertie and could not--not with Whittleson there and Hal Dawkins, who I suspected was as curious about codicil 5 as I was, not with the children standing with us in the lobby, with Michael watching everything with his quick, keen eyes. There were so many things I was supposed to be doing--I hadn't even called Helen de Grazzio yet in Nebraska and the children were back in school today, the reading room abandoned to the children, books and magazines misfiled, the decimals out of line, so many things to do--

"Mommy, I'm hungry!" Annie whimpered.

--so many things to do. Beginning with food.

I went over to the cupboard, pulled out a couple of bowls and a box of cereal (passing the sink with its still dirty bowls inside); I carried it all over to the breakfast bar. As Annie climbed up anxiously on the tall stool, I poured her out some Lucky Charms. Her eyes grew a little wide, but she didn't say anything. She began to eat it slowly. I slopped out a bowl for Michael, called out to him, "Come, get it, Micahel!"

A moment or two later, he sauntered in. He stood a little away from the breakfast bar, looked at what I had made him for lunch and said, "We had that for breakfast, you bitch!"

"Well, you're having it again for lunch!" I yelled, almost adding, you little bastard. And then--I really don't know what it was--then, perhaps because he looked so small, standing there, so impotently fierce, maybe it was the fact his lips trembled slightly (from rage? from the flood of supressed tears? for the horror of that shadowy night?)-- I don't know what it was, and perhaps it was just that I was too tired to fight anymore, but I said, "Michael, please. Please, will you just be good?"

He looked at Annie (she, not looking at either of us, just sitting on that high stool, stuffing elves and fairies, little stars and half-moons into her mouth); he looked at the lunch she was eating, then at me. Slowly, deliberately, he said, "You go to hell."

The rest of that afternoon was a blur. I walked around like one dispossessed. I tried to read.

Sometime earlier, I had stolen the Com to Del volume from Michael's encyclopedia. I sat in the living room, thumbing through it, smoking cigarettes on the couch. I skimmed over conjunctivitis (catarrhal inflamation of the membrane covering), read the lives of Constantine the Great, Corregio (this with a picture of Io, fat-rumped, embraced by a shadowy cloud, an orgasm of forms conmingling on the page), read the story of Cronus (he, fated to be overthrown by his children-gods, swallowed them all as infants. . . I, thinking, that that at least would be one way. . .I could eat the little bastard!)

I can't say it was really engrossing stuff. My mind was elsewhere, most of the time--flitting from the book to Jule to Bertie to Michael to my grandfather's Cuban cigars, everywhere, flitting all around like a bird. I can't actually say any of it made much sense in the scheme of things, though certainly the abbreviated lives, the childish sketches of unchildish things in the book made more sense than half a pack of Camels gone up in smoke that afternoon, butts littering the ashtray (not even an ashtray proper, for Pam and Eddie, in their neat, immaculate little house didn't keep them, even for guests--at least, I couldn't find one, had to settle for the lid of a jar, ashes falling on the beige sofa, making a mess).

That afternoon, the kids were off, doing God-knows-what, and, to be frank, I didn't care as long as they were quiet. The, around five or five-thirty (I had made it to the ancient city of Cumae near Naples, had barely begun to skim that), Annie wandered in to the living room, clearly upset.

She had in her hand the evening paper. She was almost shoving it at me, her voice accusatory and unforgiving, "Mommy, it's next year!"

I closed the book on Cumae. "What?"

"It's next year already," she said, putting the paper in my lap, pointing to the date at the top, "and we missed it! Mommy, look!," she cried. "It's Feboo-ary 3rd!"

I looked where her small finger pointed. At any other time, I might have smiled, for, though her numbers were excellent, her letters still were coming. "Honey, that says 'January,'" I told her. "It's January the third."

"But it's still next year!"

At this point, Michael strolled in. He seemed himself again, at least, seemed to be over the fury about the car. His face was almost placid as he stood by the television, watching us.

"Mommy, you don't understand!" she said. "We didn't do Hoppin' John yet!"

It took me a few seconds to figure it out.

"Hoppin' John! Hoppin' John, Mommy! We haveta do Hoppin' John or we won't have any luck!"

(I know. It's odd the way kids seize on things, isn't it? The way some fragmentary ritual, a sliver of custom can have so much meaning to them, be so important.) That afternoon, honestly, I was suprised she even remembered it, this silly little routine we had done once a year since she was three.

I looked at Michael, his face composed. I said, "Do you know what Annie's talking about?"

He looked at me, and there was something in his expression, a brief, almost imperceptible shiver of recognition. Yes.

"Honey," I said to Annie, "you're supposed to do Hoppin' John on New Year's Eve. I'm afraid we missed it this year."

"Oh, but you have to do Hoppin' John," Michael said. "Every year."

I crushed out my cigarette--more ashes on the couch, this time with a butt, too. Such a mess. "Did you," I asked Michael, "do that with your mom and dad?"

A blank stare.

Yet, clearly, he had. Clearly, this was one of those things, a ribbon tying him to the past, to his parents and that world before Christmas Eve. I tried to imagine what Dr. Friedmann would say of "Hoppin' John." Probably she would say, You should do it anyway--who cares if the time has passed?

"Would you like to do Hoppin John?" I asked them both.

Annie shook her head, "Oh, yes, Mommy!"

Michael, just barely, shrugged.

I sighed--I felt so tired that afternoon--and began to push myself off the sofa. "Well, come on, guys," I said. "Let's go see what we've got in the kitchen."

I have, of course, no idea where the custom came from, how it got it's peculiar name, but Hoppin' John, the g dropped off, was something we had done in my family every New Year's for as long as I could remember. Mother (for inevitable the woman who was our housekeeper at the time was given the night off) would always stew up an



enormous pot of ham and black-eyed peas. We had other things, too, of course--little pastries, for this was a holiday, fruit and green vegetables, a tiny glass of champagne later with the adults--but the ham and peas were requisite; you had to eat them to get the luck. And not only that, but after the meal, while everyone was still seated, before Granddaddy had even lit his cigar, the youngest one at the table would have to get up, stuffed with peas and ham, and hop about the table in a one-legged jaunt for good fortune. This job, of course, of "Hoppin' John" fell to Jule, as he was twelve minutes, by Granddaddy's watch, younger than I. And it's rather strange in a way, because I don't remember ever having been jealous of Jule's relative youth--or my relative age, if you like that better--except those evenings when he'd be "Hoppin' John," when the night had already settled in and maybe it was snowing and the wind, maybe, was howling down the chimney in the formal dining room--"the parlor of fancy eats," as Granddaddy used to call it, with just a hint of smile. Only then, when Jule was allowed to be the center of attention, when it was ritual and actually good that he do this crazy, nonsensical thing, when everybody would laugh and applaud as he'd hop to holy heaven round the big, wooden table, this laden with the finest silver and crystal of the house, only then was I slightly jealous of my brother's position, preturbed that I had been born first on the

wide, white bed upstairs. But that is another story.

As I said, I was surprised that afternoon that Annie even remembered it. We had done it as a custom only twice since she'd been born: the first time, when she was three and fell a couple of times going round the table in Nebraska; the second time, last year, when she made it all the way but didn't remember doing it the year before and said, "Really, Mommy? This what we do?"--one leg up like a stork.

The children followed me into the kitchen. I looked through all the cabinets, but could find no ham or black-eyed peas. The closest I came was a giant can of Campbells Pork 'n' Beans. And I held it out so Annie could see how impossible it was. I said, "I'm sorry, sweetheart, this is all Mommy can find. And you know what this does to your system."

"Mommy!" she wailed.

"Honey, it makes you. . .sick!" (Which wasn't precisely true in that it didn't make her ill in the sense of throwing up or anything like that; it was just that she, through some freak genetic chance, had inherited her great-grandfather's consitution when it came to barbecued beans, loved them as much as he, though she had not yet learned to say of the rather impolite intestinal trouble that followed, "Whut the hell--it's fam'ly here!").

Annie cried, "Does not! Does not make me sick! I just get a noo. . .," she said, searching for the word, "I just get a noo-sance!"

"It'll do," Michael said of the can in my hand. "It'll do for Hoppin' John--'cause if we don't do it, we'll have bad luck. Bad, bad luck. All the rest of the year."

It was already dark outside, already cold enough to have to really bundle them up, and frankly, I was too tired, having taken a couple of tranquilizers earlier that afternoon, to go out and get the proper for for them, a dinner Annie could tolerate. Finally, I acquiesced. I said, "Well, Annie, if you can live with the result--I guess we can, too."

I opened the can, dumped it out in a big saucepan, and began heating it up on the stove. The children, behind me, were hopping around on one leg, practicing. They were yelling "Yay! Yay! Hoppin' John!" as the beans began to bubble.

We ate our dinner, Michael--his mouth full of red sauce and beans--asking when he could go back to school, Annie, imitating him, saying "Me, too! Me, too!" Afterwards, when it was time for Hoppin' John, the kids suddenly balked.

Eddie and Pam had no dining room, you see, not in this little tract house. They had no formal table, just the breakfast bar, and Annie--presented with this fact

of suburban existence, that she couldn't go completely around a table--suddenly balked.

I tried not to roll my eyes to the ceiling. "Well, Michael," I said, "what did you and your parents do?"

He didn't answer.

"How did you solve it in the past?" I asked again.

Michael stared at me, his face almost petulant. Finally, he said, "They always did it up at the grandfather's." Very slightly, he jerked his head west in the direction of my parents' house.

"Well," I said, "we certainly can't go up there. Look, Annie, just jump around the bar here, okay?"

"But Mommy--"

"Annie! Just hop around the damn bar!"

For a moment, she looked as if she might cry.

Then I said, "Look--I'm sorry, sweetie. Mommy's a little. . .frayed right now."

Michael let out a titter.

I decided to ignore that. "Honey," I told her, "just jump as far around as you can. It'll be all right. It'll work the same."

"No. It won't," said Michael.

"Yes. It will. Trust me. Both of you!"

"Can I jump both ways?" Annie asked.

"Certainly! Anything you want, okay?"

Her face brightened a bit and she slid off the high stool, walked slowly, deliberately over to the place where the bar came out of the wall. Very carefully--

almost like a dancer, for there had been so much grace added, this last year--she began hopping her way around. One. Two, Three. Four. All the way to the other side, then back again.

Michael was scowling the entire time.

And I remember thinking, God, oh God, what I would give for some magic, for something this simple and absurd to be true.

The next day, in the afternoon, we very nearly died.

And it was my fault--absolutely, I believed it was my fault. The night before, I had taken all but one of pills Dr. Friedmann had given me. That morning when I rose, I sat alone in the kitchen, before the kids were even up, before dawn, before the first gray light from the sun, I sat there looking at the almost empty bottle, debating. (I had gone through so much hell before, from the accident, and to keep it up, this pill-taking--I remember thinking this--to keep popping the damned things in my mouth, at the mildest upset, even at the gravest, was. . .But then again, on the other hand. . .) Look, I never came to any firm decision.

When the kids got up, I had to fight Michael.

He didn't want to take a bath. He didn't want to brush. He didn't want to do anything that was right.

I told him, "You can't just run around filthy!"

He said, "I can do what I want. It's my house.

That shitty lawyer said so!"

I took a deep breath. "Legally, Michael," I said, "legally, it may be your house. But I'm in charge here. You have to do what I tell you."

"Fuck you."

"Get in that bathroom!" I screamed. And maybe it was the tone, maybe it was the fact my hand was rising-- I couldn't stop it--rising up above his head. "Get in there and take a bath, dammit!" I don't know what it was, precisely, but he went. Stomped. Stormed into the bathroom, pulling off his pajamas, throwing them on the floor. (Annie was very nearly cowering in the doorway to her room.)

We had breakfast. French toast--yes, I know. I know. I made the kids French toast, only slightly burned about the edges, let them pour on as much syrup as they wanted, Michael, I think, deliberately getting as much as he could on the counter top, smearing it about with his elbow.

After we ate--I was getting ready to call Rosewood Heights, Helen in Nebraska, my hand poised above the phone, my head, wracked for the number--after we ate, there was another confrontation, this time about his school. Another ugly scene. This one worse than the others, with Michael calling me a "turd-head!", a "shit-witch!", a "green donkey dick!" (I know. I know! It's absurd. It's absolutely ridiculous now, but I'll tell you--it was starting to get to me. Especially when he said, "I'll make you dead like Mr. Bailey! I'll kill you, if you don't let me alone!")

I hate to say it, but I fought back. I don't mean that I "disciplined" him either; I don't mean that I exerted "adult authority" or anything that grand. I fought back, like a child, as angry and hateful as he. What I wanted to do, I think, was slap his nasty little face, knock some sense into him. Instead, I clenched my fists. I clenched my teeth and said between them, "You little brat! Dead? Dead? You'll make me dead! You don't even know your own family's dead! How can I let you go to school when you don't even know that!"

What followed was silence. Heavy, oppressing. The space of air between us as heavy and impenetrable as concrete. No one said a word. Finally, very quietly, he turned around and walked out of the kitchen. A little later, I heard him playing video games. This time there was no laughter. No squealing. No sound from him at all.

I sat down at the breakfast bar, exhausted. I felt as if someone had pulled all the air out of me, felt as if there was nothing left. I sat there, looking at the green plastic bottle, emptying it. With a little of Annie's milk, I swallowed the last pill.

I sat there--I don't know how long. A long time maybe. Then, Annie was climbing up beside me. In a tiny voice, she said, "Mommy, why are you crying?"

"Mommy's not," I said--her eyes growing wide and frightened. "Mommy's not crying," I said then to prove it, reached up and touched my face which was wet, the

tears coming off on my hands.

I kept waiting, you see, for the pill to have some effect. Some calming effect. But it didn't.

Later, I tried to call the hospital. But my hand was shaking too badly. All I could get was the "0" (and this, after several shakey tries). The operator came on, said, What number did I want? I couldn't remember. I closed my eyes and said, "Doc. . ."

"Doc?" she said.

"Doctors."

"Who? Hawthorne? Eisenhower? Ridge--"

"Eisenhalter," I said, "yes. Him."

"Just a moment, ma'am," she said, and there was quite odd about her voice. "I'll connect you."

Doc's secretary, his receptionist, came on. I spoke with her briefly, not able to get out much more than my name. Doc called back very quickly. My hand was still shaking, I think, for, yes, I had actually wanted to hurt him, actually wanted to strike this child--God, what was happening to me? Finally, I was able to get it out. I told Doc everything that had happened. Maybe, I even sounded crazy on the phone with all this talk of donkey turds and green witches and such. But I think he understood me when I told him, "Doc, I need something! Something to help me sleep at night! Something in the day. To keep me calm with him!"

Within an hour--for Harlow is a very small town, and there isn't much red tape--the boy from Hazlitt's



was on the doorstep, ringing the bell. He had seconds and a much more powerful tranquilizer than the kind given to me by Dr. Friedmann. When I couldn't find my purse-- just stood there, sort of stupidly looking around--he said, "No problem, lady. We'll bill you later."

I went back into the kitchen, fumbling with the bottle, placing the tranquilizer on my tongue before I'd even filled a tumbler with water.

I stood there, listening to the muted sounds of the kids playing their games in the other room. Michael wasn't saying much and it made me feel ashamed. It (what was the "it" this time? that I wanted not just to hurt him, but something more?) made me feel smaller than I had ever felt in my life, though Annie was there, obviously trying to cheer him up, doing her best in spite of the copious volume of gas in her belly, gas which would make her grimace--I didn't have to see it, to know the pain there--gas which made her break wind and say, "Ooh! That stinks!"

"You do," Michael said. "You stink like hell," he was saying softly, then said nothing more.

I think that what I wanted to be rid of was shame, the very shame of it, for I had never in my life wanted to do such an awful thing. Had I? Had I ever wanted that before? Honestly, I couldn't think. Couldn't remember anything that morning, and the more I tried, the more upset and anxious I became. What was happening to me? What in the hell was going on? To hurt a child?

I felt so awful that, when the first pill didn't affect me in ten minutes or so, I admit it: I took another.

A little while later, I could scarcely move.

I felt as if I were moving through aspic, clear, heavy jelly, the air so heavy on my limbs. I managed to look in on the kids, said, "Mommy needs to sleep right now. Mommy's going to take a nap, 'kay?"

They didn't answer.

I walked slowly into the master bedroom and collapsed on Eddie's bed. Just a little sleep, I remember thinking. Just a little. . . .The next thing I knew, Annie was in the bedroom, yanking at my collar and hair, screaming, "Mommy, Mommy! Fire!"

## Chapter Twelve

My child's terror--her screaming, her tearing fingers, the high-pitched horror--was what woke me up. The smoke didn't. The small crackle of flames, the acrid fumes that were already filling the house from the melting carpet in the hall--these didn't either. It was Annie and her terror that made me rouse.

In those first, awful seconds of total confusion, I managed to jump off the bed. I grabbed Annie. I actually picked her up, once I realized the danger, and carried her out of the room, ran down the hall to the front door where we escaped. Only when we were on the front steps did I think of Michael. (And I

needn't have bothered, the way things turned out. I needn't have cared, for he was already outside, standing beneath the denuded limb of a tree. I suppose you could say he was waiting for us--yes, that would be the diplomatic was to put it.)

Annie was coughing, but whether from fear or black crud she'd inhaled, I couldn't tell. As for me--I don't think I breathed once until I'd gotten her out. Very quickly, I led her to where Michael was standing, a safe distance from the house. I checked her over quickly. No burns. I gulped enough cold air to say, "Watch her!" and ran next door for help.

The blaze was out in a matter of minutes. Actually, it wasn't much of a blaze at all, not much of a conflagration (as you well know). It was just a lot of smoke basically, a burning carpet, closet of flames. That this, along with the water the firemen blasted every which a way in the house, did a lot of damage isn't terribly important or significant. In the scheme of things (thank God Annie was safe!) it really wasn't much of a fire at all.

Still, there was quite a hubbub.

We stood there, the children and I, shivering on the lawn, or no. . . Michael had managed to get on his coat, so it was just Annie and I who were shivering. Still, we were joined by Eddie's neighbors who were home that day when the fire truck rolled up Elm, its siren wailing. Somebody brought us blankets (I don't remember who) and

we all stood there, watching as Henry Vance and the men from the fire station hosed down the house--hitting the hallway, the living room (part of it), the kitchen, breaking glass and everything else that was breakable along the way.

Actually, it wasn't much of a fire. But later, when we were all safely ensconced in Mrs. Curry's kitchen next door, Henry said it could have been fatal. "Tragic," was how he put it. "Could've been damn tragic, Cee"--for the nylon carpet, when it melted, was toxic.

"Poisonous to humans?" Michael said.

I didn't know what to say. I just sat there, for the longest time, hugging Annie, shivering. "You okay, baby?" I kept saying. "You okay?"

Annie was crying. But other than that, other than her fright which you could still see in her eyes, in the hard, inflexible way she held her body, she was fine. Henry checked her over, too (and Michael, who pulled away from him, saying "Don't touch me"). Henry said they didn't seem to have swallowed much smoke, if any. Not enough to matter, but I could take them to the hospital anyway, if I wanted to be sure.

Mrs. Curry made us tea. But I couldn't drink it.

Henry did, though, and after a while, brought out a small notepad, a pencil, the lead of which he wetted on his tongue. There were questions then.

"You were asleep, Celia?" he asked. "When the fire started?"

Henry had been Harlow's fire chief for as long as I could remember, had even visited my school when I was Annie's age, saying Drop, roll till the flames are out, kids; feel those doors!; crawl beneath the smoke!--nonsense like that. I had known him all my life, and there wasn't the faintest trace of accusation in his voice now; he wasn't saying, I'm blaming you! But that was what I felt, the hairs on the back of my neck beginning to quiver, the thing in my belly rise. "I was tired," I said. "I don't usually take naps in the afternoon!"

"That's all right, Celia," he said. "No one was hurt." He jotted something down in the notepad. "Calm down," he said "Things like this happen sometimes."

I'll just bet you think that.

"Why don't you drink some tea?" Mrs. Curry said, who was hovering near the doorway.

I didn't answer her.

"It started in the coat closet, near the master bedroom," Henry said. "Any idea how?"

I shook my head.

"How 'bout you, kids?" Henry asked.

Annie buried her head in my chest. Michael stood a few feet away, stiff as a post.

Henry motioned for him to come over. "That's your house, son, isn't it?" Henry asked.

Michael shrugged.

"What were y'all doin' this afternoon, son?"

Annie began to wail. Michael, his face placid at first, shot her a brief, furious glance.

"Okey-dokey," Henry said, very matter-of-factly, a thread of utter seriousness just beneath his words.

"Okey-dokey, now we're gettin' at it. Right, son?"

Michael's expression, so stoic at first, suddenly began to crack. It took a lot of stammering (his and Annie's), a lot of indecision and tracks half-covered, a lot of drawing out on Henry's part (he, saying, "You won't be in any trouble if you just tell us what happened") and then the story came out: they had gone into the closet to light Annie's farts.

"All the kids do it in school, Auntie Cee," Michael was saying. "You bend over an' put a match right here"-- he bent and pointed to his backside--"right before one rips."

"You were lighting farts!" I repeated, dumbstruck.

Henry was shaking his head. "Makes a pretty blue flame, does it, son?"

Michael almost smiled. Almost, I say, because I think he was scared. "It also gets rid of the smell."

"Good God!" I said. "Why! Why the closet, Michael? How dare you take Annie in there and light matches!"

"Mommy," Annie wailed, "Michael just wanted to show me the light! You can't see it 'cept in the dark!"

"And it wasn't my match started any ol' fire," Michael said. "It was Annie! She kept pesterin' me to light one herself!"

"Is that true?" I asked her.

She bit her lower lip.

"Is it true!"

"Yes!" she cried, "I wanted to do it, too. But Mommy--"

"She probably dropped a silly match!" Michael said.

"Did not!" she said.

"Did so, dummy!"

"Did not, did--"

"That's enough!" Henry said. "Both of you. Just be quiet."

Annie was shaking she was so afraid. She buried her face again in my chest, rubbed her head from side to side, her fingers making tiny fists. "Mommy," she half-whispered, "I didn't drop a match. I didn't, didn't, didn't!"

Henry Vance wrote down "Kids--matches" on the note and "flam. liquid, unk. orig." (for he also said that a match alone wouldn't be enough, that Pam and Eddie had obviously been storing some kind of cleaning fluid in the closet, suede cleaner or something. . .he couldn't tell from the charred mess in there just what it was, but there was a metal can of something in there and it had probably spilled over with the kids fooling around in there.)

It sounded reasonable.

What was unreasonable, was the house, the mess.



It would not, he said, be livable for some time--what with the smoke damage and the flood from the firemen's hoses, the broken windows to let in the cold. The house, Henry told me, would have to be repaired, professionally cleaned, the walls repainted, the furniture steamed, the carpet in the hall ripped up and replaced before we could move back in.

"How long?" I asked him, feeling--what? Like an unmoored boat? A balloon slipped from the fingers of a child?

"Three weeks?" he said. "Maybe a month."

Mrs. Curry, when she heard this, offered us lodging for the night. And frankly, I just wanted to pack up Annie and leave, leave Michael with Mrs. Curry, with Bertie at the bank, Lee--frankly, I didn't care with who.

But I couldn't do that, of course. Not a damned thing was settled with that child, and he had another appointment with Dr. Friedmann in a couple of days. Good God, I thought, what on earth would she say about this?

Mrs. Curry said we could use the spare room and the couch, but I didn't even have a chance to consider it before Lee was at the front door, pounding. In a town like Harlow, news travels fast as it hasn't far to go, and there he was, relieved (utterly) and utterly worried, checking everyone out for injuries, physical or psychic, telling us to get some sense and come home with him.

Honestly, I might have accepted his offer if he

food, clothing, shelter, love ("well, you know, for the kids and all"), he added this: "Besides, Celia, it's perfectly obvious you can't take care of the kids yourself, not right now or hell. . .this wouldn't have happened!"

I told him to forget it. Forget we ever existed, that he had anything ever to do with us. I told him I'd been taking care of Annie for five years by myself and I didn't need him to come along now, throwing his weight about.

He told me I was upset.

"Damn right!" I said. "Damn right, I'm upset! And you're just making it worse! It was an accident, Lee, a simple, stupid accident," I said, and at the time, believed it, I think, desperately wanted to believe it.

Annie had begun to cry again. Mad as I was at her, I bent down to comfort her. I said, "It's all right, darling. Your father's going home now. Don't worry. He's leaving."

"Oh, yeah?" he said. "And where'll you go, Celia?"

"Nebraska," I said.

"Tonight?"

"As soon as we can--I don't know. In a few weeks."

"But what about now!"

I looked around Mrs. Curry's kitchen, at the mushroom magnets stuck to the fridge, the crocheted potholders hooked on the wall, the cheap, embroidered "Bless this Mess" that hung a few inches above Lee's head. I felt

trapped. Utterly trapped. I said, "Home."

"Your parents' house?"

"Oh, Lee, I said, "just home."

Later, when we had salvaged what we could from the house (the medicine bottles, some clothes from the kids' rooms, a can of coffee, junk), our eyes tearing from the acridness that lingered, I packed the kids into the Bronco and we prepared to leave. In the end, we had no choice; in the end, we had no place else to go but the house on the hill.

It was growing dark.

Annie, in the front seat beside me, said, just as I was starting the car, "Was it 'cause we missed New Year's?"

"What?"

She stuck her thumb into her mouth.

"What are you talking about, Annie?" I asked.

She slid her thumb out, slightly. "Was it 'cause I didn't jump round a real table?"

"She means the luck," Michael said, from the back seat.

"'Cause we didn't do it right?" she asked.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Annie," I told her, and I was so tired, so sick of it all, I couldn't keep the edge from my voice, the sarcasm. "Hoppin' John's got nothing to do with anything. It's just a stupid game."

"But Mommy!" (whining).

"And take your thumb out of your mouth!" I said.  
"You're too old to be doing that!"

When she didn't comply immediately, I reached over and jerked the wayward hand from her mouth myself. It startled her, so much that for a moment in the gathering dusk, she looked as if she would cry.

"Don't you dare!" I told her, began backing the car out into the street.

By the time we got to the end of Elm, to the stop sign, Annie was trembling--very slightly, but still she was shaking a bit. I looked both ways on the nearly deserted street, then hesitated. I almost sighed as I put my hand on her thin leg, squeezing it lightly. "It's all right," I told her, softly. "I'm just. . . Look, Mommy's just frayed, that's all. Understand?"

From the back seat came a chuckling sound. I whipped around, but, no: Michael was obviously just clearing his throat, a remnant, no doubt, from the smoke and acridness of the house. His house. I said, "Are you all right?"

"What do you care?"

"What!"

Silence. "Yeah. I'm okay."

We drove off toward the center of town. The tension in the car was so thick it was palpable: the air close, alive only with the sound of the children's breathing, the light outside fading so fast as to make them almost unrecognizable, invisible except as forms that sat there

hunched in the faint glow of the dash.

Annie was so frightened. It had been such a horrible day, I wanted to make amends, if I could. I said, my voice almost breaking, "I know. I'll put on some music." I played with the knobs of the radio, came up with weak static.

"It's broke," Michael said.

I gave up, returned my hand to the wheel.

Annie looked up at me. Tentatively, she said, "Can we sing?"

I looked away, rolling my eyes. God, what next! I took a deep breath. "Sing, darling. What?"

"I dunno," she said, softly. "Row, row, row?"

"Donkey dick!" Michael said. "That's a stupid song. A baby song."

Annie looked out the window, almost shrinking away.

Inside me, the anger was swelling. For the first time, I realized how much I resented him calling her a baby all the time. No wonder she was sucking her thumb! And playing with matches--good God, she knew better than that! "Well, Mister Tripp," I said, making no effort to keep the derision from my voice, "what would you suggest?"

"Nothin'!" he said. "I don't wanna sing any dumb, baby songs."

Silence.

Later, when we had cleared the town, were crossing the bridge over the Bit, driving slowly, very slowly, I'm afraid, my foot easing up on the pedal in spite of my intent,

Michael changed his mind.

"I know," he said, trying to make his voice as bright, as cheerful as he could, "I know. I've got a song we can sing!"

"What?" I asked, glancing back at him in the rear view mirror.

"Oh, you'll like it, Auntie Cee," he said. "It's one of the grandfather's songs."

"Yeah?"

"It's real old. From when there wasn't any money"-- (by this, he meant the Depression years)--"an' it goes like this." He cleared his voice again, then, half-chanting, half-shouting, he belted it out:

"Beans, beans, the magical fruit,  
The more you eat, the more you toot,  
The more you toot, the better you feel,  
Soooo--let's eat beans for every meal!"

(Silence.)

"Well, Celia," he said, just as we came in sight of the house. "Did you like it?"

(Rage.)

And from the back seat, Michael was laughing. His voice high, musical, laughing like a demon. Laughing like crazy. Laughing like hell.

### Chapter Thirteen

I will not insult your intelligence with a lie, tell you that the rage had passed by the time we reached the top of the hill. It hadn't. The anger I felt toward Michael was still there, a gray, bubbling frenzy in my mind. But there was something else now, too, a squirmy thing, something pinned and wriggling down in my stomach, my soul, for the house was dark, the windows black and devoid of warmth like holes.

What to do?

In the car, the children smelled of smoke. The Bronco inched closer, its motor humming, its headlamps reflecting back now in the parlor glass like two yellow

eyes.

What on earth to do?

The garage door was down. I looked beyond that to the gravelled lot at the side of the house. And it's odd, because I hadn't noticed them before--that first night when Lee and Annie and I had come here, when Doc stood in the doorway, his head defiantly shaking, no; it's odd, I suppose, but I hadn't noticed the other cars: Daddy's pick-up; the finned Plymouth Granddaddy so adored; beside that, some kind of sedan I took to be my sister's-in-law. Except for the Mercedes (this year's model, I knew, and safely ensconced in the garage for its finish, the gleam and shimmer it had to have when Mother drove it in the sun), except for this, they were all here, still here, the cars parked casually, carelessly as one does for just an evening, cars that were silhouettes now, hulking and boxy in the cold.

The Bronco's motor was humming. And I hesitated there, my foot on the brake. I began to think that maybe this wasn't such a good idea, bringing the children here.

In the back seat, Michael had ceased his raucous laughter at the bean-song. Annie, up front, was sitting quietly, staring at the house. In the yellow beam of the headlights, small, reflective white bits--just a few at first, then several--were beginning to swirl about, and I started to think that probably this was the wrong



thing to do. For the children.

Never mind what I was feeling. Forget the fact that my hands were beginning to tremble, that the great white house gone gray in the snow and dark stood there again, as it had all the years of childhood, like some giant, almost living thing--a mammoth, perhaps, or brontosaur, something fossilized from the past, a cyclopic beast, its window-eye in the turretted attic atop the third floor, keeping watch over all.

What to do now?

I sat there for a moment, trying to pull it together. I gripped the steering wheel, knuckles draining into whiteness, and tried to be very logical, to string out the variables like an equation (like--I cannot help but think now--Julian on the wall?); I tried to arrange the factors, questions really, so as to have them make sense. What would Dr. Friedmann say? Should Michael go back there? Now? Ever again? Should he be taken back to live in a place where memory had to run as dark and chaotic as the Bit? (And here, that image of Sylvia's liver, squirting along the floor, was what I saw; it turned my own memory red, made my hands shake in spite of their fierce hold on the wheel.) And what about Annie? Her soft, snuffly breath there, beside me. What about the parlor and Julian's room and the stairs and--

"Are we goin' in--or what!"

Slowly, I turned around toward the back seat where the question had come. My back began to hurt and I looked at him. "Do you want to go, Michael?" I asked. "In there?"

"Sure," he said, casually. "Why not?"

Why, not? At this point, honestly, I could think of nothing. No alternatives but Nebraska (too far, too long to get there and it's snowing now) or Lee's (him, huffing and puffing his chest out, saying, "Well, finally, Cee! You're showing some common sense!" Sylvia, hovering in the background, frowning) or maybe Harlow House (sleazy little string of rooms at the other end of town, seascapes roiling above the bed, its neon sign flashing "Vacancy, Vacancy" to the highway). Honestly, my mind was blank, except for the fear. "You're not scared?" I asked him.

"Of what?"

"To go inside."

"Gaaawww!" he said. "I'm not a baby!"

Slowly, I shook my head: yes, yes, you're not a baby. For all the world, Michael, you are not that.

"What's to be scared of?" he said.

Annie's eyes were growing wide, and what came to mind was ghosts. His parents. Mine. Granddaddy (for no doubt the house, too, still smelled of him, the redolence of smoke, though different from our own). All the ghosts. The damnable phantoms of that night.

"You scared! You scared!" he said, his voice high and petulant, in imitation of mine. "Jesus-Christ-on-a-stick, Celia! You act like it's Halloween!"

"Halloween?" Annie asked, thoroughly confused.

I closed my eyes, too tired to think anymore. Finally, I said, "Well, Michael, if you don't care. . . .Oh, what the fuck." Slowly, I lifted my foot from the brake, let the car coast a few feet, then parked and turned off the engine.

We all got out, the children bounding. Halfway up the steps, it occurred to me I didn't have a key. We tried the front door, but it was locked. I stood there for a moment in the dark, thinking. Annie began to squirm. "Mommy, I haveta go!"

"Mommy, too," I told her. "Let's try around back."

The house was locked up tighter than the proverbial drum, so efficient had Doc and Queenie been, and by the time we tried all the doors, including the garage, for this led to the kitchen, Annie was threatening us with an accident.

Michael said, "Oh, hell. I'll go down the chute. That's never locked."

We walked around to the north side of the house, the wind now beginning to whip the snow in our faces. And though it was a relatively generous thing--Michael offering to slide down the coal chute--I had by this time recovered enough of my common sense (my mothering sense, if you

prefer, for I could still hear her say it, the words drumming in my ear: Don't, don't, don't you kids ever!) to forbid it. "No," I said, "I'll go." Then, rather coldly: "You could get hurt in the dark."

"I never get hurt!" he said, defiantly.

"Oh, Michael, just shut up." I bent over and after a brief struggle with the swollen wood jerked open the door to the chute. A thudding, mechanical sound wafted up at us from the furnace below. Very carefully--for I had done this often as a child, and then my back did not hurt--I began to position myself in the chute, feet first. I said, "You take Annie around front. I'll be up to get you in a minute." Then, laying back slightly, I let myself go, allowed my body to slip down the cold, dirty chute into the basement.

I came to a gentle stop, surprised somewhat that I remembered that trick of childhood, of spreading my feet so as to press against the sides of the chute, the friction slowing me down. At any rate, I didn't get hurt until I got up, and stumbling in the dark toward the door, smashed into something hard.

"Hell!"

I crouched over to feel what it was and was suddenly seized by a wrenching pain in my back. After several agonized seconds, the sort where you cannot even think beyond the tip of the tongue that you are biting, I managed to straighten up again, my back still throbbing but

superseded now by an even more intense throbbing in my knee.

"Well, shit!"

My knee was on fire now, the pain like a heart-beat, a one, two, one, two searing to the bone, like the throbbing, inefficient pulse of the furnace a few feet away, knocking itself to death.

I groaned again, could not help but think, What in hell am I doing here?

Judging by what I was able to feel in the dark (or, actually, not quite the dark, for my eyes were growing adjusted now, and there was just the tiniest sliver of yellow light at the bottom of the furnace door), I had knocked into a box, a crate or something, that had been left sitting out in the middle of the coal room.

I waited a few seconds more, then making use of what little light there was, started moving again, this time, slowly. I found the stone wall, ran my hands along its slightly wet roughness until I touched the light switch and looked around.

Virgil.

What I saw in the middle of the room was a large, wooden chest. Right away, I realized it was Virgil Darby's, Virgie's tools (for the furnace had, as long as I could remember, been "goin' crazy, that damn thing, that sonofabitch!"--to use Granddaddy's words--"goin' crazy an' breakin' down," and of all the fix-it men in Harlow, Virgil had been the only one sober enough, heroic enough with

parts from Sears to coax it back to life "wunst agin," to hear him tell it to my grandfather, his voice almost shy with pride saying, "Wunst agin, Mr. Pendleton, I done it!")

"Virgil!" I muttered now, said it like it was a swear word above the throbbing pain in my knee, my back. Then felt--what? Guilt? Disloyalty? For of all the men that had come to Lee's, Virgie alone let his tears show, did nothing to stop the great, clear drops that ran along the wrinkles of his face, cared not a whit to brush them aside. Why then say "Virgie" as though it were "shit"?

Oh, I am making a muddle of things!

Once I left the coal room, it didn't take me long to make it to the children. Movement alone helped the pain. And I moved as quickly as I could through the cold basement, leaving the thudding of the furnace behind. I climbed the service steps, wood creaking, to the kitchen, passed the door to the garage. Along the way, I felt the walls like a blind man feeling for light, turning on those switches I found, those that I remembered to be there.

To be honest, I didn't even look at the house. Not the way you might expect. I didn't linger over this feature or that. I didn't let myself be stunned into grief or nostalgia by this Persian rug or that Italian chandelier, by the Christmas decorations that were still up and hanging to the walls, by the marble in the "great

hall" (my mother's phrase) or the brown swirl of bannister up the big stairs--by all the things of the house that, long-seeded in memory, could (if I allowed them) drop back into my consciousness again like stones into a lake, each with its hundred circles of association and remembrance, each making connections that somehow always came back to the center. (Need I tell you that that center, still, was Jule?) I didn't do any of that--at least, not at first--so anxious was I to bring Annie in from the cold and snow, to let her go to the john and go myself.

I was in such a hurry, in fact, rushing down the great hall, I didn't even flip the switch. When I got to the front door and flung it open, I was almost blinded for a second.

I squinted in the sharp beam of light, sheilding my eyes with my hand. "Michael!" I yelled, for almost instantly, I realized it was he who held the flashlight, was training it at my face. "Turn it off!"

"Thought you might need it, Celia," he said, coming into the house, holding Annie's hand. "It's his. From the car."

"Thanks," I said, grabbing it from him. "Thanks a lot."

With my elbow, I flipped on the light in the hall.

"Gaawww! You're filthy," Michael said, his lips curling up very slightly.

I was about to answer that, had already started shaking my soot-covered hand at him, when suddenly Annie was wailing.

"Mooooom-eeee!" She was stamping her feet on the floor, her face utterly pained.

I took her from him, grabbing her hand, and hustled her off down the hall to the guest bath near the library. I turned on the light (besooting the wall), told her to "Hurry up!"--for I had already decided not to leave her here alone, in this strange place, while I went elsewhere. "Hurry up, Annie," I told her, "I need to, too." And while I waited, looking into the bathroom, tapping my foot at her progress, or relative lack thereof, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

Sooty coat. Sooty face--even the hair dirty. Dirty hands. I looked away.

Back down the hall, Michael had left the front door open, the cold swiling in, behind that swirling snow. I craned my neck and could see him standing there, just standing, a few feet away from the spiral stairs, looking up, his lips curling, quite distinctly now, into something like a smile.



## Chapter Fourteen

If you want to know what it was like to be back in my parents' house, what it felt like on the tip of the jangling nerves, I think you must look to science. It holds the image, the sole interface of your understanding and mine. And by science, I do not mean its theory, all those formulae, dismal little configurations of numbers as fleeting as the color of a lizard on a rock; I do not mean at all the bare-bone frame of X's and Y's (as the X, I have learned, of any place simply means you are here and lost; the Y--regardless of its spelling--has no answer.) What you must do is look to the practice. Go like the rabbit to science's lair, that chrome and steel lab of

Dr. Z; go, open your eyes and wince at that burning splash that might one day color (honey-blonde) a lonely woman's hair.

I know, I know. You've read it in the papers. You've seen the experiments on tv, for Christ's sake, and have grown as maudlin as I for the creatures trapped, the cigar-puffing beagles and cancerous mice, for that rhesus hopping, end to end, in the wired cage (the juice, you see, is on, each contact of paw to bar electric, jolting but excusable for "it is science"). I know you've been shocked--not quite like the rhesus--yet you understand how helplessness is learned, why hours later she curls to a fetal orb in the corner of her cage, tasting "milk" from the teat of her thumb.

Too much now? An image overstated, overblown like a fuse? No doubt.

But, honestly, no more that the house deserved. The shocks, you must know, were everywhere. They bolted from the corners in small ugly wings; they arced into the memory, little jolts (I think now) much like regret.

In the kitchen, mice scratched in the walls. I heard them quite late that first night back when I couldn't sleep, couldn't bear to stay a second longer in the dark of my room, the wind outside howling in the eaves. (Howling like him, if you want the truth, like Julian when Daddy took razor from his hand and wrestled him to the bed; like Michael, even, tonight.) I simply couldn't stand the

sound--so much like a human voice. So I went down again to the first floor. I took the coward's route--I know it--went down the back, service stairs so as not to pass their rooms on the second floor, though he had long since given up the curses, the battering on the door.

I stood on the cold, bare tiles of the kitchen, having forgotten my shoes, and that was where I heard them scratching, running about in the walls as if they owned the place. Maybe they did. Still, I thought of Annie (thoughts like damn her disobeying me! damn her running off like that when I'd said no, children, no--you must wait till I've checked things out). Naturally, I thought of Annie there, when I heard the scurrying mice.

Really, they were awful, the both of them, that night. Their voices had been too loud, and his, far too casual. Between them, they hadn't an ounce of respect, gabbing, gabbing, gabbing--

(How dare she just run off with him! the instant my back was turned!)

--about chalk. God, they'd scared the hell out of me.

And when I finally found them in the playroom--this, after I don't know how many minutes of frantic calling, of chasing here and there and not finding anything but a heart about to burst inside my chest--when I finally found them up on the third floor, heard his laughter, saw him pushing her on the wobbly horse, saying Good, Annie, good!

and she, about to fall. . .oh, God, I started screaming. I was howling myself, banshee-mad. I don't even know now the words I used, but the import came to this: no food, no water, nothing, bed! And I jerked her off the painted horse, an act so swift and violent, so incredible to us both, that for a moment, the only sound in the entire house seemed our mutual breath--this and the startled empty creaking of Rozie, the old wood horse.

Call the act what you will. Discipline, punishment, a righteous, sick-to-the-gills measure of adult "love" (for this is what we tell them it is: love, love, and the hand slaps down)--put the term to it yourself: I imprisoned them both in their rooms.

I marched them down to the second floor, Annie in tears (again), Michael in the grip of my hand, screaming--"Dammit, you bitch!" and such--his wrist twisting fiercely to get free. In a tone, I admit, not far distant from that one reserves for a dog, I told them they were bad, bad children, running off like that. I said they were inconsiderate, disrespectly, unfeeling (the windy adverbs running on and on) and,"dammit, yourself, Michael--you must pay the price!" No dinner. No appeal.

With Annie, the tone itself was enough. She hunkered back into the foreign room, the guest room (badly named as there had never been "guests," couldn't be what with Jule hearing sonnets from the faucets and such, Poe from the dining room floor). Annie just sort of shrunk back, lost, dog-to-its-pen, so contrite she nearly vanished into the

lilac paper of the wall. She said nothing. And from the frightened gloss of her eyes--these, so large they seemed almost cartoonish--I knew she would not emerge until morning, till I came for her. . .which was, of course, the point.

With Michael, I admit, there was more than this. I had to haul him across the hall, to another room, the twin of Annie's but with orchids. I ended up fairly pushing him in, yelling, "Stay! Or I'll blister your butt!" To drive the point home, I slammed the door in his face, then stood there, ignoring (or virtually so) the thorny rage that followed.

An over-reaction? Too severe? Perhaps.

But it wasn't I who, ten, twenty minutes before, had been talking about the chalk! It wasn't I saying the most grotesque sort of thing to Annie, the most disrespectful drivel downstairs in the great hall. It was Michael.

Look, we had just gotten in. I was still in the bathroom, for God's sake, fumbling with the soap. The damned little ball of faded pink kept slipping from my hands, was trying, I believe, to get back in the crystal dish with its cousins. Be that as it may, I was doing my best in the cold, flatulent stream of water from the faucet. I wanted to get the coal off first, to wash the black from my face and hands--nothing more. I confess, I succeeded as far as smearing it around. (Also--as honesty is the game here-- I wanted to stay in the john. Bad as it was with the scummy soap, with the "guest" towels bearing their initials, as awful as it was in that yellow light which made my skin

look jaundiced, the eyes--making contact, darting away in the mirror--more red and, frankly, frantic than I had ever seen in anyone before. . .bad and rotten as all this was, I wanted more time there in the tiny room. Anything, you see, but go out.)

Michael and Annie were standing near the slit of the bathroom door, their voices overly-loud, though, in fairness, perhaps it was the marble beneath them that made, vaguely, for the echo. Above the splashing of the water, I heard Michael say (quite casually, don't you know? as if he were telling her the plot of some tv show he'd seen, some Jack-Webby sort of thing, "just the facts, ma'am," yet with a slight tremor of excitement): "Chalk. They always use it nowadays, Annie."

"Who does?"

"Cops."

"What?"

"The cops, dummy, cops! They always go round the bodies with chalk--don't you know anything!"

"Baw-dies?"

(And, of course: the soap was slipping from my hands. You couldn't possibly stop its downward slide in the sink.)

"Where they fall, idiot," he explained. "Cops go round the bodies where they fall. It's part of their job. Oh, come on, dummy"--this, pure officious contempt-- "I'll show you where. . ."

At which point, I was out the door. Chasing them

down. Saying (weakly), "My God, children. . .stop right there."

In the shadowy hall, Michael half-turned around. I saw then he had her by the hand. Across his shoulder, he glared at me, at my eyes, one of which was beginning to sting from the soap. He said, "What now!"

I was so shocked, so flustered, I didn't know what to say. I vaguely remember raising my arms to my face, brushing at the burning eye with the wool sleeve of my coat--yes, naturally, smudging more black on my cheek. (Now, in hindsight, I think it was the right gesture, the proper attempt at costume, if you will, for they do such things in war. On lightless nights, when the job is to garotte a throat, or meet the enemy on a bridge and, with a short, silent, upward thrust--palm of the hand to nose--propel a bit of bone into the brain, at times like these, they blacken their faces with mud and such, or shoe polish maybe from home. They make a mask, a quite effective one. And now, looking back, I think it was the proper gesture, this smudging of the coal, the right response, for it encapsulated the situation there as perfectly as the acorn does an oak: it was a war. A perfectly black and bloody war. . .though I don't pretend to say I saw it then.) All I really saw was that he had her by the hand, and for a moment--after I waved them weakly to the deacon's bench by the wall, after I told them both to "sit down"--for a bare, shuddering moment, he didn't let go.

"You think you can hide it?" he said, a pure malevolence in his voice.

I jerked my head again to the bench. "Go."

"Do you really think you can hide--"

"I think!" I shouted to him, crossing the five or six paces between us with such determination and energy, I startled myself. "I think!" I said, again, grabbing them by their coats (his, slick nylon; hers, wool, like mine): "I think, young man, I can make you sit on that bench!"

And I pulled them apart. I wedged myself between them, escorted them to the high-backed seat, my heels decisive on the tile. I told them again to "sit down," "stay" (here, too, in my voice, the flavor of human-to-animal speech, care taken with each word, a pausing enunciation), "wait till I've checked things out."

Oddly enough, he complied.

After only the briefest hesitation, he seemed to sag, his shoulders dropping a notch. He made a kind of snugly noise in his throat, his back to me. Then, shrugging, he turned to sit down.

When I saw his face again, curiously, the malevolence, a pink, mean-spiritedness, was gone. He just gazed up at me, arms folded lightly across his chest, the skin around his eyes crinkling. It was much the same look, if you want the truth, that I have shown to pupils at the school, a tired (eyebrows arching vaguely) look of complete incredulity: What do you mean your spaniel ate the book?



What do you mean--"a flood came last night"--and Judy Blume washed in the sewer? It was precisely this kind of face, totally incredulous, that Michael was now showing me.

He said, "Do you honestly think you can get away with it?"

And my head was pounding. Ringing. The soap tightening like alum.

"For always, Celia?" he asked. "Ever and ever?"

It took me a second to realize that the ringing was the phone. (Trite, I know--but true.) From the kitchen, down at the end of the hall, the telephone was ringing, and as much to get away from this (from his crinkling eyes and the mouth, slightly open, and the little thumb rubbing gently the slick artifice of his coat), as much to get away from him as to find out who the hell! , I decided to go and answer it.

"Don't you move, children" was what I said, looking sternly at Annie. "Don't you dare go running around until I've checked things out."

It was Lee, of course--asking what the "fuck" I was doing. Asking, if we'll be honest, the same thing I was asking myself and had been asking, asking, asking the entire time (asking on the gravel path, in the slipping chute, God, even of the soap, its slight scummy feel). What, in the name of heaven and earth, am I doing here? What in hell? What the fuck? What! Any version will do, as it is the same, essentially the same, explosion

of nerves, the same, dribbling, impotent question the rhesus asks in her cage, or would, if she had words. Just wha--?

That night, Lee's voice was slurry and thick on the wire. It bolted out from the earpiece in that spiteful, particularly insistent way, in that "stuck" and mechanical manner, it always did when his lips were numb and wet, his soul feeling pity for itself.

"You drunk?" I asked.

But he didn't answer. He just kept barking at me, What the fuck! What the fuck are you doing to those kids! (And, really, he wasn't at all the way he is here: coming on Sundays with Annie, shrugging politely, palms up, asking questions about the therapy; that night, on the phone, it wasn't a question at all, the way he framed it.) What the fuck!

"Nothing," I told him, leaning back into the counter, rubbing slightly the pained muscles from side-to-side.

What!

"Bringing them home."

What!

"Home, dammit"--closing my eyes--"this is our home."

We argued for a couple of minutes, perhaps. No matter what I said, he couldn't get it through the fog, the Jack Daniels or God-knows-what he'd been drinking. He

He just kept harping--what! It was all quite mechanical, the exchange; and to make it worse, there was this hum the whole time, an annoying constant buzz on the wire that kept obscuring his voice. In the end, I found myself talking to nothing. He'd hung up.

I went back to the deacon's bench in the hall, found nothing again. . .or air, if you will, a slash of gleaming wood, what they'd left. The rest you know.

Or, maybe not.

Because, of course, it was this vacuum finally that propelled me through the house. It was a mother's duty to be sucked--room to room, floor to floor, obscenely--to call names and look in shadows.

In hindsight, perhaps, this was good. Maybe it's what I needed to break down the initial ice (nevermind it was all interior, a glazing of the cavity where, routinely now, with painful, contracting jolts, my heart practiced giving birth to itself). But perhaps it's what I needed, this pain, a horn-footed kick of the mule, to get moving.

I moved! I ran, craned my head into shadows, I raced to--

--the library, its thousand books (glance), smoking stand, chairs, wheeled ladder pinned to the wall (nothing);

--Daddy's room, blizzard of papers drowning the desk, one curling like the goose-necked lamp (not here);

--and the garden room, "so-lair-ee-um!" so leafy and dark the shape of plants, so many places to

hide by the bisecting glass, a blizzard beyond of its own (so look away), so round the fountain, dry and silent (naught):

--the kitchen again, parlor of fancy eats, quarters of the maid (nothing here but faded chenille on the bed); and then the pantry of shelves and glass and floating figs, pears suspended in amber like. . ."Children!";

--oh, everywhere. And all the time calling their names. All the time slapping at closet doors ("Annie!"). All the time my heels exploding, a telegraphy of sound, on the shiney "eye-talian" tiles.

Yes, absolutely. Even the parlor.

I even went there, though I admit it was last. I confess to passing it twice, calling out, yes, but not having strength enough to push in the doors still framed by the Christmas garland (this, as jolting to the senses as a coat suddenly opened on the street, a white sausage of skin flashed at the eye, above it, a desperate smile--quite jolting, for it was all over the house, this stuff: so many evergreens, looped and yellowed; so many gingham bows; red apples; red candles in the shape of Santa's face and porcelain elves--this really quite obscene, given the circumstances, the simple fact that in the parlor someone had rolled the rug).

Dammit! Are they hiding? was what I thought, standing before the two white doors, pristinely shut. Are they hiding here? From me? This was the thought as I

stood before the doors--from me!--my anger now growing equal to its partner, that queasy bowel-ice fear.

In the end, I burst inside. I smacked the doors open (a shuddering of wood, dark air quivering). I stormed right into the darkened room, brushing past the limbs of the tree still up, its needles dry, tiny pricks against the skin of my hand.

"Goddammit, Michael!" I shouted.

But the only thing that came back was my voice--a slight echo in the nearly empty room. (Oh, yes: a few things were left. Way back in the corner, near the window, was the black, curving mass of the piano; in front of the fireplace, the peacock still fanned his brass tail; a couple of hump-back chairs were still squatting, at odd angles now, on the denuded wood of the floor, mere patina in a snowy shaft of light; there was the tree, of course, and beneath it--this, just a glimpse, in turning panorama--boxes and boxes in gleaming foil, neatly stacked, slashes of ribbon and bow.) Yes, of course, some things remained. But most of what I remembered in the parlor--the flowered sofa, the loveseat, the square squat tables with their lakes of glass, the tv, the stereo and its cocoon of oak . . .my God, the drapes on the windows, too--most everything was gone. Somehow, it had vanished. Been taken away perhaps. Even the Persian rug.

(Much later, of course, he would tell me why, what happened, how it came to be that the floor was bare that night, darkly gleaming and hard beneath the feet.

It was a story come to light in the kitchen where we sat, he and I, drinking tea--"gently, genteely," with fingers crooked, for this was what he said to do, and I was too scared to argue. What he said, simply, was "the colors clashed." A sip. "All that red--the blood, you know. It got all over everything, the Isfahani carpet, too." He said Noab's eyes were hurting from the splashes, from all that "rioting red" on the carpet meant to be something else, tan, mostly, and blue. He said that on Christmas Eve it was purely an "aesthetic" thing they did, for Noab kept complaining that the grapes were "ruined," the green leaves "mucked up" and such, that the red obscured the "clarity" of the sultan's brown horse. "You can't even see the virgin-bride!" Noab said, and he kept clutching at his forehead, kept complaining, "Feels like pins in there--like needles an' pins in my eyes!" Not that Noab was alone in this. Orku, too, was sick "to the groin." Balaam, so horrified at the mess, he sat down on the flowers of spring--the sofa--was utterly green and wheezing. What he told me in the kitchen was it was "purely an aesthetic decision" the four of them made that night: to move Mother and roll up the rug.)

So be it.

All I knew that first night back, looking for the children--yes, for chalk I never found--was everything was gone. I stood there on that rectangular patch, where no one had walked for years, eons, and the first formable thought I had was, Thieves! I confess, it's quite

stupid, even naive. It's a measure of my innocence, perhaps, that I stood there, thinking, Sons o' bitches--they've taken the room!

Really, though, who wouldn't? Who wouldn't think that, coming from Nebraska, from some ordinary place and time, from any hamlet, town, city (name it yourself) where thieves prowl the obituaries as easily as they do dark, shrubby yards. Look, with the stereo and television gone . . .who wouldn't think that it was burglars? It's a notion, a story, as likely as any other.

But, of course, it only made my heart race faster to think, perhaps, that someone (scuzzy, face blackened with mud or pitch, invisible save for the glinting eyes), someone unknown to us, had broken in, had slid down the coal chute, maybe. . .maybe was still here.

"Children!" Are they hiding?

About that time, the chambers of my heart started slapping together like wet towels, a savage slap, slap inside my ribs; you couldn't even call it a beat--it was more just a flopping about, as pained and gasping as a fish on a pier.

Yes, naturally: I ran all over (ran like the blood, he said--and I heard this, too, rushing in my ears). I spurted from one room of the cavernous house to the next, too frightened to even call anymore, just looking for them in the shadows.

Finally, I found them. Way, way back in the old

nursery, back by the jack-in-the-box from France (bon-jour! its spring said, the clown-face rocketing out), back by the yellow paper rubbed raw, a perfect horizontal wound from the grip of the tryke (this, we rode in winter), way, way back beyond any concern at all, I found them, playing, Annie about to tip over the horse.

The rest, now, you know.

And maybe it was an over-reaction on my part.

I shouldn't have spoken to them so viciously, calling them "brats" and "little monsters," all the childish epithets I could devise. They were just kids, after all--were they not? How could they be expected to know that their absence could leave such a hole?

In any event, quite late that first night, when I couldn't sleep for the wind howling in the eaves, and came down the back steps to the kitchen where I heard them in the walls, the tiny scratchings, I had to ask myself: Had I over-done it, blown up over nothing at all? (For, in a way, if you didn't count the vanished furnishings, the tiny craters pocked into the walls--the fire from Jule's gun indiscriminate, messy, quite visible in the morning--if you didn't count the really obvious horrors, like the evergreens and elves, there really wasn't much to get excited about. As I said before, there was no chalk--not the slightest, white, dusty line round an elbow or leg. There wasn't any "red" either, because I looked; I searched the parlor, high and low. . .at least,



I looked a little that morning when Virgil came, but the walls had been repainted; aside from a few craters--lunacy! I remember thinking, sheer lunacy--aside from this, all that was really tangible was the faint, cloying scent of Dutchboy "basic white." There really wasn't anything you could put your hands on or around, nothing to go crazy over in the house. Only mice.)

So that night, very later, or maybe it was morning, I went about the shivering kitchen, hunting up the traps. Annie, I knew, would be frightened at breakfast, her eyes growing double their size, if she sensed them (Snitch having long ago ruined her on the species, having prodded that shrieking "Mooooooooooooo!" with his lazy habit of only eating half, the gelatinous innards, like a prize, left on the top porch stair).

So I went hunting up traps. "E-Z Kill." Lightning quick contraptions of wood and wire, for she had always said to me--to me, when I was no bigger than Annie herself, just eye-level to the counter--this was the kindest way. "It's best, sugar, to snap their necks--they suffer so with poison." Then, to the maid: "Juanita!" (or Bea, or Pearlie, whomever Jule had not yet sent packing with tales of the attic or pruning shears), "Juanita, por favor, set the traps out this evening." This followed by a slash of enamelled finger to the drawer where they were kept.

That first night, I dug them out myself. Shall I say that it was shocking to find them still there? to

discover that the drawer yet had strings, worming about, and receipts from the evening paper, a dull nubby pencil (yellow paint with the mark of a tooth), that same, unticking watch, entombed beneath pennies, that had been there the last ten years? The traps, as always, were very nearly swallowed by the junk. Still worse: in the refrigerator, "diet bars" chilled with the meat.

The fridge was one of those huge, metallic things, sized to feed an army. Diet bars? and me, gazing at them stupidly, my eyes so tired they burned for sleep, yet completely unable to close. Had she grown fat then? for there were boxes and boxes of mock "choclates," false "caramels," artificial "strawberry chews." Had her "beaux" finally withered on the square, the sheen gone from their eyes?

That night, I admit, I was so preoccupied--yes, thinking about the children upstairs, wondering if I appeared to them in that almost mythic way she had always appeared smelling of rose-water and glycerin, talons red--I was so caught up with the rhetoric of my own guilt, I wasn't paying much attention to the traps. I snapped a few prematurely, the wire whizzing past my fingers by scant hairbreadths, bits of frozen sausage rocketing to the ether.

Was it wrong to just throw him in that room?

(Not that I could have known, at the outset, the knob was faulty, that the mechanism was as bereft of sense as the room was of "guests." Not that I could have known, at the outset, that slammed hard enough, the door would jam shut. It wasn't my fault, this fluke, that made him batter the wood and kick and scream, "Let me out, bitch!")

That snowy night, going into morning, I had no answer. Just snap! the wire coming down with a vengeance, heart about to burst at the noise and hands arcing up like the flying meat.

(Was it wrong, you ask? Well, here in this place where people are more than anything just "conditions," walking syndromes and tics of the psyche, here where brain scans tell the story better than Falconer ever could, and Warren's "split" is a genetic banana thrown down to him by some monkey in a tree. . .here, now, I know: it was horribly, stupidly, innocently wrong to have thrown Michael into that room. What I should have done was throw him out the window.)

Snap!

(I had a grip on him, after all, had his twisting wrist firmly in hand. I could easily have dragged him to the window, the glass, watched--with nary a flicker of eye or twitch to the soul--watched, impassively, as the small body with its kicking feet, its mouth gaping in surprise, sailed out. Snap! I should have snapped his bloody, little neck. At the very least, should have tried, though, yes, it mightn't have worked: even from the second floor, dropping like that. . .there was such a blanket of white on the ground, he might have bounced. Bounced and come back, with snow being soft and caressing of bone. Snow, you see, utterly too safe.)

"They suffer so with poison. . ." Her words, like a shiver, came back in the kitchen. They echoed like reverberating wires in the brain, like the traps, I think, for Jule had said as much himself. (And by now, you must know, you must surely see that

were coming to me as in a collage. I was so very tired. It was just like looking down the barrel of a cheap kalied-escape, a toy they give to kids so they'll be quiet, seen and seeing, but not heard. "Look here," they say, at Sunday gatherings, handing down the dime-store tube. And what one sees, squatting by the potted palm, is the color of kings, breaking up, becoming a sunny day--golds and green leaves--and these, shattering, with the flick of the hand, into rocking oceans, blues as violent on the eye as death. What they show you is confusion, a round world in the eyeglass going to smash. What they say is, "See? What fun." This was the level of my thought that night in the kitchen--fast, disjointed, confusing to the point of near sickness.) Still, I had to face it. Jule had said much the same thing himself. Years and years after Mother and the mice, he had crept into my room--all shades and shadows, for it was night. He had come, like a feather, into the bed, saying, softly, "Cee, it's poison."

"What. . ."--and me, rousing, leaning up onto the pillow, gone that saliva of childhood that was sweet. "Say what?" I said, swallowing the bitter film, my tongue running over my teeth.

"It's poison, Cee."

"What is?"

But all he could do was look at the darkness, at the blank space of the wall. "Poison," he said, "hard, black--like that."

"Like what!"--the impatience of broken sleep, a rifled dream perhaps, clear in my voice.

"Like here. . ." Then, he was turning, the white sheets ruffling up. "Like here," he said, his hand, white as the quilt, coming up to my chest. "Burning here--poison."

And maybe he tried to touch it, my heart, to show me where. But his fingers came to rest instead on the flannel gown, on the flower woven into its threads, and beneath that, the rounding little lump of flesh that, yes, sometimes burned, sometimes hurt, because it was new and growing.

"Burns here," he said, "yes?"--his thumb stroking the bud. "Suffers and burns?"

Oh, yes, goddammit! One of the traps finally snapped on my finger.

I bit my lip, so as not to scream, a soft moan escaping into the cold kitchen air. For a moment, everything was forgotten but the taste of blood, shaking the damned thing off. I stood there--I don't know how long . . .I really don't--the throbbing finger in my mouth, eyelids hot, shut tighter than the furnace door.

## Chapter Fifteen

The morning was better, somewhat. Crisp toast and apricot jam, storm subsided to mere freckles of flakes, Virgil come to fix the door. . .even waking up, all right.

I'd managed to get a few hours sleep--the good kind, gray and still as lake-water, a black swan floating, maybe, on its surface, but not a ripple or splash on the glassy pond, not even a web of dream. Yes. . .for a moment, a hesitation between heartbeats, there was something that felt odd. The slightest tingle of unreality--not actually unpleasant--just strange, for the body felt so comfortable there; it fit so exactly into the hollows and hills of the mattress; the quilt, like a cloud, exquisitely textured and just the right weight

on the skin, still exuding the scent of lavender. In the time it takes a lid to shutter across the gray iris and open again, there was this sensation: the oak amoire, you see, stood so squat in the corner, still had on its high top that undulation of white, tatted lace--

Doily-roily, what's it up there for?

Don't know, Juley (shrugging), for her?

--another cloud, unreachable; beside that still, the gray square window of winter light, and outside, the wind. . .softer now, yet pushing the rafters in the room above to creak, like gentle rocking, completely familiar. For just the slightest speck of time (half-consciousness, half not), there was this odd, little feeling--a shrinking down of flesh in the bed; faintly, the desire of the hand to stroke (as it had always done in childhood) the fleece of the white, toy lamb.

Then--

"Mommy? Mommy?" A tentative push of her hand on the bed. "Mommy, you up?"

"Ummmm."

"Mommy! Wake up. Michael wants something to eat."

And, of course, instantly, it all flooded back. The spell was broken, splash of webby feet, bird flying off--"Ohhh-ga!"

It took me a while to get up. Tiny threads of guilt (shame, for shame! "locking" the boy in!) holding me back, tangling up with the bedclothes. The muscles of

me legs, finally swinging to the floor, felt wobbly, though from what--sleep or guilt, the sedative?--I couldn't say. I put on the bathrobe (Lee's, and getting dirty, too, a crusty blot of something on the blue lapel) and padded down to the second floor with Annie, I admit, consumed with shame. Ohh-ga--Ohh-ga. . . .feet treading down the steps.

I'm not sure what I expected to find. Rage, perhaps? Mewlish crying from behind the jammed door? A child tamed into meekness and manners? I know, at the very least, I did expect to find the door.

And for a moment, I think I just stood there, gazing stupidly at the shaft of gray light, that hole with its speck or so of eddying dust where the door had, clearly, once hung.

Ohh-ga.

A sniff from Annie--she, too, looking at the hole.

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs. In the kitchen."

"Uh huh."

I walked a bit into the gray shaft, ran my hand lightly on the empty frame. I looked inside, saw the white door laying on the rug.

"He was real mad, Mommy."

"Uh huh," I said, head shaking slightly. "Uh huh."



(Of course, it was interesting to note Virgil's reaction later that morning, to see the little, green glint of admiration coming to his eyes as we stood there, surveying the damage. "Haf'ta give that boy his due, Celia," he said. "He ain't one o' them fools in th' movies-- bunch o' jerkwater idiots what don't know door pins is on th' inside!" And he squatted down on the floor, picking up one of the variegated pins, black with dried splotches of white paint which he proceeded to fleck off with his thumb. "Blesset fools! Why, all they'd haf'ta do is pull 'em out o' their hinges--'stead," he said, half-chuckling to himself, "they ah-ways let theirselves git trap't by th' gaink-stirs!")

"Mommy, Annie said from the hall. "Michael was real, real mad last night. I think he was also a'scared."

"I know, darling"--this, so soft it was a moan. I looked at the door off its hinges, skirted, just barely, a splinter of wood. "I know, I know," I said. "Mommy: can see that now."

Resolved: To be better.

Resolved: Not to yell.

Resolved: To be kinder and hug them both, hug often, to get the apricot jam and set the table with silverware, placemats, napkins, too, to see Michael's doctor--in the morning!--to get this damned, crusty, filthy something off my chest, Lee's lapel, and for once, for a change, to be the adult!

"I think he was a'scared."

(And, oh, for the vision of children, for that sight of the Emperor bare, his gray, hairy chest and pendulous belly, for the flaccid, shameful sword!)

"I think he was a'scared, Mommy, he was making so much noise. . ." This was what she'd said to me, outside in the hall, an insight that kept bouncing and rebounding on the thick bone of my skull. Of course, of course, he was frightened--this, echoing in the hazy gray of my head as we walked, feet muffled by the thick yellow slash of carpet, down the spiral stairs. Of course. . .worse still: Celia, how could you just leave him there? ignore the screaming, pounding fit of a frightened, little boy?

Of course, he was "a'scared."

In the kitchen, though, he was also snotty--arrogant, perhaps, a better word, with his blue eyes coldly summing me up, his stiff body posed, his voice issuing commands: "Hurry up, I'm hungry."

Resolved: To remember all resolves.

What I did was breathe slowly, counting, one to three. I smiled at the little, petulant form, already seated at the table, his hands folded into a white, burlled knot on the wooden top, a shoe kicking, rhythmically, one of the scuffed wood legs.

"I'm waiting," he said.

"So I see." I motioned Annie over to the table. "How 'bout apricot jam?"

He shrugged. "No toast though."

"Oh, yes there is," I said. "I saw some bread up in the freezer. I can cut--"

"It'll be crummy."

"Oh, not at all, Michael. Bread stays fresh a long, long time--"

"It'll be real crummy, Celia. You won't like it"--(this, lilting). Then silence. A shrug. "But if you insist. I mean, you think you know everything."

I smiled. "Eggs, too?"

I know I came off like a phoney, my voice locked in to an almost preternatural calm, a lightness quite undeserved. I sounded--if you want the truth--just like Doreen at the diner once, a week or so before I discovered her sitting with Lee, two spoons on my couch. My voice was like hers had been, when she said at the diner, "More coffee, Mrs. Sawyer?" (Pink uniform, pink lips, pink vein in the eye.) She stood quite close to me, hands holding the scalding pot bare inches from my face. "Would you like sugar with that?"--(now pouring it into the thick, china cup, not a drop splashing)--"Cream, Mrs Sawyer? Half and half?" She actually forced herself to smile.

That was how I was, exactly so, that morning with the kids. I transformed myself into that same, smiling waitress, did not talk about the door anymore than she had spoken of Lee (though he was sitting there, in the booth, the whole time, head down and eyeing the remnant of a tuna melt with a perculiarly engrossed fascination). I did not talk about

the mess upstairs except obliquely.

"You're very strong, aren't you, Michael," I said, cutting thinly the French bread.

"Uh huh," he answered. "Very."

"And where did you sleep last night?" (For the bed, in the guest room, had not been touched; I'd noticed that, the clear unruffled spanse of bedspread, green as a summer lawn.)

"Did you sleep?" I said.

"Yes."

"Uh huh"--now, sliding the toaster oven out a little from the wall, noticing with half an eye that the trap behind it had snapped down, its quarry, though, escaped. "Where?" I asked him.

"His room."

"Uh huh"--dropping the crumbly slices into the dark well at the top. "Who?"

"Him," he said. "Jule."

"Uh huh"--the calm nearly shattered, hands shaking ever so slightly, smashing the toaster handle down, turning away. "You slept there?"

"Sure," he said.

"Why?"--now, making off for the pantry, walking away from them.

Michael shrugged. "'Cause I wanted to read. There's good stuff up in his room."

"Uh huh"--this, nearly drowned now with Annie's scream.

I whipped around, somehow managing to hold onto the jar of apricot preserves--"What!"--and saw her, eyes round holes

"Hell. . ." I glanced over to the counter where the toaster sat, its glass door now transparent, the dark interior illuminated now by the glowing, orange coils--my eyes, too, growing wide: "Oh, God!" Three slices of toast there--one resting crooked in the wire holder, beneath that, feet up, a tiny, unmoving mouse. "Uhhhh!" And I ran, raced over, flipped up the handle, one of the breads, absurdly, popping out. I waved at the air above the hot, metal top, at the wisping smoke that carried in it the smell of burning fur. "Good God!"

Then: "It's all right, it's all right," and, to Annie, "Stop screaming!"

Which she did, after a moment, slipped, really, into a kind of pale, half-sobbing whimper.

Finally, I turned around. I looked at Michael, his blonde head cocked arrogantly to the side, his eyes coldly returning my horrified stare.

"I told you, Celia," he said, sounding rather more bored than arrogant, the slight twinge of malevolence in his voice nearly obscured by the pure, unadulterated tediousness of it all. "I told you. The toast'd be lousy."

Virgil Darby came about ten. I'd called him after breakfast (jam on melba, nibbled at, Annie's face, pale and streaky, diet bars for "dessert"); I'd called him, though in that halting, inarticulate way of his, he'd said on the phone, "I'd a cum enny-ways--I been keepin' up that blesset monster, so as not t' freeze them pipes, doncha know"--and,

believe me, I did know, could see now the dark, blue bruise fanning out across my knee where, just the night before, I'd bashed into that crate of his down in the furnace room. Believe me, I knew, for in a way, the battered joint hurt worse today. There was nearly always a slow, niggling pain (like the back), just hovering above that threshold of consciousness; worse, pangs flared up, radiating into my thigh, when I stood suddenly or walked up stairs, when I mounted (slowly, slowly) the treads of the workman's ladder I had dragged into the great hall.

I was up there after breakfast (the children were somewhere, fooling around). I was pulling down, or trying to, the garland around the double doors, trying not to prick myself on the sharp needles of evergreen (what a joke this is!) which had yellowed now, turning the color of tarnished gold ("ever-green" as in "always"? who in hell decided that!); I was very nearly fuming, intensely irritated, for the dried garland would not come easily off the tiny hooks, and the apples embedded there--the only real color, a dozen brilliant, firey reds--kept falling off, prematurely, landing on the marble floor with waxy, little thuds, rolling away (these, of course, artificial). Finally, I decided to pluck them off myself; I grabbed at them, one by one, stretching, the pain in my knee, spoking out, got my hand round the cold, waxy balls of fruit, was balancing (absurdly), thinking that at any moment I might fall and break my neck, the Italian tiles, shimmering below, a quick little road to hell.

Then the doorbell rang.

I climbed down, two red prizes cradled in each hand;

I fumbled with the knob for Virgil there, who was standing on the porch, ready to be helpful, standing and shaking off snow.

We made a tour of the house that morning.

He, as I said, had to give the boy his "due." It had been most inventive of Michael to simply remove the pins, to get out that way and go to Julian's room on the third floor, just down the hall from mine--though this last part I didn't mention to Virgil, who was just standing there, in the empty door-frame, his face clearly puzzled.

"'Course, you know, thinkin' awn it, I ain't certain but what that kid coulda killed hisself, doin' this." And he strode over to the white door, reposing flat on the rug. He bent over, the fingers of his gnarled, spotty hand worming their way under one end, began lifting it slightly, testing. "Lordy! But this must go a hunner', hunner' an' fifteen pound! Solid, doncha know?"

"Uh huh," I said. "It does look heavy."

He let it fall, a muffled thud. "Why, pullin' it in like he done, it coulda fallen down on hisself, like as not."

"Uh huh."

"An' . . ." Again, a look of pure puzzlement, his tanned (even in winter), deeply creased skin, wrinkling up like little nests around his eyes--these, like little green eggs: "An' these pins here, too--they'uz painted over, sev'ral times. Musta been a bitch--pardon th' French--t' get 'em out in th' first place!"

"Well," I said so quickly it was almost a snort, "he did it. . .and if there's one thing I've learned, Virg, being a teacher, it's if the will is there, they'll find some way or other to do it."

"Hmm," he mumbled, slowly shaking his head. "Like as not, I s'pose."

As I said, we made a tour of the house that morning. And throughout, he seemed clearly embarrassed--this, revealed in an even greater difficulty with language, lots of nervous "doncha knows" and halting, stumbling, almost stuttering explosions of "p'rapses" ("P'raps it weren't right, takin' th' furnichur, that is, without yore say so. . .P'raps it weren't my place, paintin' oe'r the' wall like that, but we thought it best, doncha know, an' yore grandpa, he woulda wanted it that way, too--I'm certain o' that, Cee, I am!") The whole time, from floor to floor, room to empty room, Virgil seemed ill at ease with me, his head slightly jerking to one side as if there were spittle there, or something.

In any event, he let me know what happened to the parlor. We were downstairs, standing in the empty, echoing room, and his hand nervously flashed toward this void or that, toward a couple of walls that were now pristinely white. In vague and skirting phrases, he told me that after the sheriff and coroner were done, all the "evidence" gathered up (and I could very nearly see it: in the vacant room, all those pale, chalky officious hands, the shined, black shoes,



brushes flicking at the walls, the small plastic bags snapped open, bits of things dropped inside), after all of that, he had come over one afternoon with Doc. Together, they decided to get "th' worst uv it" out, which meant the sofas and upholstered chair ("weren't nothin' r'pair-able, lest you jest had 'em done completely o'er, doncha know"); the stereo and tv, its tube "blow't out," wood splintered and pocked "bas as th' walls"; the rug ("ruint--tot'ly ruint. . .I took the toll't up thang to th' land-fill 'long wi' th' rest"). He said he had spackled over the walls: "But I see sum ov 'ems sunk now" (this referring to the small sea of craters, opening up on the far north wall--

Lunacy! I closed my eyes. Sheer lunacy, face of the moon.)

"I'll do 'em o'er, if you like, Cee," he said.

Eyes opening again, focusing on a brown, human face, its tortured warmth, that bit, lower lip. "Will you, Virg? Will you do it over?"

"Why"--embarrassed--"'course." A swipe at the mouth. Gnarled hand coming up a hair's breadth behind my back, patting the air: move. "Cum awn, let's git out this place now, you seen enough."

Really, the house was falling apart.

And it wasn't even so much what had happened Christmas Eve, the shattering, indiscriminate fire of Julian's (Granddaddy's) gun. It was more the little things that

Virg pointed out to me, things forgotten and gone to seed, like the bloody furnace--he spent almost an hour that morning, tinkering with his tools, "cussin'" and cajoling it, babying it with soft, crooning words as though it were a swayback mare that must, just one time more, pull the haycart up the hill. Really, there were so many things that needed "fixin'." There were leaking pipes, sediment crusting greenly round the metal, drawers and doors that needed "planin'--they-uz so swelt you cain't get it close't," and in the garden room something ominous, terrible--"settlin' p'raps'"--that was causing some of the high glass panes to crack; it clearly needed "lookin' into," he said. "An' see th' fountain?" (Here, a little half kick toward the concrete bowl of acanthus and flying cupids, rings of white crusty rime where water had been.) "It ain't worked right for nigh onto two year!"

"Uh huh."

"An' look at them spiders"--now, jerking his head at the pale, variegated plants that hung in the corner, their aerial roots danlging limp, tips brown like a burn--"sump-in's eatin' at 'em, Musette'd know what. Doncha know, she use to do sum ironin' for yore Ma."

"Uh huh," I said, "uh huh, uh huh," but all the time wanting, burning to ask why. Why hadn't the fountain worked for two years? Why had they let the glass just crack, allow-  
in the cold and snow? Why, Virgie, why? (For such clear

decay--and the signs of it were everywhere, once you looked-- was not what I remembered here, not at all, what with her taking such pride in things, screaming, "Don't scuff, Celia, you're scuffing up the floor!" the day the puppy wouldn't breathe, Huck in the water, and I was running somewhere, just two black shoes, scuffing and scuffing the great slick hall, skirt flaring wide as my eyes and wet, too, like him, in the water, and she said, "Dammit, Celia, stop running like that in the house--isn't polite!" dammit, dammit, just like a pale ghost, running, just shoes, and she'd said, "Stop! You go right back down that hall, my girl, you do it again--walk--like a lady!") Oh, why, Virgie? Why? What the hell happened here?

"'Course, I don't know," he was saying to me in the solarium. "Don't know if you want t' live here agin, p'raps sell the place. . .Either case, it's got sum fixin' up t' do, sum work that me--me and Musette--"

I waved my hand: enough.

"Go ahead," I told him, "you and Mrs. Darby, you just, uh, do, you know. . .whatever--whatever needs to be done." I turned away from him, eyes dropping. "And while you're at it, start in the kitchen? There's something really awful, you know? In the toaster?"

## Chapter Sixteen

"So, I say: You must have one hell of a head today.

"And he says: What?

"A head, I say, a head! Good God, it must feel like a melon about to burst in there. What with all you were drinking last night.

"And he says: What?

"And I say: Drunk, Lee. You were absolutely snock-ered last night!

"And he says: Me? I wasn't 'drunk'! What in hell are you talking about, Cee?

"And then, I'm laughing in his face. Really, I am.  
I say: You mean to tell me you weren't drinking?

"And he says (all flustered): Well, no. I had a

martini, yes. But only one, dammit. Look, what's this all about!

"The call, Lee, I tell him. The call! You were totally out of your mind last night, calling me up on the phone, so damned drunk, I could scarcely--

"And he says: Celia (standing on the porch like he's real, real puzzled!) Celia, I didn't call. . .

(Pause)

"So, tell me, Dr. Friedmann," I said. "What do you make of that?"

She leaned back into her chair, slightly nodding, diplomas above her head like a faint, square halo of glistening glass.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked again, having just spilled it out, the entire story (or what I could remember since last we'd spoken--was that only a week ago? a mental shrug: no matter). "What do you think of Lee lying like that? 'Saying he didn't call."

Across her face, stoney and square like a horse, there passed the briefest flicker, a rippling wavelet as if the nerves and muscles were suddenly in need of release. She breathed deeply. "You say he was drunk that night you and the children moved back to the house?"

"Very."

Another breath. "And he's done this before?"

"What?"

"Drink to excess."

A nod of my head. "Yes. He used to do it a lot,

in fact--right at the end of our marriage."

"Uh huh," she said, thoughtfully. "Does he still?"

"What--drink?" I said. "Well, he must."

And she was nodding, too. "Well, it could be, I suppose, a blackout. If Lee's alcoholic, he might not remember making that call. As you know, alcoholism in its advanced stages can block out parts of memory."

"Uh huh."

She blinked. Rubbed at an eye with her hand. "But, interesting as this all may be, your ex-husband really isn't the issue--"

"Well, you said to tell you everything," I said.

"I just found it curious, you know?"

"--yes, yes, it is. But the real problem still is that little boy. The problem is Michael. . .and you, too. Your relationship, from what you've told me, isn't very good, is it?"

Silence.

"I must admit," she said slowly, "I've not had much success with him either, today. He still won't talk about the deaths, not in any real, personal way--just abstractly, as if it all happened to people he didn't know or maybe didn't care about. You tell me, Ms. Tripp. What do you make of it?"

"I think. . .I think it kills me, when he says 'the' all the time."

"What?"

"The grandfather! The mother! 'This is the mother's sewing room'--he said that this morning to Annie, Doctor. 'This is the mother's room!'. . .like she didn't have a name of her own, you know? God, the only one he calls by name is Jule--even then, it's not 'Uncle.'"

"Nothing that indicates any relationship?"

"No. But the worst part's he's so angry! Angry and completely spiteful, too. Like with the mouse."

"Which?" she said. "The toaster?"

"Well, yeah," I said, "but I was thinking more about later, you know?" (For I had already told her the rest of it, how Virgil had come into Granddaddy's library that very afternoon, shaking his head, saying, "Celia, I cain't for th' life a me figger out whut's wrong wi'th' toaster." And I'd said, slowly, laying Dante down on my lap: "Virgil, did you look inside?" To which he replied, "A course--ain't nothin' wrong in there but crumbs. The wires is workin' fine"--blah, blah. And, of course, he was right; it was true enough, for as I discovered later, the mouse was gone. Later, quite late that night, as I slipped into the mussy sheets of my bed upstrais, I touched the half-burnt thing with my foot--Christ!--and there I was, flinging back the covers, pulling up to the headboard, shrinking, heart thumping in the darkness like a wheel.)

"Uh huh, uh huh," she said. "A nasty little trick like that does reveal a measure of anger on his part."

To which I said, "No kidding." Something like that, and her eyebrows went--oh, enough!

Enough! Dammit, enough!

Where is the other half? you ask (or perhaps it's I, framing the question). But where is the "flip" to the waxy track of the record? the "other side of the coin," that copper cleanly ennobling Lincoln's face? Where is that fabled, famous "hand"--paired, as it always is, with that limp-along phrase, On the other, with a shrug, palms turning upward to the heavens, a smile? Just where in hell is that "silver lining" rumored to come with the cloud?

Sometimes, really, I'd like to scream.

I'd like to scream (like Charlotte here, at nothing, at milk spilt on the floor, the bitter taste of medicine), just scream and scream and scream until no sound is left, for we are so obsessed with twinning the world! We are Manichaeans all--though we don't know that Mani guy, couldn't shout his name were it the trivia question of the day on the FM station, a thousand bucks riding on the answer; yet, we are still, each of us, following that damned Persian ghost, treading lightly after him on that small, rickety bridge into eternity: on one side of the railless path, lies goodness, beauty, light (God, if you will); on the other, pure evil (dead mouse dropped in the toaster), ugliness (smell of its singeing fur), the black void (darkness of the bed at night, insomnia of the Devil).

Yes, yes, we follow this ghost. We do it blindly, ignorantly--yes, sometimes with a dash of 60's humor, too, for we want, man, that "yang" along with the "yin"; or



to say it better, beauty opposing ugliness, two equal and opposite forces, or else--how to understand either? how make sense of the universe, turn that rumbling shifting kaos of a thousand worlds going smash into kosmos again, at least its illusion. We demand some kind of cosmogony, disorder becoming order, or else--how on earth to keep bucking up one's trembling, little chin?

Enough!

What I'm trying to say is: I've had enough. . . . I'm tired of talking about that dreary little mouse! I'm tired of telling you what Dr. Friedmann's face looked like there, haloed by the glass, how her eyebrows (pencilled) kept arching up and up into that perpetually stupefied look. I'm sick to death of all this ugliness!

Michael in the house, pulling doors off hinges! . .

Michael saying, "Well that's a bitch!" when Virgil told him he'd already cleaned the chalk. . .

Michael in the outer office here, just minutes before, going zoom, zoom, zoom with a tiny, toy plane, bashing it into the papered wall, and me saying, "Stop that!"--bashing it again (actually, throwing it!) where, yes, it broke into two unequal chunks, two little duds that slipped, discretely, silently, to the carpeted floor. . . .

I'm sick to the gills of all this junk!

Where on earth is the other half? you're asking. (And I must admit, in Friedmann's office, I was wondering this myself.) Is there no beauty here, in this story?

Is there nothing completely pure? Have you never, Celia, had one moment, a tiny, shimmering spot of time, when you felt your head swirl in pure delight, your heart race in joy, it making a joyful sound in your own ears, as your body tingled, an electric pulse, at the very rightness of it all? Have you never had one single time when things, really, were good?

If this is the question, the answer must be no. I've not had one solitary, single moment like that, no. I've had two.

Or, maybe more, if I'll be honest, perhaps many moments approaching this that felt integrated and whole, in a sense, pure. Though it is true, for instance, that Snow drowned Huck in the slop jar by the porch (true, also, that that evening I tried holding my own breath beneath the soapy water of the bath, gulped the air in first, then slid down, down beneath the bubbles and tried holding it a long time to see if drowning hurt; it did), though it is quite true that my pup met a bad--no, horrible--end at the cold hand of Snow, there was also that other moment, its twin, if you will, that morning Doc first brought him to us, he so excited he peed and pooped, ran all over the upholstery of the brand, new car. There was this moment too, you see: first contact--Huck wriggling, tail swatting furiously at the summer air, tongue pink and wet and lapping like warm butterflies all over my hands and face; first contact, first love--gray eye to black,

breath to breath (his smelling more than anything like poop, and me, not caring a whit, for he felt so good--magical--dancing about on my dress as I lay there, supine, on the soft, green grass).

No doubt there have been many moments in my life, pure, like that. Yes. Even with Jule. There were those infant mice in the field that he cradled, like soap bubbles, in his hand; and let me touch them, too, but "gently, Cee, look how little they are!" and they were, these tiny, furry babies that, one by one, he put back into the nest: "Their mommy and daddy's waiting." There really were fine times like this with my brother. Making corn cakes in the kitchen with Pearlie, and they way Jule smiled when she said, "You're doin' it jes' right!" (he, stirring so lustily, he slopped great golden waves of it out of the pan, Pearlie smiling and smiling, for we were little). So many moments. Like finger painting in the nursery, that one time Juley actually caught what he saw with his own eyes, letting me see it, too: the brilliant, other-worldly greens, sunflowers upside down, their enormous heads dropping seeds that were small children, really, just round, happy, heads, dropping them in a sparkling shower to the rich brown earth below: "They will grow here," he said, pointing, "an' here, an' here!" And when he laughed, so did the heads, from their mouths, little stars of yellow. So many moments! Really. Among the best, those "philosophical meanderings"--though we

wouldn't have called them this, as we were only ten that summer. We would just talk. Go wandering round the countryside with Huck and popsicles dripping down our hands. We would sit beneath the crabapple tree (Huck getting the last bite of Jule's banana ice), and I would poke my stick into the dirt, asking, "You 'spose it's true? We come back, after we die?"

And Jule, leaning back into the small hollow of the tree, closing his eyes, said, "Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"So. . .what do you wanna be?"

And he nestled his head, brown hair into brown bark, "This."

"Yourself? You wanna be you again?"

"Oh, no!"--(laughing, arms rising above his head, hands grabbing at the trunk, trying to shake it)--"This!"

"You wanna come back as a stupid tree?"

"It's not stupid," he said, "an' I will--"

"Well, not me," I burst in. "Not me! I wanna be," I said, glancing down the little hill, "I wanna be that!" And I pointed at a big, white bird that had suddenly emerged from the dark copse in the distance. "I'd like to be a bird like that one--just spend the whole day flying 'round."

Which made him laugh. "A bird?" he said. "Then maybe we'll meet. You know, one day, maybe a hundred million years from now, you'll just be sittin' on a branch, singing. And it'll be me there. Under your feet."

"Think so?" I said. (And I remember, vividly, being intrigued.) "You really think so?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"But how would I know, Juley? I mean, how would I know it was you I'd be sittin' on? Gosh, but it could be anybody, you know? Or it might just be some old tree!"

"Oh, you'll know," he said. "I'll shake my leaves at you or somethin'." And he tossed his posicle stick at me, Huck jumping after it. "Don't worry. Even if it's a million million years, I'll find a way to let you know it's me. I'll whisper your name with my leaves, maybe: Cee! Ceeeeeeee!" (And now, he was getting silly. He was wiggling his fingers at me, trying to make his voice sound like the wind in a scary movie, like Vincent Price down at the Rialto, howling from his grave.)

"Promise?" I said, now laughing myself. And I threw my own gummy stick at him, Huck pouncing, colliding with Julian's knee. "Then somehow, I'll let you know I know, too! No, really, I will. I'll do what birds always do to let you know," I said (slyly). "I'll poop on your arm!"

"You would!"

And we were laughing, tussling about, the pup running about as if trying to catch the very sound from our throats.

Really, there were so many fine, even wonderful, moments like that.

Yet, if we're talking about beauty here, real beauty, that quality of shimmering iridescence that is clearly, 100 percent on the light side of the bridge--not the dark, or worse, hovering beneath that wide stupid structure, in the gray recesses of between--if we are really talking about beauty here, then two episodes in my life stand out. And shimmer. They seem, even now, like Sunday morning air, like the world above a hot engine, maybe (that ghostlike, irridescent quiver of blacktop, tree, and cloud). Yes, they do shimmer back in the memory, they are so beautiful. And you should not be misled that, both times, I was somehow "lost."

Not that I ever felt that way (all teary and a'scared and looking around, frantic, in a world made up only of big people's knees), not that I ever felt the least bit "lost," though my family had gone on to the monkey house, Eddie jerking on Mother's hand, Daddy's too, yelling, "Come on! Come on! They're feedin' the monkeys right now! We'll miss everything if we don't hurry!" and then Mother (a backward glance), saying, "Come along, children, your brother wants to see the--" (blah, blah, blah, blah!) Well, you know how it goes at the zoo, especially when someone has tied to your wrist a big, fat, orange balloon!

And really, I wasn't a'scared at all. I just stood there on the blacktop path, tonguing a piece of candy

corn stuck on my tooth. The balloon was bouncing in the little breeze, trying to pull my hand up, and I just stood there, watching them go, thinking "Dumb monkeys." Then I turned around and went trundling back to the giant tortoise.

"You agin?" he asked.

A solemn nod.

And he was smiling, too--a big space there between his front teeth. "Wont sum more lettuce,lil' gal?"

I held up my hand to the big man in white. (This was the "petting zoo," after all. You could feed them yourself--whatever the big man in white put in your hand. You could throw grain at the red chickens, pecking in the dirt. You could pat the fat bunnies, if you could catch them in the tall, yellow grass. And way, way back in the corner, you could stroke the little donkey with his itty-bitty saddle; you could even ride him, if you had a dime. But best of all, best ever, was the tortoise--he walking slowly--oh, so slowly!--on the curvine blacktopped path.) I held out my hand for some lettuce. I said, "Please, sir."

Once I had the wilting leaves (a whole bunch!), I went down the little path, back to the tortoise. I held one out in front of his nose.

"You again?" he said.

"Yes"--giving him a leaf. "Do you like it?"

He nibbled it. "Eh-yup! Quite tasty. Tasty n' good!"

"Here, Mr. Tortoise," I said. "Have another."

"Num, num. Don't mind if I do."

I fed him slowly, all the leaves.

When he finished, he said, "Can I kiss you?"

"Why, cert'ly!" And I bent over, placing my face just an inch from his nose (two tiny holes there, a little snort of tortoise-breath, like from the sea, maybe, or someplace like that). "A course you can kiss me, Mr. Tortoise," I said. (And lest you wonder at my precociousness, he had already informed me, with just a tad of snootiness, that he was a tortoise: "T--O--R--T--O--I--S--E! young lady. I am not, repeat not a turtle!" At which point, of course, I apologized for the error.)

Now, he was saying, "Can I kiss you?"

"A course!"

And he did.

Then, I sat down. I looked at his eyes. I stroked the rough skin under his bobbing head. I said, "You're a lot bigger than any tortoise at home."

Another snort. "Why, of course I am," he said.

"I'm the star of this show--I am, I am!"

"I see."

Another pat (this time, on his shell).

"Do you have a name, Mr. Tortoise?"

"Naturally! My word, what do you think? You



think my Mommy and Daddy didn't give me a name?"

"Why, no--"

"Oh, nevermind," he said. "Come closer."

I did, and he whispered it in my ear: Arnie.

Arnold T. Tortoise, Esq.

"What's 'esk'?" I said.

He kicked a tiny pebble out of the way with his foot. "Haven't the foggiest idea, really," he said.

"That's just my name."

"Oh."

Patting, patting his shell.

"And do you have a wife, too, Arnie?"

"Eh-yup!" he snorted. "Name's Vicky-do, it is."

"Vicky-do? Why, that's a silly name."

"Eh-yup!" And then he kicked another pebble, his eyes darting (slowly) from side to side. "Just don't tell her that," he whispered. "She's got some temper, you know!"

"Oh, I won't," I said, zipping my lips shut, to prove it.

"Lissen," he said, now quite conspiratorially.

"Let's bust out of here."

"What?"

"Break out! Cut the wires! Jump the fence!"

"Do what?" I said, because, for the life of me, I didn't see how that could be possible: Arnie, jumping the fence?

"Look, you could put that string around my neck," he said, bobbing his head toward my balloon. "You could say it's a leash and I'm your dog, we could walk right past that feller there, he wouldn't know--"

"Say you're my dog?" I said. "Why, that's ridiculous."

"Oh? Is it?" he said, thoughtfully. "Well, you could say I'm your cat--eh-yup, you could say that!"

And then I was laughing. "Oh, Arnie-esk, you are silly!"

"Yup, yup--like you."

And then he started singing. At least, I think it was singing. His voice was so slow, but his head bobbed up and down, like Eddie's sometimes, with his records:

"I was walkin' thru th' jungle just the other night!  
Well, I heard a big rumble an' I thought it was a fight!  
Well, I stood there list'nin, began t'move my feet!  
It was a jungle rhumba, doin' th' knockdown beat!  
It was a jungle, jungle, jungle, jungle rock!  
A jungle, jungle, jungle, jungle rock!  
It was a jungle, jungle, jungle--

"Oh for God's sake, Celia!"

And suddenly, it was Mother. Mother gabbing me, pulling me up, smothering, semi-hysterical. "For God's sake, we've been looking all over! Where on earth have you been!"

And what could I say? Could I really say, Here, Mother, here, listening to a song? Here with a tortoise that wanted more than anything out? Could I really tell her that when Arnie (I presume, offended at the interruption) had already begun a slow, sideways veer to the left, was kicking a pebble, walking away?

"I heard that on a record last week!" I cried out, after him.

"Heard what?" she said, irritated. "Oh, be quiet! Come along!"

Do you think it odd that this moment still shimmers? that it is radiant in memory and stands somehow whole and complete? Perhaps it is odd to count it among my very best times (a thing I couldn't help but think about, sitting in the office with Dr. Friedmann, she forever going on about Michael and "make-believe," about a child "pretending"; still, I had to wonder what on earth she'd think of me--tiny girl with a rockabilly beast, Arnold T. Tortoise, Esq., his song somehow more real to me than the one that blared out to the walls at home, Granddaddy there, too, slapping the beat out on his knee.) Still, it was one of my two best ever times--the other one coming, years and years later, in Paris.

Oh, have I not yet mentioned that I am a "seasoned traveller"? Have I forgotten to relate that "grand tour" of Europe, tell you how it "broadened" my (very) "young mind" with its "cultural enticements,"

its Venetian stones and splendid piazzas, its visit to the museum in Palermo--or was that Florence? No matter. The "richness of the past"--as promised by the brochure my mother pored over a solid two weeks--did "come alive," on cue: In Brussels, that little Mannikin Pis made his stream ("This fountain 'sposed t' be art?" asked a pimply-faced boy from Talequah, Oklahoma; "Why, I kin do that!" he cried, his hand making a great show of flying to his pants, pretending to unzip them in the middle of the street, the girls around him dissolving into laughter). Still, Brussels had its rainy day. Rotterdam, its afternoon. Outside the Hague--we all agreed--that one-eyed vendor sold better "fries" than back home, at McDonalds. Lisbon, Munich, Nice. Then Paris. (Twenty eight cities in as many days, this the last). Paris! City of lights. L'heure bleu. And me going one way, my tour group another; me with barely a franc left in my jeans, with just three pronouncable phrases on my tongue:

"Je suis Americaine."

("Say this," Mrs. Estes had cautioned, for she was our tour-guide, an excitable, somewhat dottering soul who "off-season" taught German at the high school in Lawton. "You kids tell them you're Americans," she warned, "at the first sign of trouble.")

So: "Je suis Americaine."

And: "Je m'appelle Celia Tripp."

Naturally: "Ou est le W.C.?"

Really, this was all I knew of the language. To be sure, I could say a few other things--bon jour bon soir, Brigitte Bardot, vive la difference! Yes, I had a smattering of vocabulary; but without a grammar--pronouns and moods, that slow-moving train of time, broken at the couplings into neat, little cars--without a basic syntax, I couldn't string the words into sentences that made sense. (C'est la vie, n'est-ce pas?) So when Mrs. Estes and the other kids vanished, got swallowed up by the big, yellow bus and, with a great chugging gust of dieselling finality, roared off to our hotel, when this happened just as the lights along the Seine shuddered on, began to glow like a string of pearls in the musky--yes, almost blue--light above the river, well, there wasn't much else I could do, was there? Just walk around. Look. Finally sit on a rickety wooden chair at some cafe.

"Coffee?" I asked of the elderly waiter (oh, yes: le garcon). "Coffee, s'il vous plait?"

"Le cafe? Oui"--and he quickly disappeared.

Probably, I should have been frightened. Probably, I should have been shouting for all to hear, "I'm an American! I'm lost!" But that was too melodramatic for my taste; and besides, I didn't feel it. I simply didn't feel "lost" at all, though there were hundreds of strange people there with me, sitting at rickety tables, too, milling about on the walk, laughing and

chattering, a real cacaphony of sound complete with subtle gesticulations (boy intent upon picking up girl, or vice versa), though there were all these people scuttling about, speaking a language I didn't comprehend, couldn't communicate in, and, to be frank, had no desire to learn, I still wasn't frightened.

So, how to describe it?

Quite simply: I was just there. I had no money left, no resources (after tipping the old man); I had no friends, no way of talking or being talked to; I, really, had no thoughts at all. I was just there, by myself, in myself. And--it was bliss.

It was, I believe, the happiest hour of my life.

(And I didn't even think about Jule. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but it's true. He had, of course, been hospitalized again that summer; he was maybe sitting in a salty, splashy bath the very moment the waiter came to take my order; maybe it was already morning there, and they were daubing jelly on his temples, gluing the electrodes on just as the cup came to my lips, just as I sipped the strong brew--really, I didn't know what they did to him at the hospital, or if they did anything at all; at seventeen, all I knew, was that it wasn't good, whatever was done, for he always came back to me the same. Always the same, sometimes worse. But I wasn't thinking of Jule that evening in Paris. Though probably it was his "stay" there that impelled my parents

to that stupid brochure--"Send Your High School Student To Another World This Summer!" (this, in bright yellow letters, quite gaudy); "credit available," though whether that meant money or school, I never discovered. In any case, I think it was Jule's hospitalization that made them fork over two thousand some odd dollars for my trip. There was even a little party for me at home--just family, a cake shouting Bon Voyage in blue icing, a couple of pieces of new luggage they had special ordered. But why not? Eddie would be going back to college after all; I believe he stayed at State all four summers. And Jule, as Mother always put it to people we didn't "know," would be "away." So why not? Why not shuttle me off, too?)

At the cafe, though, I wasn't concerned with this. I was too busy just being, if that's possible. I just sat at the little table by myself; I sipped the coffee till it grew cold, till the blue above the river turned black, those pearls becoming like Chinese lanterns in my eyes, swaying and swimming in the wetness there (as tears can spring from joy, too--you know?). For a while, I simply was. And it was the closest thing to bliss I've ever felt. It lasted until Mrs. Estes (or rather, her Jungle Gardenia cologne--which had a way of wafting out ahead of her, as well as lingering long behind) came back into my consciousness--she, a nervous wreck to judge by her appearance, she, patting and pulling on my hand,

saying, Celia! Celia, you must pay more attention!  
And--

"Ms. Tripp? Ms. Tripp?" (Now, it was Alicia Friedmann's turn; now, we are back to the present, its own little car of coal.) "What do you think?"

(Pause.)

"About what?"

Again, that pencilled line went arching up.  
"Are you all right? We were discussing Michael."

"Oh, yes."

"Well?"

"What?"

(Pause.)

"Will you consent to his going into the hospital?"  
she asked. "Will you give your permission for that  
now?"



## Chapter Seventeen

She asked me to do several things (and I remember them, as I made a list on the back, inner cover of a book I had brought: Commedia):

1. Think. Hosp.

"Well, mull it over," Dr. Friedmann had said. And then she admitted that she, too, had her reservations. "We wouldn't want him to think he was being 'locked up'--you know, 'punished. But I am concerned that he may not be getting the, uh, intensive kind of care he might be needing. Professional care. Maybe the hospital setting would be the best thing for him right now. So will you think it over at least?"

I said I would. And I did. I'm half embarrassed to say, I even talked about it, too.

## 2. Talk.Teach.

And this was quite a strange thing, really, an odd little trick of fate (a moment of synchronicity that were one, say, writing a work of fiction, or even a long, droning, allegorical poem, one would not include for fear of offending the reader's sensibilities about such things); but it was odd, because I didn't have to go hunting her up, Michael's teacher. She was waiting for us at the house that very afternoon when Michael and I came home from the doctor.

(In the car--I might as well tell you now--he had told me, in no uncertain terms, "You'd better not! Don't you try puttin' me in any old hospital, Celia! Can't hold me there anyhow!" And to reinforce the point, he kicked the dashboard with his shoe. To which I'd said--and yes, it was fairly close to a threat--"Well, you'd better start minding your P's and Q's then, hadn't you? You'd better start behaving, young man"--for he had put a small dent in the glove box, he kicked it with such force, and yes, it was Mother's Mercedes we were driving that day--"I mean, they've got real locks at the hospital, Michael. You can't pull the doors off there!")

At any rate, Sandy Robeson was waiting for us when we came home. Musette (who had come to look after Annie and do. . .oh, whatever it was she did around the house) had shown her to the library, and she was still there,

about four thirty, grading papers at the little writing desk--spelling tests, by the look of them.

"Hello, Michael," she said gently, rising when we came in. "How are you, dear?"

I'm embarrassed to say he didn't respond. He just looked at me, glaring, turned on his heel and went out. A moment later, you could hear him clumping, stomping almost, up the back service stairs.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "He's. . .not himself, you know?"

She nodded. "Of course."

We had an interesting--if somewhat unsettling--talk that afternoon, Michael's teacher and I. Sandy Robeson, a new face to me, was a pale, wispy sort of person (washed-out hair and skin, brown eyes that fairly disappeared behind the thick, mannish glasses that sat so heavily on the bridge of her nose and kept slipping down its sheen). She was about my age, I'd guess, but she seemed much younger to me somehow. She seemed, in fact, almost like a student herself in that plaid skirt and blazer, the little Buster Brown type shoes. But maybe it was more her manner I found upsetting than the clothes. I really had to wonder how long she'd been at this (teaching), because she didn't seem to know what on earth she was talking about, her "Michael" being a far different creature from mine.

"He's such a sweet child, too," she said, after the preliminaries, after she told me she'd been meaning to come

by every afternoon, but hadn't been "sure" if she should, after she told me how upset all the other kids were at school, how this "incident" (her word) had "shaken them up badly. I'm afraid it's shaken their faith in the world, you know, to have something like this happen."

"Uh huh," I said.

"I mean, how do you explain it to a bunch of seven year olds?" she asked, white hands fluttering up.

I shrugged.

"And to have it happen to Michael, of all people, and his family. Well, he's such a good little boy, so sweet and helpful--"

"Helpful?" I said, barely able to keep the disbelief from my voice.

"Oh, my yes," she said. "He's always been the first one to stay after school to help. To clean the chalk boards-- or really, whatever needs doing. I've often told him he's my 'right hand' in class. And, you know, I've tried to give him extra responsibilities. I've tried very hard this year to make him feel, well, important--you know? Less self-conscious?"

And I was shaking my head--"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Well, something like this is always traumatic for a child. Though it'd be far worse, in the long run, to just shuffle him through, before he was ready. But, you know, as a teacher, you try to do what you can to ameliorate the

fact that he's older and bigger than the other kids--"

"Older?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh," she said (and now, she was growing visibly flustered, embarrassed). "I thought you knew. Michael was put back last year."

"Put back?"

"Yes. Last spring, we felt his skills were such--well, he just wasn't ready to go on to the third grade. He needed another year."

"You mean his people skills?" I asked. (For that was what we called it at Rosewood: "people skills" or "interpersonal relations"--nice ways both of saying, This kid's a wild beast, a brat, hyperactive, immature.) "Are you talking about discipline problems?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Michael's citizenship skills are just fine. It's his reading and writing--math, too, I'm afraid. He's quite weak in all of them," she said, then quickly added, "mind you--he's not an unintelligent child--"

And at this, my ears picked up. They actually started burning, because I have said the same thing myself to other parents; all teachers have. Oh, little Suzie (little X, Y, or Z--plug the name in yourself) is not an unintelligent child. I've said this very thing to parents who've sat in the principal's office, concerned, yes, but usually as slobberingly-stupid as their child. Oh, little George is not unintelligent, I've cooed, consolingly, when what I've meant is: Good God, he's dumb!

"Michael is not, mind you, an unintelligent boy," Sandy Robeson was saying, as she sat, rather tense, in the wing-back chair.

"Damned right," I told her. "He's not." For wasn't it just yesterday, or the day before (I'm not sure about the time--with so much going on, time itself was beginning to get mixed-up for me), but wasn't it just recently that I had found him and Annie here, poring over some old volume of Granddaddy's? They were lying on the rug, Michael with a piece of paper there, Michael telling her--of all things!--about alchemy and the Middle Ages. He was writing down the word ABRACADABRA for her, making it form a triangle on the paper, telling her, more or less, what it meant, saying--yes--it was a "Jew-word". . .but that's just Oklahoma for you, isn't it? Just a bit of ignorant prejudice. Regardless of any of that, you have to admit to be eight years old and even know the word "alchemy" is pretty, damned impressive! I, at least, was impressed--I'll admit, even startled, then Virgil was calling me into the kitchen, and, well, you know how that goes. So, now, in the library, I had to tell her, Sandy Robeson: "You can't seriously mean that Michael is stupid?"

"Why, no," she said, flustered again. "No, of course, not. I'm not suggesting that at all!" (Her brown eyes, what I could see of them behind the thick lenses, quickly darted away.) "But we all have our. . .strengths. And our weak-

nesses, too. What I'm saying," she was telling me in her best, most teacherly voice, "is that Michael's weakness just happens to be school work. He's a slow reader--quite conscientious. But I don't think he cares for it much. He'd much prefer to be out playing soccer--now there's a field he shines at. Sports! I--"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" I said. "Look, regardless of anything else I might think, Michael is a very bright kid."

To this, she gave a weak, half-smile. She almost shrugged. "Well, I was his teacher last year, too, you know? But this is all neither here nor there," she said quickly, "I really just came by to see how he's doing, to find out if there's anything I can do to help."

"Uh huh."

Silence.

Then: "Is there? Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

And I, by this time, was, I'll admit, feeling rather lost. I shrugged: don't know.

"Well, when will he be coming back?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Shall I leave his assignments? So he's not too far behind when he does--"

"Look, I don't know," I told her. "Yes, yes, of course. Leave his work, if you want."

We got up then. Or rather, I did, saying, fairly abruptly, too, as I rose, "Thank you for coming"--something like that, because, really, I wanted her out. (Incompetent idiot! I was thinking. And I actually had to stop myself from rolling my eyes up in disgust as she fiddled with her stuff, pulling workbooks out--"Run, spot. Run!"--writing down his assignments on a sheet of pale, blue paper. Incompetent fool! No wonder he hates her! For I must admit I've never had myself the smallest grain of patience for "teachers" of Mrs. Robeson's obvious ilk: pale, stupid little things, squirming up from the lowest rungs of their college classes, going into "education" because it seems easier than anything else, because you get tenure and three months off every summer for a real, good tan--enough! Honestly, from what she had said, she had so misread this child and his obvious abilities--holding him back an entire year!-- I couldn't help but side with him, at least a little: No wonder he calls her a "bitch"!) "Thank you for stopping by," I said, and escorted her down the great hall.

Before we got to the door, she stopped. "Would it be all right if some of Michael's friends came by? They been asking me--and I haven't known what to say."

"His friends?"

"Oh, yes. They'd like to see him."

I was about to say, no; then, thought better of it. "Why not?" I said. "Maybe seeing some of his friends would



do him good." (Thinking: What could it hurt? How could things, possibly, get worse?)

I followed her out on the porch. Before she left, I couldn't restrain myself. I said, "Mrs. Robeson, are you sure Michael's never been a discipline problem? There's never been anything--"

"Oh, I don't mean to imply that he's an angel!" she said, laughing a little.

(Again: Celia, don't roll your eyes!)

"On the whole, as you know," she said, "he's a very sweet child. Oh, he's gotten into trouble, sure. Little things. Throwing spitballs at the girls, stuff like that--"

"But never anything serious?" I said.

She thought a moment. "Well. . .there was a little incident, last year. I wouldn't call it serious, but I don't think his. . .his poor parents agreed. As I recall, some of the older boys and Michael were supposed to be at recess--this was last March, I think, or maybe April. Anyway, they went into the supply room and were smoking a cigarette--you know how kids do. And Mr. Harjo caught them, turned them all over to the principal--"

"Harjo?" I said, the name not familiar. "Whose that?"

"Oh, he's the--no, wait a minute. It wasn't Harjo. This was before his time. No," she said, shaking her finger slightly, as if to dredge it up from the very air, "no, I remember now. It was Mr. Bailey--you remember, the custodian? It was old Mr. Bailey who found the boys. As

I recall. . .yes, yes, this was just a few days before he died. Heart attack, you know?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, Mr. Bailey was something of a stickler on rules--actually, he was a curmudgeon, the old guy, if you want my opinion. But he told the principal, as well he should, and they all got detention. Of course, the boys' parents were called in, too."

"Uh huh."

"I must say, though, I don't think Michael was one of the ring-leaders. Really, he was too young to orchestrate nonsense like that. I think the older boys duped him into going along, you know?"

I shook my head. "And that's it?" I asked her. "That's the extent of his--his life of crime?" (And now, I was rolling my eyes, at myself, my own triteness.)

She smiled. "Fraid so. He really is a fine little boy--but then you know that, he's your nephew. Oh," she said so softly it was almost a sigh (and somehow, to me, it felt quite genuine, too; it was felt; really you could see it in her eyes), "oh, this whole thing's. . . oh, it's so horribly sad."

"Uh huh," I said. "Uh huh."

There were other things that Friedmann wanted, too. An entire list of chicken scratches, ink blots, including:

3. Med. file.

She wanted Michael's complete medical history--"every

bump and bruise," she said, "the more information, the better"--and she'd asked me to contact his doctor. So, that evening (when I remembered it), I phoned Doc at his house.

I remember I was sitting in the kitchen. It was such a large room, so institutional--in a way, it was more like the kitchen of a hotel than a house with its faintly buzzing white-lights, the enormous equipment, with that lake of checkerboard tiles, reflecting back (black and white) the ceiling, the chair, one's own bent leg. Really, the kitchen, even in spite of the scratching in the walls, was one of the few spots in the house where I could settle down, drop like a stone on the hard, wood chair, just sit by myself and not feel. . . what? that stomach-ache of nostalgia? Was that what it was? For it did feel like pain, sometimes, though in the library there were books to distract me and here, in the kitchen, the very colorlessness of the room did its own fine job of bleaching out the niggling reds and yellows (hurt comes in these colors, you know, like blood does, and bile). Still, there were so many other places in the house, rooms that did not bleach out--no matter how long you looked at them--doors (white or brown) that tied strings to your wrist and drew you into the past as surely as you, yourself, had strung along . . . at three, that pull-toy train, jangling and clanking down the great, wide hall. (Only then, you laughed.)

Really, some doors were awful. And I avoided them.

After that cursory inspection with Virgil, I did not again go into the parlor. I forbade the children as well, told them (while Virg was shrouding the chairs with sheets) that there was work to be done, handyman's work with ladders and sharp tools, and they were not to entil till I said they could. Michael was almost smirking when I closed the two white doors, but I didn't let that deter me. I pointed out the other places they were not to play (rooms that, of course, I seemed unable to enter myself, as my heart would invariably race when I tried, my hand visibly tremble still inches from the knob): "Not here," I said, pointing to his room. "I don't want you messing with Julian's things." (Another smirk from Michael--from me, growing anger.) "Or there either!"--now, perhaps arbitrarily, jerking my head down the hall to the brown door that led to the attic stairs: "Leave it alone, you hear?"

Michael, hands on little hips, nodded slightly. He said, "Why?"

"Because!" Quickly, I turned away from him, angered that he, like the doors, could set my heart to such rabbitry rhythm. (Really, they needed rules, the children; any psychologist will tell you this: kids need guides and boundaries, lines that may not be crossed; they need structure, if they are to feel loved, if they are to grow up to be decent citizens and such, mothers and fathers themselves. And this, basically, was my argument to myself, the answer to my arbitrary restrictions, as I walked back down the spiral stairs,

trying to ignore that rather whiney chant: "Why! Why! What are you hiding up there, Celia?" Stuff and nonsense, I thought; you can't let them get the upper hand. "And while you're at it," I shouted back up to them, "stay out of the garage, too!" For, like all garages, ours, I was sure, had its plethora of dangerous edges, sharpened points and metal tools, things that could cut--God damn him! Brat!--and injure.)

So I laid down the rules! Some doors, you could open; others, you could not. And at night, I would sit in the kitchen, in that room that was like an old photo, really, for it was quite bland there, black and white, empty. Nice.

I remember that night I called Doc I was down there; I was feeling, really, nothing. The children were upstairs, Musette's Irish stew having had on them a soporific effect, I think, for they had gone to bed fairly early. It was about nine o'clock, and I was sitting on one of the hard, kitchen chairs, working on Granddaddy's scotch (there were always bottles and bottles of Chivas in the house; that was one good thing). On the table, in front of me, the book (tale of sin, not the least bit amusing that night) yawned listlessly open; and I was just slouching there--to be honest--picking at the crusty stain on Lee's bathrobe which somehow now was bigger than yesterday, was two colors where before there was one. A number of things were floating in my head, vaguely colliding: Must tell Musette to clean this when she comes, a sip of scotch sliding smoothly down; What on earth was she talking about, Sandy Robeson? . . .

"not an unintelligent child!". . .How could she say that, when just tonight, at dinner, he was chattering away about this thing and that--a plane, I think, some new fighter on the tv news. How could she imply he was dumb, when he could parrot back--with some authority--such technical, picky details? Megatonnage, firepower--(I had no idea what.) Then, suddenly, I remembered the file.

I got up and went to the phone.

After the pleasantries ("Fine, fine," I said, "and you?"), I asked Doc for his opinion. "Tell me," I said. "What do you think of Michael?"

"Why?" he asked. "Is he acting out again?"

"No, I mean, generally, Doc. What do you think of his mind? His intellect?"

"Oh," he said, sounding a little surprised. "Well, I don't know. He seems sharp as a tack!"

"Uh huh," I said. "I think so, too. Did you know he was having trouble in school? I mean, before. . . .I talked to his teacher today."

"No," he said. "I wasn't aware of that."

"Uh huh." I leaned back into the counter, took another sip. "Well, anyway. . .the reason I'm calling is I need his file. You know that psychiatrist I'm taking him to? She wants to see his medical record and--"

"Oh, Celia, " he interrupted. "You'll have to get in touch with his doctor for that."

"What?"

"Michael's doctor--his pediatrician. Let me see,"

he said, thoughtfully. "I believe his name is Reynolds. His office is down in the City."

(The glass, its amber liquid, seemed suddenly suspended; it hung in the air like a jewel.) "You're not his doctor?" I asked.

"I?" he said. "Oh, no. Never have been, Celia. I treated your brother Eddie, of course--all your family. But Pam wanted Michael to go to her own man. Same doctor she had as a child, I believe. Let's see. . .the first name is Tyler--Taylor--something like that. I'm certain I've got it in the records down at the office. If you like, I'll check on it tomorrow."

I took another swig; this time, it burned. "You're not his doctor," I said again. "You're not?" And the liquor was burning my throat. "You never treated him?" I asked.

"Mmmm--once," he said. "Yes, one time the whole family came down with the flu, and I went over there."

"Once?" I asked. And now, my eyes were half-closing. "Well, then. . ., well, how well did you know him, Doc?" I said. "How well did you know Michael--I mean, before. . .?"

## Chapter Eighteen

And what to do about number four?

What--in heaven, in earth--could I do about that  
blesset, nagging four?

There it was. Scratched on the flyleaf. Plain as  
day. Clear as a bell. For God's sake, in black and white!

4. Jule.

There was no mistaking, no misremembering, what the woman  
wanted. As a doctor, a pyschiatrist, she had to--absolutely,  
had to--know what happened that night. (4. Jule.) This  
was chicken-scratched in the book I had carried there. It  
was the last thing on the list, the last thing to do.

And, oddly enough, it had the power to jump off the  
page, to claw at me throughout the days, even nights. (4.



Jule.) It was like a speckled Sussex, pecking in the yard: it kept coming back, kept reincarnating itself in my mind and gut, scratching and pecking about as if for grain, some tiny seed that would satisfy all. Really, it clawed at me--at the oddest moments, too.

Like in the laundry, one morning, when Musette was stuffing things in the washer, and she asked me, quite plainly, "You want me to get that, too?" (Meaning the robe.) She was just pushing stuff into that black chasm there, asking me, exactly, precisely, the same thing I had asked Friedmann.

"You want me to get that too!" I'd cried. And, honest I was growing mad, annoyed, irritated as hell. Why me!--was what I wanted to know. Why am I the conduit for this! Why am I the one supposed to find out!

"You want me to get that information, too!" I was telling the doctor. "My God! My God!" (Now, I was virtually screaming.) "You think I have no feelings! They were my parents--my family, too! I've done what I can!" I said, even as I said it, knowing, I think, it was a lie. "I've talked to the police, dammit! They don't know! They don't know why he did it, what happened! I'd talk to Jule, too, if, if. . . ." And then I was rubbing at my eye. There was something there, a speck of dust, some hurting little mote. I was rubbing away at it, my hand becoming wet, my voice going all soft and limp, until I was saying (and it was almost a whisper), "God, God. . . I don't want to know."

Can I be blamed then? Days later, in the laundry,

when Musette asked about the robe (the very dirty robe), when she said, "You want me to get that, too?"--can I be blamed for not responding? for my eyes darting, slowly, away? for the air suddenly so cold I was shivering? Oh, no, I shook my head, you can't have this. And I pulled the blue, heavy fabric tighter, holding on, if you will, for dear life.

Am I to be held morally responsible for this? For the fact I simply didn't want to know?

And yet, the foul thing kept after me.

It was horrid, as awful as the robe. If you want the truth, it almost had a smell to it, too. (Yes, the chicken-odor of the barnyard or slaughterhouse is good enough; it comes, actually, quite close to the scent of the thought that lingered so around me, wafting up at the oddest times.)

Like in the library, where I was sitting one day-- morning? afternoon? I don't recall. I was just sitting on the divan, a book unopened on my lap. I believe I blinked-- a long, slow, nictitation of the lid. And when my eyes were fully open again, it came to me: the white, plaster wall like an empty slate, table rasa, not a blesset thing there.

What gives? The clock was ticking--someone had set it. Staring at the white, blinking: What gives?

Or in the bathroom, upstairs, one evening. I was bathing Annie (Michael's turn was next, though he would do

it by himself, and, presumably, without the yellow duck Annie was fingering, that little rubber toy she had unearthed in the playroom and was, now, worrying to death beneath the water, submerging it, trying to keep it from bobbing back up.)

"Stop it," I said. "You're splashing."

"Tee-hee!" She let it rush up, slapped it back down.

"Stop it, Annie, please?"

Then: "Mommy, aren't you gonna take a bath, too?" She almost sighed. "Aren't you ever gonna take a bath again?"

"What?" (And now, it was all slow-motion: Annie's face, half-puzzled--part disgust--the duck riding on the surface, bobbing slower and slower in the subsiding waves, till the ocean itself was completely calm, the toy, like a broken boat, listing on its side.) "What?" I said--and then, had to wonder. How long has it been? When was my last--? For my hair was dirty; I felt it, the faintly greasy strands, as I pushed them away from my face, leaning over Annie. What gives here? How could he do such a monstrous thing?

Oh, so many times this thought came back.

Even at night. In my dreams.

"Jule," I said once, one night when it was summer, the sun streaming fiercely on the porch swing where we sat.

"Jule?" I said to him in his beige pants and crisp white shirt, "Why did you kill them?"

"Do what?" he said. And he had in his slender hand

a large tumbler of tea (sweatbeads glistening on the amber glass), sprig of mint there, too, a slice of lemon with the ice. "Kill?" he said, smiling beneath his panama hat. "Kill who?"

"You know who," I said. And to be emphatic, I began patting at my thighs with my hands. "You know," I said, patting down the pure, white cotton: "Mother and Dad. Granddaddy. Eddie--"

"Oh," he said. "Them."

(The sun was really hot on my face. I was very nearly blinded by the yellow light as I looked at Jule. And at the same instant I was rolling off the names. . .it's odd, but, it was as if I were standing back a few feet, watching myself watch Jule. In the yellow, brilliant light, they looked so good, my eyes; the lashes fluttered perfectly to my cheeks; the gray irises were radiant, alight.) "Why, Juley? Why'd you do it?"

"But I didn't," he said, smiling again. "Honest Injun, Cee," he said (using our swear, that most sacred oath when we were children). "I didn't kill anybody."

"Oh, no?" I said. "Oh, no? The police say you did."

"Oh, I don't deny they were killed." He took a calm, little sip. "Don't deny that at all, love. But Honest Abe, I dind't do it."

"Oh, Jule," I whispered, my eyes now crinkling half-shut, the irises slits--still beautiful. "What are you going to say? That it was Snowbelly? Or Balaam? Or--"

"No, love," he said, now handing me the tumbler. He got up, leaving me to sway alone in the breeze, the porch swing creaking. He walked a few paces, then turned, leaned against the white railing. "Those clowns?" he said, "No, no--'twasn't them either. Honest apricot, Cee. The murderer was God."

"God?" I said, incredulous.

"Uh huh," he answered, and with a delicate, half-twisting motion, he reached up and took off the hat. He leaned there, fingering lightly the barely moist inner band. "Uh huh," he said, softly, "uh huh. The killer is always God." And with two fingers, he dropped the hat over the railing, into the roses. He shrugged. A tiny hopeless gesture. Then with the same casual motion he had used with the hat, he reached up with both hands and took off his head.

"No!"

I lunged forward, trying to stop him, but it was too late. My eyes were open now in the pitch-black hole of the bedroom (heart rabbitting, knees drawn up, hands clutching at the sheets--behind my head, all that remained: that faint creak, creak of a vacated swing.)

No doubt, it would have happened anyway.

Had Friedmann never existed; had sperm and egg that autumn evening never met in the back of the car, had Michael never been born, or even had he lived, but been killed that

night along with the others--it would have happened anyway, I think. And I would have been the one.

Death, quite simply, does this to human beings. And nevermind the bullshit catalyst--disturbed child and querying physician; "imminent insanity" (if we are not already there); a mind vastly chaotic, its dendrites waving wildly like octopi legs, going what? what? what? as the shark approaches, the water, even now, getting murky. Look, pay no attention to the immediate cause (Michael); it would have happened anyway. Death has a way of doing this to people: sooner or later, it sends one out, looking for answers, hunting, searching, traipsing high and low in the inky light.

I know. It happened to me.

I had been calling, of course, that hospital in Jefferson. I had been calling every day, listening through the static to nurses who said, No. No change. No change at all.

I had been doing this, now, for more than a week, my brother (and maybe I) hanging on by a mere fingernail of hope. To the outer world (Friedmann, Doc Eisenhalter, even Virgil and Musette), I'd assumed the pose of helpless frustration: "What can I do?" I said. "Talk to him?"

Mute. Mum. Mindless.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked Lee, who had come over one afternoon, contrite, ashamed, saying, Cee, it's all my fault.

He was looking at my bathrobe, a wild kind of helplessness on his face. "It's all my fault," he said, "I

shouldn't have yelled at you. After the fire. I'm sorry, Cee. Really. Please," he said, pacing around the library, "will you and the kids move back to my house? Really, this isn't working."

"Move back?" I said.

"She's left. Sylvia. She moved out a couple of days ago. She won't be back."

The clock above the mantle was ticking.

I pulled the robe tighter.

"What do you want me to do!" I yelled. "All of you. What the hell do you want me to do! Talk to him? He can't talk! Oh, you're all after me, all the time. Do this, do that, do, do, do! I'm sick of it, dammit."

"Celia," he said, "you're not well."

"They're dead, Lee! Do you understand that? They're all dead. They're not coming back!"

"Calm down, okay?"

"Oh, shut up, Lee." I lit a cigarette, pushed the hair back from my face. "Just shut up. Let me think for a minute, will you?"

He obliged--his face, though, betraying the enormous effort it took to be silent.

I paced around, walking back and forth, treading heavily on the rug behind the sofa. I smoked my cigarette.

Mute. Mum. Mindless--might as well be dead, too, for all the difference it makes; I can't talk to him.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. "Cee," Lee said,

(and it's funny, but I never noticed it till then--that we rhymed, our names, Cee and Lee, Cee/Lee--how utterly absurd that we only matched when I was made into a diminutive, my name chopped and disfigured by his voice).

"Cee," he said, now quite gently, so soft that his words brushed against my ear like a feather, like the brown, little wing of a hummingbird, brushing and buzzing round the skin of the lobe. "Honey, I think I should call Doc for you." And he started to move toward me, to touch me.

I jerked away. "Don't you dare!" I walked over to the mantle where I'd put my drink. I picked it up, still mostly full; I brought the glass to just an inch or so from my lips; for the first time, really, the scotch smelled awful.

"Don't you dare call Doc," I said again. "He'd only tell me, 'you're upset.' Well, damned right, I'm upset! They're all dead--do you hear? Dead! They're not coming back, any of them!"

"Cee, you really are upset--"

"You mean, I shouldn't be? Is that the game? Oh, come on!" I said, walking over to the philodendron by the window, its broad leaves slightly sagging, hanging limp in the big, brass pot. (How long has it gone without water?) "Lee, he'd want me to take a tranquilizer, a sedative. 'Take this, little lady. And you won't be upset anymore. Everything will be all right.' What crap! Don't you see it?"



They're dead, Lee! And I don't know why."

(Later, much later, Lee would say that my eyes rolled up to the "heavens"; that my face, in that moment, assumed a rather "beatific" look; that I seemed to be listening to something, to a "voice," perhaps, that he couldn't hear. He told this to one of the doctors--I know, I saw it in my file. What bunk! Oh, yes: my eyes did roll. But I wasn't looking at the "heavens," for heaven's sake. And I wasn't hearing a "voice," either. . .except, perhaps, that still, small one yet inside, the one that, if truth be known, I'd been hearing all along, that tiny voice of a still-tinier me that came across the gravelly yard like music, as she walked, shooing away the chicken, the speckled Sussex with its monotonous pecking and scratching about. If you want to call this a "voice," get mystical, I suppose you can; it's a free country. Myself, I prefer to call it "concentration," or "getting in touch." And that's what it really was, you know--the deepest, most intense kind of concentration. It wasn't at all a saint-like thing. I wasn't in the least looking up to the celestial ether, to the "heavens" where reside the gods--Whomever, Whatever, Nothing At All. Where I was looking, dammit, was the attic. That's where it was. And, no: don't you be rude! I certainly couldn't see through the fucking wood floors--

"You 'spose it's still there?" she asked, her voice so tiny it was like a bell, a tinkling little bell, but quite clear and distinct.

"Don't know," answered Big-me. "If the cops didn't get it, it's probably there. I mean, why would they look? No one was up there. Why would they look under the floor boards?"

"But what if he moved it?" Tiny-me said. "What if he got sick of the whole business and burned it up or something?"

"Jule?" Big-me said. "No, I don't think he'd do that. It was too important to him. It mattered too much."

"You gonna go and look for it?" said Tiny-me. In her voice, there was the slightest hesitation, a tiny ripple, like a shiver of fear; it went through us both. "You gonna go dig it up, Celia? What if it's bad? What if there's something awful up there, and it hurts us?"

Big-me sighed. "What if there is? We're hurting now, aren't we? Both of us. We're hurting very bad right now." )

"Celia," Lee said, "please! Let me call Doc Eisenhower for you."

"Oh, Lee," I said, "don't be ridiculous. I'm fine. Look," I said--and said it with half a smile--"I know what I look like. I look like hell. I feel like it, too. But what about that child? What about that kid upstairs, Lee? Michael--what about him! We have to find out, don't you see, for his sake, if no one else. All right, all right! I can't ask Julian. Maybe he'll never come back enough to answer, to

tell us why, what happened. But what about the boy? Do we just let it go? Or, look--I'll be honest. Forget him. I need to know, too. I have to know what gives--"

"Celia, what are you talking about?"

"Death. Murder, Lee. Destruction--oh, call it what you like. It's all the same. And I have to know why. Okay, so maybe I can't talk to Jule," I said, "but maybe there's another way. Maybe his friends--"

"Friends?" Lee said. "What friends? Celia, Jule didn't have a single friend in this town!"

And I was shaking my head (poor Lee, poor Lee, so earnest, so ignorant! Oh, why had I never told him?) "Yes, he did, Lee," I said now. "My brother had many friends. A veritable army of them, in fact. And if Juley can't give me the answer to all this, maybe they can."

"Cee. . .This is nuts. It's insane--"

And I kept shaking my head. "Yes, yes. You're absolutely right, Lee. It is." And then--really, I don't know why I did it (for dramatic effect? melodramatic punch? or just because it was there and, somehow, the thing to do?)-- then, I was standing there, next to the wilting plant, tipping the drink, what was left of it, pouring it into the philodendron's dirt.

(Lee's eyes, I remember, grew wide.)

"All I really know is, I said, watching as the liquor splashed in small thudding droplets into the soil (it, so dry there were cracks, fissures; the earth lapped

the wetness up)--"All I really know is this: with Julian's friends, you cannot converse with them stoned."

## Chapter Nineteen

From that point on, I took no drugs.

Honest. The palliatives stayed where I left them, became again, perhaps, what they'd always been: just colors in a bottle. Green/black capsules, or red, nestling egg-like in their plastic shells--these, with a trembling hand, were put up again, laid high on the highest shelf of the medicine chest cut into the bathroom wall--

And how many razors in there? I wondered, my eyes sweeping down the paste-smearred wood, from pills to the slit in the wall. How many blades in back of that, brown hairs clinging, red, red rust in the wall?

--just colors, you see? Nothing more. Even the booze-- those ambers and browns, the crystal-clear whites, for Grand-

daddy always kept quite a stock at home, the harder the better for hard questions like sleepless nights (a thousand positions, old man curled fetally on the bed), for even harder answers: confinement to a chair.

Oh, have I not yet mentioned that? that Granddaddy was in a wheelchair the last year of his life? It was not all the time, of course, and not all that bad; the chair was not even electric. Still, it came as quite a shock when Virgil asked, of the gray, collapsible thing, what did I want to do with it? as it was out there, in the garage, I presume, in his way.

Hard questions, yes? Hard as the liquor high up on the shelf which, after a time, came to seem like fusty specimens there, like something from a museum, pee of the ancient gods, whatever. The bottles gleamed, yes, sparkled prismaticly when light from the window hit them. But for me, they had lost their appeal. Honestly, I didn't want to drink anymore.

I tell you this for one reason: it is not as simple as you think.

I know, I know. There you are, intelligent, patient, discerning. And all along, you've been thinking, maybe, Ah, it's the drugs, the booze; these inform the "reality" here, for they are so sensational, these markers, are they not? They are manifestations, signs as real as red octogons at the end of the street: STOP--STOP (IF YOU DON'T, YOU'LL DIE). But it can't be true, because I stopped taking the pills and the booze that afternoon Lee came over. I simply stopped.

So now, maybe you'll be angry. Maybe you'll think I've "led you on," that merely the sedate mention of tranquilizers and such was a trick, that I've created a red herring and made him swim deliberately into the net only to bust loose, wiggle out some shoddy, unseen hole and disappear--forever--into the broad, blue sea. Well, this isn't true either.

(Oh, yes. If you want to get picky, this is one little fish that does get away. He escapes the cannery tin and the oil, that hungry human mouth. He does escape this story, too. But rest assured, it's not forever. Somewhere, in a cool, green cove--beyond our vision--he'll hook up yet with a carp, a big-mouthed bass, perhaps a blue marlin who himself will be hooked off the Baja--yes, maybe even by a lawyer on vacation. Life and death goes on.)

But here's the point. I was taking all kinds of stuff, all sorts of shit. Look, if I hadn't been so spaced at my brother Eddie's house, I might have seen him set the fire. (And he did, you know. He splashed some rags with cleaning fluid; he got my lighter. He told Annie that she should go outside and play, that it was, in effect, "not her time." This done, he lit the rags. He walked calmly from the house to the frozen world outside.) I might have seen this, noticed something odd or unusual, if I had not been "asleep" from the drugs. And even at my parents' house, those first few days, I admit, I was soused much of the time. I walked around in the filthy robe, heart crusted over and drinking like that proverbial fish.

So many images of water here. I wonder now, was I thirsty? Is all this ocean-talk and fishness a sign of that? Or is it simply that gray-pinkish guts, in a peristalsis of trembling, mimic perfectly the roiling of the sea?

And, oh, I was trembling in front of the attic door.

I had cleaned myself up, finally, late in the afternoon, had rummaged a fresh shirt (Jule's) and a pair of Mother's slacks, baggy but serviceable enough. I had put the children to bed after dinner--no easy task, as Virg and Musette had gifted them with a puppy that day, a nondescript little bitch of brown fur and pink-tongued squealing "barks." They hadn't asked me, of course, before bringing her over, but for the first time in weeks, Annie seemed happy. I was not too slow or achey to see it on her face in the great hall, so finally I said, "I suppose. . .if you'll take care of her, Annie." And she had said, squealing herself, "Oh, Pook won't be any trouble, Mommy. I promise!" A shrug from me and it was done.

Details. Details. Musette scrounging up a cardboard box, shredding papers, finding a bowl. Musette, ever so motherly, reprimanding Michael who'd made the puppy yelp: "A pup's bones is del'cat as twigs, boy. Donchu yank its front paws like 'at." Details.

Dinner and the feeling I would vomit.

A bed-time story. Annie tucked in beneath the white, white sheets. Eyes growing sleepy. My voice droning on about a little prince and his rose.



Finally, the attic.

I stood there for a long time, trembling, the dinner  
beef wanting to come up.

"Wimp."

A deep breath.

"What a wimp you are," it said.

I closed my eyes. "Fuck off." I opened the door.

## Chapter Twenty

and spring      blooms like blood on the redbud tree  
redblood & Balaam a greeny sap      out greeny stem B comes  
a fountain      cant help      comes      gushes & rushes &  
flushes the sheets      cant help      comes & i blacksheep  
sleeping & mothers mad

"she will cut it off" S says

no      i come like B on sleepy sheets

"will too silly huprick" Snow-B says "she will emask  
you jule"

no

"efface      take off your face jule      take the skin  
and do a lampshade      use the eyes for"

no

"she will chop it off      cut off the head like cee  
with the"

no

but Snow be white      Snow be old      Snow coughs & makes  
the huprick cold      cold & cold within his bed      Snow wants  
the hupricks mother

"lissen asshole"

no

"lissen up little goat"

no goat      human      huprick      hudick

"you idiot"

what month?      what time be this w/ B in the sap?      B  
Balaam busy as a bee out there & baby Ork upon the ceiling?

"HUDICK LISSEN"

Snow roars & batters hupricks window but baby Ork is  
laughing      laughing & crawling & licking the light      baby  
is on the ceiling is color of the sky      baby Ork babbling  
come jule come o come up here & play

okay baby

"LISSEN"

o no      no      no lissen anymore to you

"lissen monkeyface"

cover up      cover up      huprick will cover his ears all

up

"cut out the shit julian"

shit julian    shit    julians a

"knock off the nonsense you sorry little prick    lissen  
to me    turn your head to the window jule"

cover up    cover up    huprick will stop up his holes  
with wax

"histrionic jule    pyrotechnics?    such a little liar  
you are"

no no no no    he will get the candles wax Snow    hu-  
prick will pour in the waxy wax wax    he will stop up his  
ears with

"o whats the point in talking to you you silly pissbat  
o why do I bother jule tell me that julian o hearts desire  
you absurd & whimpering so so so sorry excuse for a human  
thing"

leave me alone Snow

"just look at you jule o look at you cowering in your  
little bed look how you hide your ugly puss head ugly ugly  
ugly o Ork for gaaaws sake stop' laughing come down from the  
light"

Snow leave me be    please

"leave you be? leave you be? why for gaaaws sake  
should I leave you be pussfucker    come on you miserable  
cowardly pissforbone man    pull your head out the sheets  
lissen    come to the window & let me in"

Listen. Listen. Yes, there it was again.

I put the bloody paper on my knees and listened, but it didn't come again, not for some time at least, this furtive scurrying in the attic. There was just the wind outside, blustering in the eaves, a heavy dopplered sound that rose gradually in pitch then abruptly fell. Every once in a while, the timbers above my head creaked, and the bare yellow bulb hanging by the frayed cord would slightly arc, swing side to side in pendulum-style, as though the laws of physics applied even here.

Mice? Rats?

But what would they eat? Ancient dust of droppings in the parrot cage? the fibrous bamboo bars? For the life of me--and by this time, this really was the point--for the very life of me, I couldn't remember that we'd ever had a parrot, a bird of any kind, save once, save one we found with a broken leg, tiny brown sparrow nursed not to health but to cold as stone death one morning in a shoebox.

What else? Old fabric? Somewhere up here was Mother's dress--Milano lace and silk Charmeuse, "four thousand and twenty seed pearls, each one tacked in by hand" (she always said, laughing, for "your granddaddy had a fit, he did, when Missy McCumber handed him the seamstress bill"). Could they eat that now, the rats and mice? all that white, white virginal lace. Could they still get drunk on the burgundy wine, huge splotchy stain on the skirt as though she'd already been deflowered, when someone (was it Bertie?) got drunk

at the reception, making fools of them both?

What nourishment here? Cartons and boxes and trunks and dust--a haze of dirt overlying everything: old treadle machine, so sculpted in the shadows you could almost hear its whir, the ghostly foot still pumping; beside that, the oval mirror, its diagonal crack ready to split your face in twain as though struck by lightning or a huzzing saw--everything distorted, cold, wrong. Even Mother's "sport." Snowbelly, I think, gave us that word for the dressmaker's mannikin, a headless thing now back in the shadows, its solitary metal rib still poking out the torso. Jule once told me, "We could rip it out, Cee, like God did to Adam--we could make this thing, Snow said so, just pull out the rib and make--"

What? Make what, Jule? Nonsense--horror?

I put my finger in my mouth, tasted the drying flecks of blood. I had nearly torn the nail clear off, trying to pry up the floorboards, my heart fluttering so wildly I scarcely felt the pain (was there pain? should have been, for the nail was ripped at the quick, the fleshy pad bled as did the eyes, tears, as you know, being plasma). I ripped the floorboards up above Jule's cache with my bare, bleeding hands. Everything hurt so bad I knelt by the hole and cried, stayed in that position so long my calves began to tingle as if there were tiny needles--thousands and thousands--pricking skin and muscle, putting the body to sleep. And then Noab said,

you know    you know    mcguffeys reader tells  
you so that dog is god but backwards    now or  
won    not or ton    now this is quite important  
young nam young eluj    is all quite orange in  
the scheme of things like the sun or a nus    is  
at traeh a sign of theodicy (y    c    i    doeht?)  
theodicy which as you well well wonk is merely the  
relating of dogshit to dog or backwards (ro sdrawkcb)  
an explanation of affairs between tishgod and god  
young nailuj    tishgod--kram my words--tishgod is  
always pain    pain pain    is always red or der  
save in france where he is bread spelled rightly and  
can be eaten daily or de jour    otherwheres tish  
comes on the wind like yeast    he leavens and  
sneavels the flesh so der so red so very egnaro  
der eluj tishgod is a lap    wonk well he is the  
best pal a yob ever had    eluj do not fear him  
do not raef or be diarfa    tishgod always gives  
save when he takes

No date on this, of course. But the paper (and what shall we call this stuff of Jule's? a journal? a diary? a thousand sheets of tishgod's ravings?), this paper that I dug from a hole in the attic floor was so yellowed with age, so fragile, it fell apart in my hands

hand and had to be pieced together like a puzzle in the dust.

I don't know what I expected. More sense to it? A better order in the hole? The white sheets stacked neatly in the black abyss, a "diary" like everyone else's that went, "Got up at seven. Lunch at the diner. Went to the movies w/Susanne. Saw Gable & Lomb--b/w but great. Bed by 11 and oh, there was rain." Surely, this was not what I envisioned, was it? A neat, orderly progression of events, year after blessed year of trite timed risings and weather reports, the entertainments of phoney love scenes ten feet tall?

Whatever I wanted, there was Orku instead: twelve hands high and hovering by his feathered aqua wings, hovering above Julian's mattress, singing

cob/a/corn/jule/cob/a/corn/cob/a/corn/

cob/a/corn/jule/cob/a/hand/

cob/cob/a/seed/cob/a/seed/seedy/see/

cob/a/seed/cee/be/a/man/

(Absurd! Nonsense! Falsity upon falsity! And the noise!)

I dropped the yellowed sheet of paper. I sat there, listening, my heart maddening in its beat, for the noise.

That tiny scratching and scurrying about--where? in the walls? (my head turning) in the ceiling? in the floor?

Really, it was all too much. I brushed the paper from my knees, got up, my head almost reeling from the noise. And suddenly, I was moving, running in the shadows, not paying any attention at all, could not have been looking or I'd have seen it, that thing. Surely, I'd have noticed



it and jumped across in time.

Mind! Where on earth is your--this, laying in a heap on the floor. Then: God, is this the one?

At first, I wasn't sure. It was so old and filthy from the dust and I hadn't seen the stupid thing for years, but as soon as I brushed it off, I caught the gleam of its metal fittings, the unmistakable brass.

Because of this? I wondered--our birth, that joke because of this?

It's one of those family stories, you see. A tale that is told and retold, embellished with new threads maybe like a weaver making cloth on the loom, though Eddie always said, "Hells bells no, it happened just that way," and he would shake his head, dumbly, years away from the stuffy closet but still scarcely believing that such idiocy could have happened. "But I was there, remember?" he'd say, a strange, uncomprehending wistfulness in his tone. And once he and Pam and Michael (who lay in her lap red-faced and cranky from the colic) were on the couch at his house, and Eddie, spinning out the story again, for Lee, patted Pam lightly on her fleshy thigh and said, "Well, thank the Lord she's not so mulish as Mother." Pam laughed and the baby let out a howl. "That's so, Mike," Eddie cooed, "you're glad, aren't you, your mamma's not that jack-stubborn."

Jack-stubborn, Eddie? Is that the term? Does that do justice to the incredible, stiff as a board digging-in the both of them did that day, the morning of our birth? For this? A white leather case with brass trimmings?

Oh, it was stylish, no doubt. (And perhaps it was Jule's presence there, an indescribable something up in the attic, that made me remember back to that day, the summer morning already hot by nine, horsefly buzzing at the window.) Oh, yes, the case was stylish and expensive, and she had packed her things with great, particular care before stuffing it under the bed. She had spent some time, obviously, folding into perfect squares her lying-in gowns, all white and too heavy for summer though this was what she wanted, to convey to visitors the sense of maternity, sweetened with hair ribbons of blue, yet hide, in bulky layers of cloth, the flabby, loose-skinned flesh that would follow. Everything was arranged, you see. There was the box of chocolate turtles from Hazlitt's ("One a day," she'd said, laughing, "a layer a day as my reward!") and goo for her face, her writing papers--large "L" in fancy script, branching out into the tendrils of flowers (lillies, of course)--even a stack of romances: Sins of Sarah, The Passions of Castle Peale, Danielle's Desires. (This last part, I'm making up. I don't remember the exact titles, but they were always around the house, spines cracked on the coffee table, pages turned down on the nightstand in her room. Once I remember Jule actually read a few, and one afternoon he came out to the apple tree where I was laying, looking up at the sky, if memory's right; he said, "It's shit what she reads--all this love stuff--Orku says it's cobbing yourself.") But the point is, weeks before the event, she had put her things together.

And then the pains came. They started, actually, around midnight, faint and trembly spasms that she didn't wake him for. She just lay there, elephantine, in their dark room with rosebud lamps, counting the time between by his snores. (She couldn't see the clock on the table and this irritated her.) Finally, around seven, she punched him awake.

"Up, Edward."

"What?"

"It's time."

And, of course, a frenzy of fumbling: Daddy not finding his shoes or his belt; Daddy putting on her swollen feet the ballerina slippers.

Fifteen, twenty minutes later--and by then, the whole house was up, Beulah, the cook, trying to catch Eddie, pry him from their room with, "Boy, you caint go--you gotta come down an' eat!"--everybody, even Granddaddy, up and fumbling about, Mother finally making it to the doorway of their room, saying, "For God's sake, Edward--the case!"

And he went to get it. He pulled the white thing out from under the bed, expecting (I guess) it would be brown.

"What?" he said.

"Hurry up with it."

"What!" (And you must know, this was before Daddy grew silent. This was when his voice could boom, an Oklahoma twang of incredulousness and pain.) "What!"

A short exhalation from Mother, a "hurry up" huff, "Oh, Edward, don't be--"

"Why, it's a slap in my face, Lil!"

"Don't be--"

"A slap in my goddam face! You takin' this one to the hos--"

"--ridiculous! Thoroughly--"

And, really, I don't know quite what happened then. But it all escalated, oppressively, as things are apt to do on hot days in July with the horseflies buzzing.

What it came to was: white or brown. There was nothing between, with Daddy insisting she carry the brown checkered bag that Grandfather had given for their wedding, and Mother, her strength of will, her jack-stubbornness the equal of his, demanded it be the white case she had already packed. Neither would give an inch. Even when the heels of his boots dug into the wooden floor (so heavy did he stomp to the closet, flinging it open, jerking down the brown case from the uppermost shelf); even when he dumped her stuff out of the white, thrusting it into the brown; even when the pains got knee-buckling bad and Eddie was crying and crawling into the closet, half closing the door behind him, while outside, in the hall, Granddaddy was pounding his cane on the floor, yelling at everyone to "Stop it!", Beulah, behind him, muttering, "Whi' folks--bunch a crazie', they is"; even when her water broke--this coming in a flood of watered blood upon the floor--neither of them would budge.

And so, we were born at home.

We were born in that house, in the white linen bed, horseflies buzzing at the window.

Harlow was much smaller then, with Doc the only GP in miles, and he that day was already out by the time Granddaddy called, spitting and sputtering on the phone downstairs, smashing his cane against the desk in anger. "Goddam, he's goin' to the Fairmore ranch!" Granddaddy said, the Fairmore spread where Billy Lee, then eight, had arthritis so bad he couldn't be driven the eighteen miles to town, down the red, rutted country roads, not without pain, you see, and a childish screaming that turned Mrs. Fairmore, in the seat beside him, the color of a pale, ashy ghost.

So we were born at home, Jule and I, the pain of us always, right from the start, in this house--with Granddaddy out in the hall, stomping and spitting the juice from his plug, saying, "Goddam, goddam, you, Edward!" and Eddie, curled in a ball in the closet, eyes enormous and white as china plates, whimpering and pulling some of her clothes down, wrapping himself up in them for they had "mamma's smell," while Beulah, her broad brown face, stood by the side of the bed, stoic, saying, Push, Missy Pendleton (having grown used to calling her that a long time before), push, Miss Lilly, push, push--and inside, Jule's face, in the red-purple light, inside, Julian's face contorted in shock and surprise as I began disappearing, feet first, out the hole. He tried to hold on (he said), but couldn't.

And so I was born. Breech and bloody, looking--to hear Eddie tell it later--like "nothin' so much as a

monkey in the zoo, Celia!" and he'd always laugh, "monkey, monkey, dipshit monkey!" when we were children, taunting me because at my birth I was covered with a layer of brown furry hair.

"It's nothin', Lilly, don' mean nothin'!" Beulah said, trying to counter Mother's horrified look, her white forehead crinkled and glistening with sweat. "Sum chil'rens jes' borned that way--it come off! Drop off in a day or two!" And then, to my father--her cook's voice as sharp and edged with steel as one of the meat knives down in the kitchen--"You git that water warmed for the tub! Git ready an' wash 'er off. I gotta wait on the afterbirfff."

Which Daddy did, taking me over to the dresser where Beulah had had the foresight to put the white, enamelled tub ("It'll do till the ambulance come!"). Daddy was almost quaking, looking ever so much like the bed itself, with parts of him white (eyes, skin, lips), parts of him red (bloody shirt where I'd rubbed off on him), parts of him trembling like Mother's legs.

"Hol' the chil' ti'!" Beulah said, then muttering to herself, "Cause enough trouble fo' one day wiff ou' droppin' 'er on 'er haid!"

Maybe it was this that began to silence him, this squirmy, blood-red thing with hair he held in his trembling hands. He placed me in a bare inch of water--me, not crying so much as hiccupping air, stunned for the metal beneath me was cold and Daddy's fingers, impotently splashing the

drops on my stomach and head, were turning the water pink. AND if I was thinking anything (though being monstrously difficult in a place where nothing had names anymore), it must have been in the hiccups--where is, where is, where where, almost like sneezing (this, looking across the cold white rim at the screaming lump there, her belly still swollen with Jule).

"Oh, Lor', Lilly," Beulah said, "there's another!"

Eddie was audibly sobbing now. Granddaddy ("goddam, goddam") was standing in the doorway, stabbing the floor with his cane. And all the while, Daddy was growing whiter, was almost transparent, the sun behind him so bright, as I lay there, limply thrashing, in the cold, bloody tub. (Odd, but it was down there yet, the very thing that first received me and then--in a flurry of groans and white-faced horror-- Jule. Odd in a way that the tub had a life of its own, was pressed back, after the mess, into the service of soap and dirty clothes, was lined once with rags for Little Troll's kittens, and when winter came--Snow blowing out his nostrils the glittering whiteness for the hill--was ridden by all of us, in turn, down and down and down, Julian crashing the slick bottom tub into a tree once, knocking himself out, waking up with a scream.)

Which was what happened that morning, too, you know. Twelve minutes after I came out, weakly crying and hiccuping air, Julian was born--or, should I say, exploded out?

That really was more the sense of it, Jule expelled to the bed with such force, such screaming and thrashing--every bit as enraged as Grandfather, maybe more--that it was like a shell exploding on the sheets: torn flesh and blood, blood everywhere, so much sudden gore that Beulah herself was screaming; with her trembling black hand, she waited till the ambulance came, stuffing Mother back into herself.

We almost lost her, I am told, though Julian was perfect. Pink and healthy, ten toes and an equal number of fingers, no monkey fur but a cry so "lusty he jes had to be a boy" (Grandfather). Julian was a "perfect angel" (Mother, six days after her surgery), and after that, she couldn't have children anymore.

For this?

All for this stupid white suitcase?

I admit, it never made any sense to me--white or brown, what difference did it make, what possible matter, any of it? And Eddie's dull appraisal--that it was just plain "jack-stubbornnes," a mulish sensibility that impelled her to stay in their room beyond all constraints of common sense and, Lord, incredible pain--well, this was as weak as my legs were that night in the attic when I fell.

What a stupid thing, this, I thought, my fingers running over the cool brass lock; stupid, absurd (click)ridiculous nonsense, utterly--

"Lilly, my love now on your graduation. . ."

--(unkown, as I had never looked inside before that



night in the attic, Julian's ghosts drifting on cold currents of air, swinging with the yellow light.)

"Lilly, my love now on your graduation"--this a little brass plate, inscribed on the inside, near the lock--"now, and forever. AES."

## Chapter Twenty One

I called the next morning, first thing. I said,  
"I need to talk to you."

"Why, Celia, certainly, what--"

"About the house."

"Of course. When would you--"

"Tonight. After dinner." And my hands, I admit, were a little unsteady, holding onto the phone, an unsteadiness Michael noticed as he sat turning his cornflakes into mush at the kitchen table; he noticed it and smiled.

"After dinner it is, Celia, but--"

I hung up. "And what are you looking at!"

"You," he said.

"Well, quit it."

"Well, quit it," he said, his voice as grating as a blackboard nail. "Gaaawww, Celia. You're, you're--"

"I'm what!"

"You're cracking up, I think."

"And I think you'd better snap that trap of yours shut, Michael. You've caused enough trouble for one morning! I mean. . .what on earth possessed you!" I said, and I pulled Lee's bathrobe tighter around me, for the first time, I think, feeling the thinness of my arms, a rib that now protruded, even through the heavy, napped cloth--was I losing so much weight then? "How could you just smear that stuff on the mirror, Michael!"

Annie was staring into her cereal bowl. And by this time, I was almost expecting the perennially-bowed head, brown hair falling like a veil across her face. Clearly, she was trying to ignore us both. Every once in a while, she would lift a soggy cornflake out and drop it to the floor.

"I asked you a question, young man!"

Under the table, where Michael's foot was rhythmically kicking the chair leg, Pook was scuttling about, overjoyed, lapping up the cornflake and possessing not the slightest bit of guilt.

"Well!" I said, tapping my foot on the floor. "I'm waiting, Michael."

"For what!" he said.

"For an explanation as to why," I said slowly, "you

wrote that stuff on the mirror."

(Look, I know he did it. You could practically smell it on his hands, even after he'd washed. You could smell it on mine, too, for that matter, though after I'd cleaned off the mirror, I scrubbed and scrubbed them with powdered borax.)

"Who said I put it on your mirror!" Michael cried.

"It coulda been Annie!"

"I don't think so, Michael. Annie doesn't even know that word, and she certainly would use. . .use puppy stuff--"

"Dogshit, you mean, you and your euphimisms--"

"Knock it off, Michael--"

"Knock it off! Knock you off! Knock you up! You know that word, Celia," he said. "Maybe you did it yourself."

"Me!"

"Yeah. Maybe you took the dogshit an' wrote it yourself 'cause you know that word an' you haven't gotten any lately, have you?"

"That's enough!"

"Well, it's true, you haven't had a good fuck since--"

"That is enough! Go to your room!"

"Why?"

"Because if you don't," I said, now with such slow vehemence each word seemed to stab the air, puncture it like a knife, "because if you don't, I'll pull you out of that chair myself and--"

"And what!" he said, calmly extricating himself from

the chair, standing, feet apart, hands crossed against his chest like a little tyrant. "And what? What would you like to do, Celia?" he asked. "Kill me?"

I whirled around toward the counter. "To your room," I said, so angry (shocked? stunned that he could read, that it was that obvious?) I was very nearly trembling.

"Is that what you'd like to do, Celia? Kill me? Kill me?" he said, almost laughing. "Kill me, just like you--"

And I don't know what possessed me, but there was a coffee cup resting on the counter, half-full. I picked it up and hurled it--not really at him, just out there, you know? Brown spray, exploding china, white shards rocketing everywhere.

Pook yelped at the noise, ran under Annie's feet. Annie, her mouth gaping like a startled fish, just sat there, horrified, tiny dribble of milk on her chin.

"Good, Celia," Michael said, turning himself to walk away. "Very, very good."

tishgod says cut & veins are better than yretra  
both in the flesh cut flesh    in a star this  
time    cut in a star like rats running out  
cut in a star & doolb runs der to the floor

Downstairs, of course, I could hear them. Virgil, Annie, and Michael--Pook, too, maybe, as there were squeals sometimes from where he was working on the second floor; several times, Annie let out with sharp little "no's!"

"No, no!" she would say, as if the puppy were making

a nuisance of itself, tangling up in someone's feet. And I would be spirited away from the pages I'd brought to my room. I would lay there atop the mussy bed, feeling my ribs, maybe, or one of the pelvic bones, because when you lay flat like this (like they were laying, in Queenie's boxes?), flat on your back, those bones really did stick up through the skin; you could feel your own skeleton.

"No!" (This wafting up the stairwell, followed by laughter, Virgil's voice.)

The worst "entries," of course, were those when he was well, or nearly so. And there were more of these than I expected. A firmer hand, punctuation, all the niceties. Honestly, they cut deeper than all the bull of raging angels. I mean, how could one not be cut to the bone by

Nov?

It is Thanksgiving I think. Not sure. But today  
woke up at the table. Turkey & ham & talk. Talk  
talk talk & me in a suit, so it must be, right?

Must be Thanks. to have these things.

Wanted to ask how long. But G. was telling a story  
about the bank. Funny story & Mother was laughing  
too but like a ghost. So pale she was like something  
must have happened. Don't know what. Wanted to  
ask more than anything: G, how long this time have  
I been gone? But G was talking, said 'Jule, eat  
your cranberries.' Took a spoon of peas & G said  
'Attaboy.'

Still is Miss October on the wall. Someone  
gave me it but they should x the boxes so I'd  
know. Page hasn't changed since Oct. & there's  
dust, damn, they ought to x the days.

So how long? & what between?

Some stuff I do remember but in frags. Like this  
face up in mine that must have been a doctor,  
not Doc, but some other doc on account of his  
jacket. Big pores on that face like someone took  
a pin to it & went da da da da da. Did I tell  
him that? Da da da--when he was looking at my  
eyes in the light? Seem to recall but could be  
a dream.

So what?

Trip to Hazlitt's w/ Father? Yes, maybe went w/  
Father to the store cause there were these fellows  
in there by the card rack & one of them says 'hey  
Pete, you hear that one about the loon what lost  
his mind with the jewish barmaid?' & Pete says 'no  
why don't you tell it Joe?' & Joe starts telling it  
real loud, saying 'hey it's a gut buster it is'  
& Father looks at the laxatives but he can hear  
it too. & the fellows are going on & on & I'm  
laughing too like what Cee said to do 'Defuse--  
you get them laughing WITH you Jule.' Or maybe  
that was Eddie. & I'm trying but Father's really  
mad & he comes over & grabs me & pulls me out the

store like I'm a sack of spuds or something  
not his son cause he's saying that, he's saying  
'no son of mine.' But then in the truck he's  
crying he's so mad. He's saying 'o what did I  
ever do to deserve?'

When? When, Daddy? Had to be still Oct, right?  
On account of your witches at Hazlitt's, those  
cats on the cards.

Still, Daddy, why? Why won't you come? I want  
you to come Daddy & x out the days.

And then, suddenly, Musette was there. She was leaning over me, timidly poking my arm. "Celia? Celia?"

What! (Again, that startle reflex.)

"Celia!"

"What?"

"Honey," she said, "it's for you."

"What?" I said. "What do you want?"

And for a moment, she had this look to her, a crinkling, half-frightened expression, the face of someone who's been talking a long long time to empty air.

(Or, I don't know. Maybe I'm getting this confused. Perhaps the "blinking out"--for this is what Noab called it once when he was sad; he said, "Cee, blink one time in an Indian Summer and it's gone, your leaves float away and nothing's left save sad philosophy"--well, maybe this "blinking out" or "blanking out" or whatever you want to



call it began not on the bed just then, but a little while later. Maybe I was still quite alert, reading and rereading Julian's prayer. And you must know that "Father" was the man, crying in the pickup, "Daddy," being a thing altogether different from that. So, yes, maybe I had not yet "blinked." And maybe when Musette came knocking on my door, I knew it was her by the very timidity of that knock and said, "Come in," thinking she wanted to know about lunch for the kids. And maybe when she said, "Phone, Celia," I sat up in bed and lit a cigarette, a sardonic smile curling round the filter for I knew, I believe I was thinking, Well, the little bastard! meaning Bertie, the little bastard'll probably try to squirm out of coming over tonight!

Perhaps this was how it went. Musette knocking and saying, "Celia, phone for you," and me, thinking, 'Uncle Bertie'! Wonder if now he'll weasel out on the phone, not have guts enough to face me. . .

Perhaps I lit a cigarette for courage, gaining time to consider what I'd say to him, which would be. . .what? Get your ass over here tonight--said maliciously, smoke coming out my nose, eyes hard and aglitter--get your ass over here tonight Bertie or you're fired! Could I actually bring myself to tell him that? Yes, I think so, yes, shaking my head slightly, hand shaking out the match. Perhaps I lay the paper prayer down gently on the bed,

placing it neatly atop the others--

14057243532 (two or three pages of numbers, so easy to glance at and pass by), or:

cittaehtnidaedebdersutef (utter nonsense!), or this--one to cut out the heart:

i am i am i am i am i am i am i am

(hundreds, thousands of repetitions, page after page after page of i ams, printed first in a tiny neat hand, delicate and vulnerable, so precise, then scrawling free, getting larger and blacker, the crayon dulling, flattening out)

I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM

(an infinity of iams, Dad! And then the phone rang. The crayon fell off the page. The iams stopped.)

## Chapter Twenty Two

(Ask a hundred people. Go out right now to the weed-line, puddled street, stop everyone you see--men, women, children knocking a four-square ball with their hands--ask them where. Say, Where is Hell? To a soul (save one or two who think the question is a trick or crazy or a joke: knock, knock--who's there--Hell--Hell who--but, of course, there is no clever rejoinder), to a soul, they will seem taken aback, puzzled, but eventually point. Why, it's there, says Mrs. Murphy, watering her herbs--down there, isn't it, dear? she says, pointing to the earth with a spotty hand. Or take Tubbs, from the Feed & Seed; cigarettes

rolled in the sleeve of his shirt, he'll shrug--who cares?--but give a thumb's down: yeah, there. Look, even the children know: the things of Hell are downward. Down, down--for it is Hell, is it not, to trip down the stairs? to tumble down on the asphalt playground and skin your knees, gravity having snagged you by the shoelace it untied? It is a purely hellish thing, this thunderbolt hand coming at you, sweeping down, down, an infuriated arc, down till it smacks your pretty white cheek.)

Yes. I admit it. It finally happened.

That afternoon in Mother's room, Michael went too far. No sooner had I said, "You're mistaken"--this in a shakey voice, my stomach icy and quivering--no sooner had I said this and hung up the phone than Michael started after me.

"Who was that?"

(He and Annie had come into the room with me; why, I don't know.)

"Who was that, Celia?" he said.

It was all very odd, but I just stood there by the night table; I felt suddenly too tired to talk, too tired even to shrug and say, I don't know. All I could do was very slightly move my head.

"Well, what did they want?"

Odd, very odd. Because now I really can't describe that feeling there by the nightstand; my feet were on the

floor, yes, but so what? They might have been as well barefoot on sand or snow or embedded in a cloud for all the difference it made. My hand (I could see the white thing) was still touching the phone, yet simultaneously I felt it hanging limply, touching empty air.

"Mommy?" (Annie now, her voice coming at me as if from a great distance, valley to mountain, pitch rising like an echo.) "Mommy? What's wrong?"

Odd, too, but on the phone there'd been static, surging crackles of noise that had obscured. . . .

"Mommy!"

I shook my head, convulsed with a shudder like a dog rising from water. "Nothing," I said. "Wrong number."

But Michael was smiling. "Musette said--"

"Never mind what Musette said," I told him, and now, in place of the void, the blankness, I felt a swelling heat. "I said it was a wrong--"

But the phone was ringing again. Insistent.

I stood there, feeling in the palm of my hand and in my fingertips the persistent vibrations, and it reminded me of this thing Eddie used to do with wires and the light sockets--

"Well, aren't you going to answer it!"

I glared at him. I picked up the phone.

Again, the static. The surge and crackle. Again, that woman's voice, very nearly eaten by the faulty line:

--"lo this is"--

--"ferson hos"--

--"manning thaw"--

--"should know"--

--"situation of"--

--"bruh"--

--"gray"--

What is this nonsense! Suddenly, I was getting very angry, that tiny ember Michael started inside flaring up, burning. "Look, I can hardly hear you," I said. "What do you want!"

But all I got was static. Incomprehensible language.

--"very grave"--

--"not expected to"--

"Look, if you're not going to come to the point, dammit," I said, my heart coming up to my throat, "if you're not going to speak clearly, you can go to--"

I slammed down the phone, let the receiver rest for a second, then picked it up again, and dropped it on the table.

Everything else happened so quickly even now it doesn't seem quite real. Michael was standing no more than a foot away from me; he was laughing (and to appreciate the moment, you must get in your mind an old movie, black and white, slow motion, for even though things happened

quickly, in hindsight, they seem slow; it's like sitting in a darkened theatre, by yourself, studying and restudying a classic film, committing each detail, each word of dialog, every angle and trick of the camera to memory, to be played again and again in the dark room of yourself). Michael was laughing! His arms were crossed over his chest--that same midget defiance. He was laughing and shaking his blonde head, saying, "Don't tell me, Cee--another wrong number?"

And suddenly, I was turning. Left hand coming down in an arc. I was so startled myself, I barely felt the contact with his face.

The next thing I knew, he was falling backward to the floor.

Annie screamed, hands floating up from the mattress where she'd been perched.

Dull thud. Michael on his ass.

The scene shifts slightly. The film is speeded up--fast now, becoming frantic. Annie, terrified, jumps from the bed, is out the door so fast she forgets her doll. Sobbing. New characters rush in: Musette first, mouth agape, running over to Michael who's just sitting there, as furious as the red mark now emerging on his cheek.

"What happened! What--oh, Lord, boy, get up!" Musette says. She tries to pull Michael up by his arms, but he will have nothing to do with it. He pushes her away with such

force that, were this a farce, she would be on the floor, too. "Oh, Lord, oh, Lord," she said, then to me, "you struck the child?"

Then Virgil comes, he far calmer than his wife. He stands in the doorway, wiping grease or something on his jeans, carefully appraising the situation.

Musette is fussing and mewling over the child, and Virgil, clearing his throat as if in embarrassment, comes in, checking it out. He takes Musette by the arm, gently tugging. He says, "Come 'way now, Musie--boy's all right. You all right, ain't you, son? Come on, Musette" (this time pulling harder), "this here's fam'ly bid-ness."

(And it may be of interest to note that later that afternoon, as the Darbys were preparing to leave for the day, Virgil came out to the porch where I was standing, where my eyes were taking apart the gray landscape, high and low, looking for a sign. Virg came out for a moment, plugged a chaw in his mouth, sidled up to me and in a low voice, conspiratorial, for Musette was now mad at him too, said, "Ask me that kid d'served more 'n one smack. 'Course, we always went for the backsides wi' ourn, but other folks do it diff'rent, I 'spose."

"Uh huh," I said, not taking my eyes for one minute off the copse--was there something there? some movement?

"Aw, donchu worry, Cee. He'll be back. Afore supper, too, ask me, 'cause his belly be rumblin' by then."



"You don't think I should call the Sheriff?"

"For whut! The boy ain't run away--he's jes' had his feelin's--naw, more 'n that, his pride--wounded. He ain't run nowheres. Ourn always come back."

"Uh huh," I said. "Uh huh.")

But up there in Mother's room--where I suppose, if truth be known, worse than this had happened--up there, when I was alone finally with Michael, the static of the phone (or was it blood?) rushing in my ears, I wasn't sure.

I said, "I. . .I. . . ." And what did I want? To apologize? Hell, no! Still, I was stunned, and the red stain on his cheek was growing brighter, his eyes harder, more paralyzing at every moment. "I. . ."

"You what!" he said.

My hands fluttered up, helplessly.

"You what! You cowardly little bitch, you--"

"Uh--"

"Shut up, Celia!" he said, and suddenly I became aware of the phone making noises behind me, a whirring sound to let you know you've left it off the hook. "You're gonna regret this, Cee," he said, now picking himself off the floor. With a gesture almost a parody of an adult, he brushed himself off. "You're gonna regret this if it's the last thing I ever do, 'cause I've got friends, you know?" he said, almost stuttering in his rage. "I've got friends

that are bigger an' meaner than you--"

"Michael--"

"--an' I'm gonna make 'em come, you'll see. I'm gonna make 'em come an' then we'll just see, we will, we'll just see who the hell hits who!"

### Chapter Twenty Three

The nightmare, if you want to call it that, began in force that day. It was like a train, blackly chugging smoke, pulling away from the station so slowly that, save for the initial jerk, you scarcely know you're moving at all; then, the whistle sounds; you feel the tracks--chugga chugga chugga chugga--hear the engine, even back in second class, and suddenly you're hurtling forward. Villages, cities, all the civilized world, speed past, stains of light in the window. An old man, perhaps in white, lights up his cigar, begins fouling the air with his fetid smoke. Your stomach lurches and you run.

That was what happened to me. After Michael stormed out of the room, I was alone. I stood there for a while, my head whirling in confusion ("bitch! cowardly bitch!"-- "ferson hos"--"you'll regret!"--"not expected to sur"-- "friends, I've got friends!"), all of it so confused and jumbled in my head, my equilibrium was shattered. My hand, now, was stinging, too. I looked at the redness there, closed my eyes, and felt a great, surging wave rise up.

I stumbled to the bathroom, almost made it to the toilet (Mother's things scattered still about on the counters, still that smell there of lilac and rose-water, a solitary puff stained with makeup on the floor).

I heaved. The awful burning stuff came up--brownish gobs--ravaging my throat and nose.

No better than you deserve.

Vomitting, vomiting.

No better than you deserve, I told myself, head in the toilet. And when it was done, I just sat there, exhausted, eyeing my soiled hands.

The next few hours, I spent in a fog. As gray and lonely and cold as the world outside, which I saw through the windows, kept looking at once Musette said, beneath her breath, "Well, ain't it just great--boy's run out--got his lil' coat an' left! Ain't it just, just"--but she didn't finish the thought, as she was down in the kitchen, making bread, her hands roughly slapping and pounding the dough, smacking it on the counter.

Annie wouldn't talk to me at all.

She had taken refuge in her room, going so far at first as to lock the door. I knocked, gently. No response. I knocked again, louder.

"Go 'way! Cherry says, Go 'way, you!"

"Annie, please. . ."

After a time, she opened up. She wouldn't look at me though, keeping her head down low, holding her rescued doll by the hand. She marched back to her bed and lay down.

"Annie," I said, "I'm. . . Mommy's really sorry she blew up--"

Silence.

"Honey, did you hear what I said?" this, sitting down on the mattress beside her, an act which prompted Annie to pull the doll even closer, as far away from me as she could get.

"Annie. . . ."

Silence.

An inhalation. Tasting again the bitter stuff that, even though I'd brushed, wouldn't leave, kept flaring up in the air on my tongue.

Waiting. Finally, "Cherry," I said, "Mommy says she's sorry you saw that. Mommy's sorry she frightened you. Do you forgive her?"

A second of doubt.

"Do you?"

And suddenly a doll thrust in my face. "No!"

"Oh, Annie," I said, reaching over to touch her arm, she pulling back as if the touch scalded her.

Deflation.

"All right, you stay here with Cherry." I pulled myself up from the bed. "We'll talk when you're ready."

At the door, a parting shot: "Cherry says Mommy's bad!"

I went down to the library and sat.

Around four, when the Darbys were ready to go, I could restrain myself no longer, and went out to the porch. It was getting cold, and without my coat I was shivering. Virg came out, spat some brown juice in the shrubbery, said, "Ask me--" and what I wanted to say was, Who did? Who's asking you, Virg?

His words were weak consolation, bitter as the cud, for, you see, to hurt a child--to hurt a child!--oh, God, that's the worst thing of all! Nothing, no sin, no crime is worse than that; it is a abomination one will burn for in hell, and for a moment, for a warped little fraction of time up there in that room, after I'd hit him, I'd seen-- what?

Virgil was talking and I was shivering on the porch, but the image wouldn't leave. I stood there, playing it over and over in my mind, trying to capture it, force it into the light: a child, so little and white, falling back,

(flung away?), red there on the cheek (like what? like blood?)--God, what was happening to me!

On the porch, I tried to pretend I was listening to Virg, to the sage words of advice from a man who'd raised eight--or was it nine?--of his own, only one of them going to prison (or, actually, the reformatory, for a stolen car). I pretended to be listening and maybe I even was, for I was able to say, Should I call the Sheriff? But that was only part of it, a fragment of the conscious mind, the other part now fully dedicated to--what?

To looking for Michael in the copse? Yes, of course, but something beyond even that. Something else, too, something so horrible it took one back to the tent, to Brother Wendel's flames (doing what in that "revival"? licking up beneath my seat?). Yes, a part of me was seeing in the copse those orange-red flames, and worse than that, my stomach was aching, too, repulsed as if from memory--

Juley, it hurts! (this, suddenly, flashing into my mind). Juley, it hurts so bad!

What was happening to me?

On the porch, for a moment, it got so bad, I thought I might throw up again; but I forced it down, tried to calm the shivering as Virgil talked and talked and spit into the bushes. "You jes wait, Celia," he said, "that boy'll be back at the table afore supper. Mark my words."

"Uh huh."

But when they left, the Darbys, when they got into their old ramshackle Dodge and began bumping down the hill

(Musette, her had turned to Virgil, a hand shaking forcefully at his face), when at last they were gone and out of sight, I could wait no longer.

I went back into the house--that odd, fleeting image now gone with the sense of action. I pulled my coat out of the closet, wrapped up, and for a moment, stood, debating, at the foot of the stairs.

Finally: "Annie!"

No response.

"Annie! Listen to me! Mommy's going out for a while. You just stay up in your room and play with Cherry, all right? Mommy'll be back soon!"

One and a half, two hours, maybe, left of light.

But where to go? Where to look?

For a second, I considered taking the car, hand upon the shut door, but decided against it. It didn't seem likely somehow that he'd be on the road. (The image of that--little boy in a blue coat, hair like a blonde bowl on his head, sticking his thumb out to hitch a ride--was ludicrous; besides, in Harlow, any of the locals would have snatched him up pronto, brought him back to the house, maybe even given him a "talking-to" on the ride back home.) No, it was more likely he was in the woods.

Yet, what had he said? "Friends--I've got friends." No doubt, but damn! Why hadn't I asked his teacher, Mrs. Whats-her-name, who? what were their names? where did they



live?

"I've got friends bigger an' meaner than you!"

And, yes, in a way, thinking back to his teacher, that wasn't surprising either--what was it she'd said, after all? That last year Michael and some older kids-- who possibly were bigger than me, though at the time, I couldn't vouch for meaner--had gotten into trouble for smoking? Wasn't that what she'd said? Mr. Bailey turning them all in?

Still, who? Where?

Oh, screw this! I've just got to look!

Which was what I did. I went round back, past the garden (weeds, brown and overgrown, prickly to the ankles), down the slope to the woods beyond.

I won't bore you with natural details--how I fell in the brambles or cut my leg or slipped once on a declivity of rotting leaves still wet from the rain and snow--but I looked a long time, all the while, of course, growing more and more frightened. As the fear grew, my voice becoming hoarse from all the shouting and casting about ("Michael! Mike! Michael come here! Please!"), as the cold sinking in my gut grew wider, spreading out to the limbs, which again, had no gloves on or heavy pants to protect them, so did the blasts at myself.

"Bitch!"

"Bad!"

"What are you doing? Going crazy?"

"What's the matter with you, Cee! To hit that child! To want to hurt him!"

Which wasn't really true, you know. Good Lord, Michael had that very morning called it himself. As the cup I had thrown shattered, shards flying out like an impotent china nova, he'd called it himself and called it right. And later, at that moment I struck him up in Mother's room, I hadn't wanted really to hurt him, but--rage a fierce thing once it's loose--wanted, I think, to kill him, simply to destroy, shut his mouth forever.

"You monster!" I told myself, and this was when I slipped on the rotting leaves near Muddy Bit, and tumbled face down in the muck.

I came to rest near the northern bank, the light dying out in the trees above, a slight orange cast to the brown of the river. I came to rest there, covered with mud, bits of detritus stuck to my skin. I started to cry, the river flowing swiftly, my vision obfuscated by the tears and the junk of trees that had fallen.

After a time, the frustration lessened. The water dried in my eyes. I looked at the river, caught sight of a patch of blue there, by the fallen limb: light blue, there, in the dirty water, caught up in the slimey leaves. I crept closer and started to scream.

## Chapter Twenty Four

It must have been quite a vision, this: this muck-stained woman, wool coat wet and smelling like a feral ewe, hair beslimed, slicked to the skin, the eyes as wild as a beast's. It must have been something to see her jolting down the road to Harlow just as dark was settling in, to watch the shoe fly off and the funny, limping canter as she ran on without it; funny, too, to hear her voice as she burst into Bascomb's Texaco at the edge of town, racing, out of breath, into the shrill linoleum office where old Bass and the boys were playing a winter's eve game of gin:

"Bit! Bit!" (great panting exhalations). "The Bit! Drowned!"

Funny, how Billy Bascomb, jumping, upset the tray of cards, pennies rolling madly on the floor. Funny, too, how Jute Bender, usually so serene, grabbed her by the arms and started shaking (for she was incoherent, she was, blubbering how it was her fault, how horrible was the thing in the river, how bloated and white, blubbering and screaming and making no sense at all when what Jute and the others wanted was, of course, direction):

"Where, Celia!" he cried, shaking her, shaking.

"'Xactly where in the Bit did you see it!"

But she couldn't say, for the horror. "I. . .I . . .I. . ." was all that came out, her tongue too bloated itself with the vision to curl the words right, to say anything till Jute, that is (Jute who'd sat like a stone through all the melodramas and spy shows that ever flickered to life at the Rialto) tried slapping her face, missed and cuffed her hard on the ear.

"Aye!" Hot tear rolling from an eye. Hand clutching the burning cartilage, guilt ebbing a bit in the pain-- ebbing enough, that is, for me to tell them where, to say, finally, "By the bridge. Bridge that's near the house."

Four of us squeezed into the battered wrecker (Jute and me, another man, and Billy, behind the wheel). He pulled out so fast, the tires squealed, leaving lines of black on the pavement. He flipped on the the yellow

lights above our heads, and out we went, barelling up the road while old Bass stayed behind to phone the Sheriff.

We were the first to arrive, of course, Jute jumping out before the wrecker had even come to a full stop.

Deep voices in the cold air:

"Flashlight!"

"Rope!"

"Keep a blanket, Billy?"

"Damn. Batt'ries dead."

I stood by a concrete post on the bridge, looking down at the dark swirling water.

"Here. Got a littler one," Billy said, "in the glove box."

"Well, git it!"

And he did. He turned the small flashlight on, flooding the post and me with a yellow beam.

"Reckon we oughta wait on Jim?"

"Whut for?"

"Well, I don' know."

"You don't."

"Spose its a murder--"

"Jesus, Jute!"

(Then softer, another voice): "Whut you talkin'

murder for--in front o' Celia Tripp!"

By the time they had gathered courage enough to go down to the river, Jim Randall, the sheriff, had already arrived: gumball lights casting red on the bridge, radio squawking static.

Behind Jim, other cars were stopping, and I guess I appreciated the fact he hadn't used the siren. With that high, tinnital whine in my ear (the one Jute hit), it would have been unbearable. As it was, the disembodied voices were bad enough.

"Billy?"

"Hey, Jim."

"Your Pa said--"

"Yeah, its trouble."

"Oh, what is it?" (a woman's voice, from another direction).

"Drownin', I heard" (another man).

Behind me, boots, crunching gravel, heels thudding on cement. Then, "Celia, honey--whut was it you saw?"

I turned to Jim. "Michael."

We were out there on the bridge some time. Five, maybe six cigarette's worth, because, of course, they didn't find the body.

Jim wouldn't let me go down at first. He said, "Now, Celia, no, you just tell us where. Point to it." And I did. My hand trembling, I pointed with the glowing

end of the cigarette Jute gave me. "He's down there--see?--where that tree's fallen. He's tangled up in the branches."

Jim and some others went sliding down the bank in the dark, flashlights on, beams sweeping into intersecting webs. They looked. They looked all over, waded in, tried to hoist the tree a bit in the freezing current. One of them--maybe Billy--even slid all the way under, feeling with his hands, coming up, though, only with freezing silt, and a sputtering choking cough that only made the people on the bridge chatter more.

"Damn!" (this from below).

"Spose it's downstream, Jim?"

"Hell."

"Maybe."

"Whut you wanna do?"

And Billy was hacking again.

"Hey, Bill--"

"Billy, you git on home!" (Jim).

"Aw--"

"No, git on home afore you catch your--"

"Celia!"

And a hand, suddenly, taking hold of me. "Good God, Celia," he said (Lee, white as ash again, squeezing my arm with such force it caused pain). "God all mighty! What's happened now!"

I stared at him.

"Pete Hawkins said it's--"

"Yes," I told him, my voice now sounding even disembodied to me. "It's Michael, Lee. He's dead."

An anguished moan.

Seconds ticked by on his watch (or maybe it was the tinnitus). "Cee, what happened!"

Then Doc arrived, the look on his face pure pain, too. He came over and said something--I don't remember what--then went back to his car, just as the ambulance from Jefferson screamed on to the bridge. Two attendants in white rushed out and got a stretcher from the back. Doc called to them, while he put his galoshes on. A moment later, both he and the ambulance men began heading down to the Bit.

Lee was like a trapped animal there, beside me, his head moving side-to-side, hands clenching, one touching the post, tapping it twice, then relaxing.

Suddenly, he looked around and said, "Where's Annie?"

And it was funny, but in the excitement (for that is always the word they use, isn't it? "in all the excitement," a phrase peppering cheap novels and shoddy films to explain why the heroine does something dumb), in all the bloody, damned "excitement" of that horror, I'd completely forgotten her.

"Annie?" I said now, stupidly blinking. "Why, she's at the house."

"Not alone," Lee said.



And all I could do was look at him, mouth dropping mutely open--

"Jesus H. Christ!" Lee said.

"Lee--" (weak supplication).

"Oh, look," he said, his face betraying that well-practiced disgust, "you stay here. I'll go up to the house and, I don't know," he said, glancing away from me for one more look at the creek below, "I'll see if I can't find something to watch her." He turned away from me, muttering, "damn."

The men were searching slowly, meticulously scanning the Bit with their lights. You could still see the beams on the water, though the men had passed round the bend. You could hear their voices, too. Once, one of them even cried out, "Here! Here, boys, come here!"--this in a shout both triumphant and terrified--"I've found it!"

And the people on the bridge grew silent. Respectful. A great hush descended, save for the radio's static, and the people held their breath.

"Aw, shit, Clyde!"--from below--"'At's a log!"

Communal sigh. An exhalation of relief. Then talking.

Finally, Jim Randall came back up the Bit. He climbed up to the bridge, wiping his brow (which was sweating, despite the cold) on the filthy sleeve of his coat. He half-sat down on the post, panting.

"You sure, Celia?" he said. "You sure you saw him here? Not upstream a ways?"

I shook my head: no.

"Nor down?"

"No."

"You sure? 'Cause, you know, one tipped o'er tree could look like another, and whut with your being so upset and all--"

"No," I said. "I'm sure. He was here."

Jim sighed. "Well, all right. I better call on o'er to Jefferson--they got a hook there, 'quipment for dredgin'."

He got up and walked toward the car. I watched him for a moment then turned back to the river--how black it seemed, how animate, especially with the lights playing across its surface, illumining the stuff there: branches, two stones, debris floating past, something that resembled faintly a tire.

As I stood there, watching, I became aware, only vaguely at first, of a change in the crowd. It started on the east end of the bridge--a hush from there, then huzzing, then. . .oh, how to describe it? Excitement? Relief? Great voluble confusion--everyone gabbing at once.

I think I must have sense it the same time as Jim, for as I turned toward the edge of the bridge closest to the house, I heard him quit talking in the radio, saw him out of the corner of my eye put the microphone down on his knee.

And it's funny, you know?

Funny how the three of them walked toward me.

Funny how the people who had gathered on the bridge faded back into a circle around them, how their voices carried over in bits:

"Why, isn't that--"

"Look!"

"But she said--"

"What the hell--"

What the hell, indeed. Because there they were, all three. Lee in the middle, his face yellow and alternately red in the flashing lights--there was Lee with a look on his face that is pointless to describe. On his left, he was holding Annie by the hand (she, in turn, grasping Cherry; she was looking around at all the people, thoroughly bewildered). And on his right? On Lee's right side?

Well. . .need I tell you?

On Lee's right side was Michael. Little blue coat. Head, a blond bowl. Hale and hearty and shrugging with delight. "What, me? Drown?"

## Chapter Twenty Five

Lee was so furious at first he wouldn't speak. He was horrified and embarrassed (incredibly so, for the crimson staining the tips of his ears lingered long after we returned to the house with Jim). We went to the library, sending the children upstairs, and when he finally condescended to speak to me, his words lashed out like a current--abusive, torrential, wrong:

"Totally irresponsible!" he said. "Not only that, but lunatic"--this said as his hands slapped together in furious cadence. "Running into town and telling everyone-- God what possessed you! It's fucking abnormal, and I'll tell you something else--"

"That's enough, Lee," said Jim Randall.

"What! You liked going down there on a wild, goose chase, Jim?"

"Better that than findin' whut we could've. Or ain't you never seen a drownin', Lee?"

"A drowning? What drowning! She made the whole thing--"

"That's enough! Cain't you see she's had a fright?"

And I suppose, if you were perched on the mantle there, looking, or standing tiptoe by the window and peering in, you'd have to have agreed with the Sheriff.

--Cain't you see she's had a fright!--

A fright? No, no--a "fright" is something an old lady gets with a mouse in the cupboard; it is a child's nightmare (white braying donkeys with wings, biting chunks from your heels); it is even that moment on the shoulder of the road where you've swerved to avoid that semi bearing down in your lane to pass--these, all of them, constitute "frights". They make your knuckles white, but not your heart. They do not make the blood run pale on the inside, too, which was what happened to me when I saw him in the creek.

"Celia," Jim said, sitting down beside me on the leather sofa. "Whut happened?"

I told him, this man who was nearly as filthy as I, sitting there; when I rubbed my hands a bit of dried muck flaked off and fell to the floor. I told him how I tumbled down the bank and came to rest by a stump. I told him I

spotted the blue cloth in the water, how it swelled and billowed there, snagged in the branch of the tree. "I was screaming his name, you know? 'Michael! Michael!' And his head, the hair there--like this white corona in the water. He was floating face down, and I was screaming at him to get up. And then, when he didn't, I went over and. . ."

"And whut?"

A deep breath. "Jim, I turned it over."

"It?" said Lee.

"Yes, it!"

"The kid?" said Sheriff Randall.

"Yes!" And suddenly I was up, pacing. "Horrible! Oh, God, it was all white and bloated and the eyes!"

"Whut about 'em?"

And now I was cradling my head in my hands, pressing in on the temples, for they were aching so. "They. . .they weren't there, Jim. The eyes were--gone."

A moment of silence.

Finally, Jim settled back an inch or so; he said, "Uh huh."

"You don't believe me."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Celia--"

"No, it's true. Jim, you don't believe me, but I saw it! It was in the river and it was Michael!"

"Well, Celia," Jim said slowly, "I have to tell you--"

"It's true! I saw it. It was dead and bloated and--"

"Bloated, Cee?" said Lee, a curious, twisted little smile on his lips. "I'm no coronor, but I know a body has to be in the water for some time before it bloats. Isn't that so, Jim?"

Jim was scratching his head. "When did you see the child last, Celia?"

"Oh, what is this nonsense," Lee said. "The kid's upstairs right now! He didn't drown! He wasn't even in the Bit!"

"I know," said Jim. "I know 't. But Celia here--"

"Celia here," I said, "Celia here saw it--you didn't!"

"Oh, I have no doubt, Celia," Jim said softly, "you think you saw somethin' in the crick. But thinkin' and seein's two diff'rent things, sometimes."

"You can say that again," Lee mumbled. "The whole thing's what I said--fucking abnormal, and if you don't quit this nonsense, Cee, I'll--"

"Now, no threats--either o' you. Don't you say things you'll later regret. Lee, you just calm down. You, too," he said to me. "Now, you can pitture it this way. You were out there in the woods, lookin' for 'im. You told me you had a fight an' he run off, is that right?"

I shook my head.

"Well, there you are! Huntin' for 'im, an' it's gettin' dark. You take a tumble down there. Come to--"

"I wasn't knocked out!"

"--perhaps not. But you were scared, weren't you? Worryin' about the kid? An' you see something blue there in the water, piece o' cloth, maybe, that looks like his coat--

"Was his coat."

"--that in your worst fears, looks to you like his coat. An', well, if it's runnin' scared enough, imagination can play tricks, make you see all sorts o' things."

All I could do was stare at him, at the sheriff and Lee, behind him--idiotic conjecturing!

Jim leaned back now, deep into the sofa. He folded his arms across his chest and said, "Now, that was the way o' it, Celia. After all, that kid's upstairs, isn't he? That had to be how it happened--I think you'll agree with that, won't you?"

I was about to say something quite acidic, like, "Well, you've made up your mind, so it must be, right?" I admit, I was so frustrated that at that moment what I really wanted say was, "Oh, well, Sheriff Randall--you do know everything! Such an omniscient fellow! Like that time you took that tramp out behind the water plant--remember? And your brother-in-law saw you and told your wife. How old was she, Sheriff Know-it-all? Fourteen? Hadn't she just turned fourteen that summer she hitchhiked here from the City?"

This was the tenor I wanted to take. Put him on



the spot for a while! But, I don't know. . . maybe it was the fact he was covered with muck, cold and wet and wanting to go home; or maybe it was just Granddaddy yet whispering in my ear that held me back (Granddaddy who always supported Jim and would defuse the story whenever it resurfaced, usually at election time): Ah, he'd say, with a wistful smile, but that was in another country, and besides the wench is--

"Dead."

I let the word hang on the air.

"What I saw in the river was dead."

Silence.

"Why, Celia?" Lee said. "Because you wanted it to be?"

I lit a cigarette. Shook out the match. "Pop-Freudianisms now?"

"Oh, this is absurd!" Lee shouted. "What's the point in talking to you! It's just like all those times before! You let your imagination run away--"

"Like with Doreen?"

"Goddammit!" (smacking his fist on the sofa back).

"God damn you!"

"All right! The both of you--now, I'm not gonna tell you agin! Stop bickerin'!" Jim hoisted himself off the couch "This is gettin' nowhere." He turned to Lee: "Maybe you ought to go home now, son. Your not helpin'

matters any."

"Fine," Lee said, grabbing his hat. "I'll leave just as soon as I've rounded up the children--"

"What do you mean? Round up the children!" I said. "They're not yours to round up!"

"Well, you certainly don't think I'm going to leave them here with you tonight, do you? Not when your in a, a . . . state like this!"

"Lee," said Jim, half-rolling his eyes to the ceiling, "go home. Celia's not gonna hurt the children--are you?" He looked at me, so assured, so certain obviously that he was right, I almost forgave him for his other doubts.

"Hurt them?" I said. Then to Lee: "God, do you think I'd hurt them, Lee?"

Another anguished look from him.

"Aw, look. I been in this job," the sheriff said, spreading his hands in a gesture of mock-helplessness, "forever. . .I seen all sorts o' things--had a woman once up on Tar Road, antsy all the time. If her kid was ten minutes late comin' home from the pep rally, why, she'd be on the phone to me, swearin' he was kidnapped. Had another down near Black Bear crick. . .but, I think you get the point, don't you?"

Lee was staring at him icily.

"People, when they're scared, see an' do funny things. Ain't no help for it--jus' the nature of the

beast."

Suddenly, there came a thud, like something had been dropped outside the library door. Jim and Lee turned around. Then Jim said, "As I said" (now striding, stealthily toward the door, a half-smile on his face), "it's just the nature of the beast like"-- and he flung open the door, startling them both--"like eavesdroppin' children who were told, if I remember c'rectly, to go to their rooms upstairs."

Annie, crouching down on the floor outside, looked guilty. Michael stood behind her, with something like a smile.

Before Jim left, he tousled the children's hair: "As I always say, all's well that ends--" (he got that far into the bromide before Michael, with a look of contemptuous disgust, wriggled free of his hand). He also bade the kids "be good now, hear? Mind your P's and Q's cause she's had a wangdangle day already, and you don't want to add any worry, do you?"

Annie solemnly shook her head. Michael looked at him, bored.

On a more serious note, Jim said to me, "Now, you know, don't you, Celia, that if you need to, you can call? Don't pay no mind to those stories I was tellin'. You get scared agin, you just pick up the phone--you got my number."

I nodded, but all the while, Lee was looking at me

so curiously, so critically, I felt my attention wander.

I walked them both to the door--yes, after repeated, and I admit, sarcastic assurances to Lee that everything would be all right, that we would all still be here in the morning when he came to make his "bed check." Yet, oddly, when I shut the front door after them, I didn't feel better that he was gone. I leaned against the door, almost too tired suddenly to move, then, after a moment, I heard them talking, in low voices, just outside.

(If you put your ear to the door, you could hear them almost distinctly, and for a little while that's what I did.)

"You really buy that crap, Jim?"

No response (a shrug?).

"Well, I'll tell you--if she keeps this up, I'll have to take steps."

"Whut?"

A moment of silence (or wind). "Court? Go to court and get them legally."

"Uh huh."

(Muffled, obscured)--"compes mentis. Something."  
Another pause, then: "Look, I know we both think she's"--  
(a gust of wind)--"possible, though, that she did see something out there?"

"A body?"

"What I mean is, Jim, should you have called off

the search? What if there was a--" (Jim, clearing his throat)--"oh, not Michael, of course, but somebody else?"

"You think that hasn't occurred to me, too, Lee?"

"Well, then, why--" (a thundering in my own ear perhaps, something)--"should you just have summarily called it off?"

And then Jim was laughing, a dark kind of laugh that echoed on the porch, wormed through the wooden door. "An' who says I called it off? Gettin' too dark to do much now, but in the mornin' the"-- (book? hook?)-- "'ll be comin' in from Jefferson. We'll have us a look-see anyways."

Another laugh.

"Like I said, Lee. Bein' sheriff's a job I been in forever. . . ."

## Chapter Twenty Six

"Are you insane?"

I looked but did not answer.

"Are you really mad then, Celia, like your brother?"

I did not answer, for what could I say? I mean, madness, insanity, to be crazy as a loon, as a bedbug, to be mad as a hatter--all those terms, those phrases, cheap and easy as they roll off the tongue. . .what do any of them mean?

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

The question is: Why is a loon "crazy"? Or a bedbug, scuttling across the sheets, looking for a warm harbor of

flesh and human blood--is it "crazy" to follow the force that chants: "You, you there, little insect, you are called to be vampiric. Your script is written for cheap motels. Those mandible I have sized perfectly for the buttocks of married men, out for flinging good fun with whores!"

"Are you crazy? Or what?"

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, watched the pale, besmirched lips moving, accusing themselves and the brain behind the movements (grayish mass, computer made of meat)--I listened, like some dead thing, to my own lips' abuse and could think of nothing beyond the simplest facts:

1. Loons are not insane; they are animals only; they follow that chant, glide along reflective surfaces of lakes, crying pitiably for a lover.
2. Ditto bedbugs.
3. Ditto hatters. (Oh, yes, if you want to get sticky, those milliners of London were quite, quite "insane." 'Twas a regular routine, you know, for them to caw like grackles, coo at the Tower, give piercing shrieks down Drury Lane--just as the theatres were letting out, gaslights casting yellow circles on the sidewalk in the fog. And, yes, little Jenny, golden-haired girl who "fell" at the age of twelve to a member of the House of Lords--yes, little Jenny is there, hawking what the Lord didn't pay for at the age of twelve or

twenty two, standing in the gaslight, lifting her skirts, black bedbug clinging to an inside seam. Yes, the hatter, just then, shrieks by, "mad as" himself, insane--but it isn't, as a righteous cleric once insinuated, a "punishment from God," this madness; and it isn't a trick of the Devil either. . . .My God (if You're there at all), my God, it is just the glue! This is why the hatter screams--from the glue! That ticky-sticky stuff that tacks the headbands down on the hats, that keeps the felt of the bowler from curling obscenely in the brown London smog. This is why the hatter shrieks: his four pounds of gray meat have been glitched by the glue.)

"You must be insane, too," I said. And honestly, as I stood there in the bathroom just after Lee and the sheriff had left, as I stood there staring at myself (mucked, filthy, small twig and its gray dead leaf stuck in my disheveled hair), to be truthful, I'd never seen anyone look so bad.

(Oh, yes, once at the hospital here. . . .something comparable. Another glitch perhaps, for the nurses or orderlies, or maybe it was one of those candy-stripe girls from the college--you know, the kids majoring in "sike," eager and anxious to do battle with the demons, once somebody



left Falconer alone in the crafts room. As you know, there is a large, glass mirror at its nether end--two-way, no doubt, for it is gloomy and dark as a wood in the evening--and the clay that day was wet and pungent, had a divinely silky feel that he enjoyed. Well, it doesn't take a genius to guess that within minutes he had covered himself: face and neck, hair, hands, even part of the blue pajama top, streaks and swashes of mud the color of a lead sky in winter. And he went to the mirror like that. It was almost comedic how he looked at his hands, then at his face in the dark silver glass, was delighted then to touch his chest, then look back again at the mirror:

"Ditto," he said, pointing, for there were two of him now.

"Ditto, ditto," he cried, pointing at himself.

"Ditto-man. . .dittoman-do. . .dittomandododo. . .dittomonodo!" he shrieked in joy, nonsense syllables reflective of nothing but a clay man, middle-aged, lost in a darkened mirror.)

A comparable thing, perhaps, to what I was feeling that evening after Lee and the sheriff left, my own voice asking, "Are you crazy, or what? Halfway through your fucking life--and none of it makes sense! Are you like him?"--meaning Jule, of course: "jewel, jewel," for this was how she said it, how she would cry his name across the summer wheat--"jewel! jewel!" as though he were a sapphire or diamond, some precious stone, prized, impermeable, lasting. When

we were young, Mother would stretch it out, making me almost jealous that he had such music in his name, that it conveyed out there in the wheat to my small, white ears a kind of glory. And it didn't help when she said once, "Why, Celia"--see-lee-uh--"course we didn't name you after the ceiling! Where'd you get such a stupid notion? Your name means heaven, child--heavenly . And it's every bit as dignified as Jewel's."

But it wasn't. They chopped it into Cee (said loudly, a command "to look," implicit in the demand the idea that I didn't or wouldn't or couldn't)--

"Are you out of your head now? Are you really losing it, to have seen him there in the creek?"

In the bathroom, I shuddered. The muscles in my hand and arm convulsed slightly as I reached for the towel, rough white nubs of cloth upon my face--rubbing, rubbing, sanding the dirt down to bare, ruddy skin.

The children were in the kitchen, eating pie with spoons.

"What are you doing?" I said, face still stinging as I walked in. They hadn't even bothered with plates, but were at the table digging in to the whole, fresh cherry pie Musette had made that morning, mangling it with tablespoons, heads close together.

"Annie!" I said. "You know better. . . ."

She looked at me, the expression on her small face devoid of feeling.

"She's hungry," said Michael, spooning up a great

gob of red, gooey stuff, not caring, obviously, that it dripped on the table or his shirt.

"Uh huh," I said. "I can see."

He crammed the full spoon into his mouth. "Well," he said, mumbling around the cherries, mouth a red maw, "if you won't do what you should, somebody has to. . ."

"Has to what?"

He smiled. "Take care of her."

I went over to the table, picked up the pie plate, their spoons hanging (dripping) in the air. "I'll get you something proper--in a minute."

Honestly, I was so exhausted, I didn't set the pie down on the counter, but rather half-dropped it, slung it, almost; it fell with a thud.

I opened a cabinet, stood there, hand on the door, looking, but it was like Greek, you know, or Arabic; it was like staring at squiggles on a page that made no sense beyond the fact you knew they were a language. In the cabinet, there were boxes and boxes and bags of stuff, but somehow they didn't register as food, as something that could be mixed with water, heated, eaten.

"She's already made something," Michael finally said.

A sigh. "What?"

"A dead animal," he said, behind me. "It's in the fridge."

"A dead animal?" I said, mouth open, body turning to look at him.

He stared at me. Annie was licking her spoon.

"That's some way of putting it, Michael," I said, tiredly.

"Well, it's true."

"A lot of things are true," I said, now walking to the refrigerator, opening it, finding a chilled dish. "But most people call this meatloaf."

He shrugged. "It's still a dead animal, Cee. You can call it anything you want, but last summer that cow was down at the McSwane's ranch, she was. She was eating grass an' having a good time an' old fart McSwane put 'er in a truck an' took 'er to the City an'--"

"Oh, knock it off, Michael."

"Well, he did! He took her to the City an' this man there--name was Rick Quigglebush, but the boys call 'im Quig--ol' Rick took a sledgehammer--"

"That's enough!"

"--an' he knocked her brains out--"

"Mommy!" (And now, Annie had a pained look on her face; she banged the table once with her spoon.)

"--he knocked 'er in the head, right here," he said, pointing at Annie, "right there between the eyes!"

"Michael!" I said. "We do not talk like that at the table! What's the matter with you?"

Michael smiled.

(And I think at that point, I finally decided it. You only had to look at Annie, her face frozen into grotesque

half-believing horror, for until that moment, I don't think she'd made the rational connection before, that link between brown-eyed snuffly beasts in the field and steak upon the table. Really, you only had to look at her--her eyes accusatory, directed at me--then look at Michael, who promptly added, "In China they also eat dogs--like Pook, your Pook, Annie"; you only had to see them together, then get inside my own skin, feel my seething, to know that he would be better off somewhere, anywhere else, but with us. Really, you only had to see the loaf-pan, greasy and still full in the sink, for Annie, of course, refused to touch it, said, "I don't want that now, Mommy," see her shaking her head resolutely no, and you'd realize I had no choice.)

I ended up giving them back the pie, a caustic "Thanks so much, Michael, you're a prince!" ringing out above his small blond head.

"A prince?" he said, then laughed. "Not quite, Celia."

"Not quite indeed!"

A spoon full of cherries, contemplatively poised near his lips; a quizzical arch to the brows. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand! Oh, I most certainly understand! I understand that you're a. . .a. . ."

"You're repeating yourself."

"And you're on very thin ice, young man!"

"Ice?" he said. "Ice?" Then he crammed the cherries in, almost choking himself on a snicker, a thin line of red juice dribbling down his chin. "Ice?" he said. "Oh, really?"

And then?

Well, he came over, of course, as he said he would on the phone, but to be frank I'd forgotten completely about it--it being an item that, when contrasted with that white bloated thing in the Bit (hallucination? fantasy? but damn! it had a little, blue coat of slick nylon, and when I turned it over with my hand, I slipped in the freezing water from the fright and my fingers pushed partway in--damn! for hours, it seemed, on the bridge, in the house, in the library where I paced about trying to decide, finally, what to do, for hours you could still smell that bloated thing on my skin!)--well, compared and contrasted to this, the ringing of the doorbell late that evening and the conversation that I thought would ensue seemed utterly trivial, of such non-importance, it took me a moment to even remember why I'd called Bertie in the first place.

But there he stood, nervous as hell, awkward, hat in his skinny hands, weight shifting foot to foot on the porch.

"Yes?" I said, slouching in the doorway, smoke from my cigarette curling like a veil before my face.

I know I must have looked awful. (Bertie came once to visit me here, and he said that night my skin was the color of wax in the door, my eyes so dark and sunken he was sure I knew.) "Why, Bertie," I said, "what are you doing here?"

And he came in, stammering how very, very sorry he was, but he had been all day in Jefferson and--

"Oh, that," I said, drawling it out. "Well, come on in, if you want." "Nothing seems very urgent now."

He put his hand down on the deacon's bench in the great hall. He said how sorry he was again. "Is there anything, Celia, anything at all I can do?"

"No," I said, now suddenly growing embarrassed myself, for I knew by the awkward, disjointed workings of his face that he had heard about the Bit, the trouble I'd caused there. For a moment, I even considered telling him what I'd heard the sheriff say, about the hook they were going to bring in, that maybe, just maybe, in the morning. . . . But had I really heard that? Was that the gist of it in the wind? "You want a drink, Bertie?"

He nodded. "I'll get them. You just, uh, come on into the library here and sit down, okay?"

I let him lead me in.

I sat down again on the leather sofa, began picking at a slash of mud there that already had dried. And it's true--if this is important--that I did feel embarrassed. I watched him pour the drinks (though I really didn't touch

the one he proffered). Finally, in a weak, almost infantile, voice, I said, "It's awful. Isn't it?"

He nodded, sitting down beside me. "I heard it on the radio."

"The radio?" I said, closing my eyes. "Oh, God."

An awkward pause--not silence, for such times are never really devoid of sound. There is always that measured, uncertain breathing of the parties sitting side by side; there is the creaking of furniture, the structured beating of the mantle clock; really, there are too many sounds that knock against decorum and the drum of the ear (a stomach growling, I think, Bertie's) to make for a moment of awkward silence.

"Again," Bertie said, now weakly, too, "if there's anything I can do. . . ."

"What can you do?" I said, perhaps more loudly and forcefully than I intended.

Bertie shrunk back.

"Oh, listen," I said, somehow gaining a bit of steam, "I really don't want to talk about it, okay? I mean, it happened, right? I can't explain it. Why go on and on about something you can't explain?"

Bertie looked puzzled for a moment, his wonder flickering into concern, then back again into that sedate drawn expression he had for so long perfected at the bank. "Certainly, Celia," he said, finally, and as I recall, quite slowly. "Whatever you want."



I pushed myself off the sofa then, began stalking about the library, hugging myself--a gesture, it seemed, I had begun to do more and more often of late. Perhaps it was to feel the knobiness of my own bones (had I still had nothing to eat this day? what yesterday? toast? or was that the day before?); perhaps in feeling the ribs, I somehow assured myself of something (what? that I was still here, a thing of substance yet and not a ghost?). Maybe it was just the simple act of hiding myself, or steeling up the way line-backers do on a scrimmage, you know, how they hunch into themselves, preparing as if for war--

A noise. Nothing. Bertie clearing his throat.

--Who knows? Perhaps it was just to keep those awful blue lapels from flapping, for, again, I was in Lee's robe. And, again, somehow, it had missed a good dousing by Musette.

"The house?"

As I turned toward Bertie, I caught a sideways glimpse of myself in the mirror above the mantle: flat silver pond and stringy hair, eyes blank as a doll's.

I said, "What?"

Bertie caughed discreetly into his hand. "The house. You said you wanted to speak to me about the house, Celia."

"The house?" (Honestly, at that point, I couldn't remember.)

Bertie's eyes narrowed. His discomfort increased, several-fold, for he began rubbing with both hands the tiny thighs above his knees. "Yes," he said. "When you called? Remember? You phoned this morning."

"Oh," I said, scratching absently at my neck.

"That."

Another pause.

"Well? Are you thinking of selling?"

Really, I had to dig at the memory, plumb hard to dredge it up. (Was that just this morning? A few scant hours past? It was funny, but as I stood there in the library, cradling my bones, treated peripherally to the ugly countenance in the mirror, simultaneously, I was upstairs, too. I could see myself, melodramatic double, standing in her room, so furious the smoke was pouring from nostrils as flared as any dragon's. Yes. I had been angry, horribly so, for those initials, in flowery script on brass, were floating before my eyes like little snakes: aes, aes--said aloud, they even sounded reptilian, hissing adders, coiling and weaving in the grass. Funny, but I had been furious there, phone in my hand. Love. Forever. Blah, blah, blah.) Now, if anything, it was laughable. Between Bertie, sitting on the sofa, attentive and small, politely sipping his bourbon--between this and the incredible tiredness that had somehow descended upon me, a hemorrhage, if you will, of the spirit that had been born that afternoon at the Bit, well, now, it was really too trivial for words.

I went over to the mantle, grabbed the pack of cigarettes, lit one. Perhaps I shrugged. In an exhausted sort of voice, I said, "Albert, I just wanted to know if it was true."

"What?"

A sigh. "You know," I said, and I walked over to the sofa, sat down beside him, slouched back into the leather, for now I scarcely cared. "I just wanted to know if it was you," I said, blowing out a tired stream of smoke, "you know--fucking Mother all those years."

## Chapter Twenty Seven

For a while, he was like that proverbial cat: up on the steaming, tin-tile roof, pads scorching with every prancing, noncommittal step. In a way, it was much like a play, with Bertie performing to perfection the role of a stammering, unjustly accused Lothario: Bertie pacing here and there, hitting his mark, twisting and stuttering out squirmy, inept lines (Celia-I-don't-know-what-you-mean! How-could-you-think! This-is-hardly-the-time-you-know-what-with. . .and on and on).

All the time, of course, I just slouched there on the divan, watching and blowing the smoke out my nose. Finally, I suppose I convinced him I really didn't care,

for there came a point, after a wild series of dramatic gesticulations of his arms by the mantle, where he looked me straight in the eyes and it was as if someone had pricked him with a pin: the hot air just simply went out. His tight muscles slackened. He very nearly sighed. He said, "I guess you're not buying this, are you?"

Probably, I shook my head.

He came back over to the sofa, sat down beside me again. Funny, he started slouching, too.

"You know," he said softly, picking up again the sweating bourbon, "there was never any harm intended."

"Uh huh."

And now, he really sighed. "I knew her long before Edward got. . .involved." He took a sip. "I suppose you want to know about it?" he said, as though it were not my business.

I shrugged.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter much now," he said, slowly, and it was strange, but you could tell that the pain of it all, of the last few weeks, was still there in him, a boiling kind of rage and helplessness, just below the surface; in Bertie--Albert Estep Swann--it revealed itself (bubbling up is far too dramatic a term) as a slow liquifaction of the eyes, tears coming up, yes, glossing the orbs over, but not spilling now--just there, two shiney little lakes. "I knew, Celia--at the reading of the wills--I realized

then you'd be asking. Sometime."

I stubbed my cigarette out, lit another. "'Bertie of Iscariot'--wasn't that how Daddy put it?"

He shook his head as if to say no. "But it wasn't what Edward thought. Not at that time. Really. Oh, Lilli and I knew each other then, of course. We'd even gone together for a while in school--did you know that?" he asked, and though it was more than thirty years before, this rather inconsequential fact, there was still in his voice a slight piquant pride, the kind of thing that in middle-aged men is (in normal circumstances which this, clearly, was not) pitiable. (And you know what I mean: there was in Bertie's voice the same prideful shade a beer-belly jock in a trailer court exudes when he tells you, bowl of corn chips in his lap, that three decades earlier he, and he alone, scrambled forty yards to safety, giving his team the touchdown they needed most.)

"Oh, yes, my, yes," Bertie was saying now, "we, your mother and I, were quite an 'item' in those days. We dated for almost three years in school. Most people even thought, you know. . ."

(Pitiable. Pathetic.)

"But you didn't," I said.

A pause. "No."

"Why? Was it Grandfather?"

"Oh, no," he said. "Not at all. Your Granddaddy always liked me. I think he would have been pleased if we'd

married. No," he said softly, "it was Lilli who didn't want to. She. . .she had this stupid idea, you know?" He took another sip. "But she was very young then, too, you must realize that."

"Stupid idea?" I parroted back.

And Bertie, suddenly, was embarrassed again. His head almost jerked spasmodically, like a twitch. He gulped at his drink. "You know how it goes. 'Specially back then. A young girl wants her prince. Lilli always had this idea, in the back of her mind, that, well, one day, he would come in. Knight. White charger. The whole ball of wax. And sometimes, she would even tell me what he'd look like--she had it that clear in her head, you know?" he said, and now that decade's old pride, like wine in a dusty undisturbed bottle, was sloshing and tangling up with a sort of bitterness. Bertie's features were becoming pinched--the wrinkles furrowing the skin even deeper; it was as though someone had placed a a bit of lemon on his tongue. "Well," he said, finally, "the long and short of it is that I wasn't him. Not tall enough maybe." He almost laughed. "Lilli always said he had to be at least six feet. Guess she didn't want runty kids." And then he looked at me, flushed pink, and said, "I don't mean anything by that, of course."

"Hey. . ." I said, brushing it aside, letting it die, in a sense, in the air.

"But, you know, we weren't. . .we never. . .we really never--"

"Fucked?"

He didn't answer, though I could tell, by the pained shiver on his face, that I finally had hit my mark, too.

"Celia," he said, "I loved your mother. Oh, sometimes I wondered why, but I did love her. Back then, of course, people just. . .uh, people didn't get intimate the way they do now. Not before marriage, usually. I suppose you can call it 'fucking' if you want. But when we were courting, you know, we never. And then Edward moved into Harlow--my senior year. And that was it."

I looked at him quizzically. "So, you and Mother never did? Is that what you're saying?"

Bertie rubbed his temples. "Well," he said, his eyes half-closed, "not for a very long time."

"When?"

A look of disbelief. "You want details, Celia?" he said, sharply. "Goddam, I don't think that's any of your--"

"When, Bertie!" (And now, I was starting to get upset again, that coiling worm down below making its presence felt, excited, charged with adrenaline.) "I'm not asking out of any prurient interest--believe me, I'm not. But I have a stake in this, too. So does Jule and--"

(Bertie's eyebrows arched curiously)

"--dammit, you should tell me. When! I need to know when. Because, I'll tell you, Bertie," I said, now shaking my head rather forcefully, "my Daddy thought, I'm just certain he believed, that Jule and I. . .that we. . . ."



(And by now, of course, it had sort of fallen into place, a scad of niggling, prickly little details--oddities of memory and family stories--a number of pieces had begun to suddenly come together, a puzzleboard upended and put right. What else could one do with the suitcase battle--white versus brown? Our birth? Or, as Julian himself had said in the journal--that old, familiar phrase of my father's that I, too, had heard at least a hundred times, but had shrugged off to anger or despair: "No son o' mine." This was so often what Daddy said, especially when Jule had done something awful, when he'd come and grab him by the hand and say, "Daddy, Daddy, come listen to the tree! Daddy, Balaam's in the leaves there, talking," or that time at the bank when Jule came in, striped like an Indian, with dung--so many times, our father had said this, rage welling up in his throat: "No son o' mine.")

"When, Bertie?" I said now. "When were you fucking that whore?"

For a second, honestly, I thought he might strike me. I pulled back, my face a stoney mask. I watched him tense, grow hard himself, felt his measured through-the-teeth breath. After a moment or two, he gradually calmed himself. In a tight, still quite strained voice, he said, "Celia, I could not be your father."

Exhalation of smoke. Disbelieving stream.

"Celia," he said, "I swear that. On my eternal soul,

I swear I am not your father--I couldn't be! Lilli and I. . .it was almost a year and a half after you and Jule were born."

"Daddy thought so."

And then, Bertie did something I'd never seen him do before. He picked up the pack of cigarettes beside me, shook one out and lit it. "Filthy habit," he mumbled, as if in explanation. "I used to," he said, not looking at me, "long, long time ago. . ."

"You haven't answered, Bertie," I said, blowing out a stream of smoke to match his. "Daddy thought you were our father, didn't he?"

Bertie looked down at the floor. Softly, very softly, he said, "I know."

He hadn't, of course, meant it to go that far. "I never intended any harm," he said, that night in the library, and then contradicted himself. "No, no," he said, striding weakly on the rug, "I--well, you have to understand what it was like, Celia, for me! I loved her! I loved your Mother. And for the longest time--hell, right up to the wedding, I always thought I could get her back. I thought, surely, certainly, she's not stupid. She'll see the light. One day, that Lilli will wake up--you know what a talker she was, Celia. Oh, how your mother loved conversation. She loved

art, you know, all the finer things. Oh, hell," he said, his gestures much more animated than before (all the while, now, he was flinging his arms, pointing with the cigarette at me and himself, ash falling absurdly on the floor), "hell, you'll laugh at this, Celia--I know, you'll think I'm a clown--but when I was a kid, I even ordered The New Yorker--can you imagine that? this scrawny little bank teller in Harlow, Oklahoma, reading , no, devouring, that damned ritzy magazine, just so I'd have something--oh, I don't know--cultured to say.

"You see, I thought, surely, surely, Lillian will wake up. Edward was never much, as you know, for small talk--and she needed that, needed it like a plant needs water. And I thought, oh, yes, sooner or later, she'll come to her senses and realize what she's thrown away! I even had these fantasies about it. . . ." (Embarrassment, again.) "But that's not the point, is it?"

(Blank stare.)

"Well," he said, "I suppose it would be a lie to say I didn't want to hurt him. I did. I hated his guts. I wanted him. . . ." Bertie looked away again. He turned his back to me and walked over to one of the far windows. "I don't know how it happened, Celia. But one day, I guess I'd had enough. Your mother and father weren't--well, I don't like dissecting this, it isn't fair--but even before you two were born, Lilli and Edward weren't getting on.

And one day--I remember it was in the spring--she was downtown, out to here," he said, twisting slightly, hands held out away from his stomach as though he were cradling a barrel.

"And, you see, Ceeley, that was my child there!"

I could feel my eyes narrowing.

"What I mean is, it should have been mine--you and your brother."

"So," I said, slowly, "you told Daddy that you were the father?"

Bertie licked his lips, sucked in the bottom one, half-biting it. "Not in so many words," he said, then weakly smiled. "But I suppose that's a faulty distinction. I don't know. I let him think it, yes," he said, fingering the glass of the window, tracing (or so it seemed to me from my vantage point) a circle. "Oh, I denied it, Celia. When he finally came right out and asked. But I denied it in such a way, you know. . .he'd think it was a lie."

And now, I was laughing, a dark, caustic, hateful sound.

"Don't despise me, Celia," Bertie said. "Please. I despise myself enough for both--"

"Oh, you do, do you? Hate yourself, Bertie? What's the matter," I said, suddenly rising (and, I'm not sure, but maybe it was the lack of food, the lack of sleep--something physical--but for a moment, I had jumped up so quickly, my head was reeling: small white meteorites were streaking

across the void between us; for an instant, I thought I might faint). "Oh, you really feel guilty, is that it?" I advanced toward him. "Do you know--do you have any inkling -- what you've done!"

And, of course, it was like that circle he'd traced in grease on the window. The past, like one of those cheap rides at the carnival, came sweeping round again. (Honestly, you cannot get away from them--the scenes of one's youth like magenta horses, carved of wood and champing at the bit, all the gaudy, raucus noise, and the little children, pale riders, going up and down, up and down, horrified, for the ring is only brass).

"Do you know what you've done?"

I stopped, hesitated, turned. I walked away. For there were things far worse than "no son o' mine"--though Julian, when he was well, would carry that on his face for days sometimes. He would creep down to Daddy's office in the evenings, would stand in the light of the goose-necked lamp, black moths huzzing against the window-screen. He would wait--I saw this--hoping that the "work" would be done, that the white papers piled on the right would filter across to the pile on the left (or, maybe, he wanted the wind to come and blow them all away--which it did once, too. . .oh, God, yes, that happened, too).

"Do you know what you've done, Bertie?" (And now, my

voice held no rancor. It was just sad, slow, tired sound, a wax record stuck, repeating; for there were things so much worse than a child of eight or nine pushed back on "account of bid-ness, Jule. I got bid-ness to attend to," I had heard him say, face white as marble in the ovoid of light. "Go awn now--quit pesterin' me. Go awn out an' play."

Oz, you know, was all a fraud.

I tell you this now, because until that night in the library with Bertie, it had never made any sense. Or, rather, it did, could be explained away as "bidness," and yes, absolutely, I despised him for it. I hated him, our father. For the longest time, like Bertie, I think I wanted him dead.

Oz. . .Oz--what a joke that was!

In the story, in the movie, you know, she is picked up like a leaf in the twirling house. Toto in her arms, barking, she is carried off to Oz, this dotty little girl. Her house comes down with a thud, deadly, but intact. This is the story, the enchantment to enspell a generation, or more, of pale, gawking kids who sit, mouths open, in the flickering, blue light of the color tv. This is the story.

It is also crap.

In real life, whatever "real" might mean, a tornado is not so mannerly or polite. It never arrives on cue, this deus ex machina, and it swoops down equally on the just--red shoes or blue. In "real" life, a twister is a freight train slamming the back of the head. It is death, pure and simple, no rhyme or reason, just glass shards and needles of wood, exploding paper, horizontal rain of water or urine (for you

are so frightened there in the hall, you do not know if the wetness, slashing knives across your skin, is from the outside or within). And you do not care, not with your eardrums exploding, not with you screaming, till you're hoarse, his name: "JULE! COME ON!" But Nettle is cowering in the corner of Daddy's study, head beneath the credenza, and he cannot budge her loose, though he grabs, half blown away himself, great handfuls of hairy skin and tries, in the torrent of wind, to move her. Then Daddy. In his hands, from the library, a great black heavy box I know to be the "safe": all the important papers, all our junk. He screams at me so fiercely, "FRAIDY HOLE! GET DOWN!" (meaning the basement, that claustrophobic corridor there, the only place without windows), "GET AWN DOWN!," he screams so viciously I start to run, then turn: "JULE!" And Daddy yells at him too, but he won't leave Nettle. Daddy is screaming, furious, the skin of his face distorted by the reddish, grainy wind that has come even inside.

The tornado, when I was six, didn't set down of course. Beyond shingles ripped from the roof and broken glass, the lower garden of marigolds and okra shredded into a moonscape of desolate earth, the twister skirted past, as such a thing in real life is most often apt to do. Really, it caused very little damage --beyond that moment in the doorway when he couldn't decide.

What happened there happened in a moment: me, cowering in the somewhat calmer hall, my ears crushing in the weight

of the twister's noise; Julian, ten or fifteen feet beyond, literally in hell, in a red rushing vortex of wind, trying to pull out the dog. And between us, in the doorway, Daddy: heavy safe in his hands, a moment of indecision, of rocking back and forth--Which to save? The papers or Jule?)

"Do you know, Bertie," I asked again, "do you know what the hell you've done?"

And then, in the library, he was stammering again.

"Oh," I said, not ready to relinquish the knife I'd inserted and was slowly, deliberately twisting, "not just to Daddy. But to us!"

"Celia--"

"To Julian and me! How could you let him think--"

"I never meant--"

"Fuck what you meant! I don't care what you meant! It's what you did to our family--to my brother!" (For Juley, I know, had seen that hesitancy, too, that flailing weak indecisive moment before Daddy dropped the safe and ran in, grabbing Jule roughly, pulling him and then me downstairs, saving us--the whole incident, minus that doubt, to become another story.)

And now, I was shaking my head, shaking my hands, trying to shake him, this petty jealous man, off. I whirled around and began to walk out of the room.

Bertie followed a second or so behind. He caught up with me, just as I reached the front door. He touched



my arm. I jerked violently away, knocking his hand off.

"Out!" I said, throwing open the door.

"Celia--"

"Don't you say another word to me! Julian. . ." I said, "Julian will never forgive you! Never! Not if he lives to be a hundred years old. He got the worst of it, by far, Bertie. He will never, never--"

And now, on his face, a look of total bewilderment. His lips parting (slight hint of his crooked, lower teeth), the eyes, in one solid movement, narrowing, fanning out into a look of incomprehension, incomprehensible surprise. "What?"

"Julian!" I shouted. "I don't know--he, Daddy, never was much that way with me, but with Juley, poor little Juley who couldn't even handle. . . God, Bertie," I said, honestly floundering for words, "you deserve his hate more than mine!"

"What?" he said again.

"What is it with you! Are you deaf!"

And then it was like a light in there, in his head, flickering on. I can say now, without exaggeration, the man blanched as he stood in the doorway. "My God," he whispered. "My God, Celia," he said in a voice so soft it was nearly eaten by the wind. "Sweetie. . . you don't know. . . ."

## Chapter Twenty Eight

Albert Swann was, clearly, disturbed.

And as for me, too much, too many squirming, incomprehensible things had happened for one day; honestly, I couldn't bring myself to listen another moment to his guilt-provoked, stupid nonsense. I ended up screaming at him, "Not another word!" And, I know, it's horrible, but the rage--this red, seething thing inside--just exploded there, on the porch.

"Get out!" (I was yelling this.) "Get out! Get out!" And I think I grabbed him, got him by the brown of his suit and in one, thundrous, muscled movement--which surprised even me--he was suddenly (oh, this is awful) flying down the steps.

"Don't you ever come back!" I screamed to the stunned, barely-moving figure sprawled on the flagstone path. "Come back," I said (and the timbre of my voice was suddenly so low, the words so obviously calculated and not eruptive, this frightened even me), "come back and I'll kill you."

I ran into the house again, slamming the door. I leaned against it, the vibrations of the wind--and Bertie's moaning--worming through the wood to my back. For a time, it seemed I could not catch my breath.

(In hindsight, of course, I should have listened. Later that night, it would occur to me--in that quivering, almost surreal, moment of shock and horror--that I should have heard him out, that I should not have started pummeling him and screaming the moment he said, "Jule, Jule. . . ." But somehow, on the porch, it seemed he had no right to put wings to the name, to even speak it, for he had caused my brother and me so much anguish, years of asking "why" just to look at Daddy's face; intentional or not, it hurt us the same. So he had no right to say it, "Jule," to say anything about my brother, yea or nay.)

I think I must have leaned there against the door a long time. I cannot exactly describe the feeling that night in the great hall, for it was odd and heavy ("Quart o' catshit in a pint-size jar!"--one of my Grandfather's phrases, this, but apt enough, I suppose, what with the

stuffed, almost explosive, sensation in my head and bowels.) Too much, too much. Really, this was all I could articulate at the time. Even so, this idea--too damned much to take!--rolled across the neurons like something made of lead, an iron wheel. It was slow and heavy and filled you completely up--just like that woman, I think, that lady I saw once in a book of freaks; yes, yes, my feeling must have been akin to hers, to Frieda's (surname something German), for what she did "for a living"--imagine this!--was to eat nuts, and if you want the queerer details, bolts, nails, bits of glass, the wooden legs of tables and chairs. God, she was a small woman, like me, but would have swallowed the entire world, had she had room, or her patrons, money enough, sadism enough, to see her do it. Bucket of bolts in the belly or brain--yes, there must have surely been times when she had enough, too much, when she'd performed too arduously (swallowing back her own distaste and the green bile coming up, her shredded inner soul), there must have been moments with Frieda, backstage, when she felt as I did then: too much (loggy, heavy, sick at heart, stuffed with those non-living things).

Then, Michael was laughing.

My head came slowly up and I could see him at the top of the spiral stairs, standing and looking down at me, his mouth opening into great, echoeous guffaws.

For some time, I just leaned against the door, listening.

Finally, the laughter stopped. He shook out his platinum hair, his face growing still suddenly, placid and cold, the color of ice. He almost sighed audibly, as he came down two or three steps, then stopped, his small, white hand on the railing.

"You are a twit, Celia." (Pause.)

(No response.)

He took another step or so. "Gaaaawww! But you wouldn't even listen." And now, his hand swept out across the bannister, a gesture to the door. "That man had something to tell you, something you must know. How on earth," he said, clumping down the stairs, "how in hell, on this cold, cruel earth, can you expect to understand things--"

(Nuts and bolts and heavy wheels, ready to explode!)

"Shut up, Michael."

"--when you perpetually plug up your ears with wax!"

"Go to your room." (Inside, this seething.)

(Now, down on the checkered tile): "No."

He waited. I waited, too. A standoff--clearly this, until he smiled suddenly, with half his face. There came a short explosive exhalation of air ("huh!"), a slight nodding of his head, hair very white in this light, too

much, too bright, for it almost looked different now, beneath the chandelier (its thousand icy crystals, prismatic refractions, Einsteinian in their bent); it almost made you want to close your eyes, it seemed so different: not blond at all, but white in this light, bleached out like an old man's wisp of hair.

Another exhalation, then: "I thought so. You run like a rabbit, Celia," he said, turning, walking toward the kitchen. "Really, you always have."

Annie was crying in her room.

She pretended, at first, to be asleep, but she was so tense, burrowed beneath the sheet and blanket, I knew, sitting down on the bed, it was a ruse.

"Annie?"

No answer. Eyes, in the gloomy half-light of the open door, squeezed tightly shut--not tight enough, though, to keep inside that sparkling globe of water, clinging to a lash.

"Annie?" I whispered.

And suddenly, her breath was coming like a dog's--short pants filtered through wet bubbles in her nose.

"Sweetie," I said, meaning to touch her, but touching the plastic arm of her doll (wet, too) instead. "What's wrong?"

She burrowed, full face, into the pillow. She said something, but it was garbled, muffled.

"What?"

"Gone?"

"What?"

"Is he gone, Mommy?" she said, still into the pillowcase, her voice quavering.

"Who? Michael--he's downstairs," I said.

"Not Michael!" she cried. "Him!"

"Who!"

"Him in the window," she said, half-pointing behind her, her face coming up a tiny bit from the pillow, glancing fearfully, looking quickly away.

I turned, but beyond the panes of glass, drapes wide open, there was nothing--just snow again, or maybe sleet. Frankly, I was too drained, physically and spiritually desiccated, to care. "Honey," I said, my voice clearly tired, "you must have been dreaming--"

"No." (Face back in the pillow.)

"Annie, look for yourself--"

"No."

"Oh, God. . . ." I patted her shoulder, waiting. I sighed. "You want to tell me what he looked like?"

She made a snuffly sound.

I waited with her, in part because I was supposed to (I mean, one did things like that with one's child, did one not?), partly because it seemed too hard to push myself up from the bed. I waited, all the while thinking, that pie. Damned cherry pie--who wouldn't have nightmares following--

"Mommy?" (finally). "He can't get in, can he?"

Probably, I rolled my eyes. I patted her again.

"No, no. 'Course not. He can't come in the window--that's the rule. . . Besides, your room's on the second floor, and that's another rule--" (what was I saying?). "Annie, I think you were having a dream. Sometimes when you eat junk, you--"

"Was not dreaming! Ask him!"

(God, I wanted a cigarette.)

"Ask him, Mommy."

And now, I was starting to lose what little patience I had left. "Annie, sit up," I said, trying to pull her. "Look at the damned window--there's nobody there--you were having a--"

"No," she said, resolutely. "Not him. Michael!"

"Michael?"

And now, she was looking at me, up from her nest of white. Her eyes narrowed into accusatory slits. "Mommy, he saw him, too!"

It was all falling apart. Really. Any other time, any place other than this, and I would have done it right. (Good Lord, in Nebraska--flat-earth, boring, honest Nebraska-- I would turn on her Donald Duck light, would make a great show, hunting the phantoms: for a bear, I would look in the closet; for an alligator, under the bed. "Not here," I'd tell the terrified child, then go to the dresser, begin



pulling the drawers. "Nope--just undies" is what I'd say and maybe latch onto a sock, turn it inside out, to see; or maybe if she were really scared, I'd try my best to shake him loose on the floor. And she'd say, "He's too big, Mommy, to fit there!" And I'd look at her quizically (Oh?), shake the sock again, polar bears being notorious for whittling themselves into dwarves. In Nebraska, this was how we dealt with ghosts. We stuffed them into socks or pink lace panties; we said, Oh, they must be here then, beneath a book, and pretended to be surprised when they were not. We looked high and low and never found a face among the toys that wasn't plastic.

But here, in Harlow, in the bone-chiselling cold--the worst of which I even then realized was inside rather than out--here, among the ticking clocks running down and the wooden creaking floors, here with that little monster downstairs--and he, goddamit, was going to the hospital! come hell or high water, I already knew I would take him there in the morning--here, in this place of so much death, we were lousy at hunting ghosts, even worse at playing "parent." Here, we called nonsense "nonsense!" We said, "Dammit, Annie, you dreamed it! Now go to sleep!" We rose from the bed, jerked the draperies shut. We said, "Stop being such a whiney baby!" and ignored the moon-white face, those saucer-eyes, rimmed with red. Here, we said, "You didn't see a man in the window," and turned

our back on her, closed the door, ignoring completely that childish fury: "Who said it was a man!")

## Chapter Twenty Nine

(What Bertie was trying to say was--)

"Enough," I said, standing before the open white doors. "Michael, I've asked you before"--words preternaturally calm, the timbre of my voice modulated, forced and dishonest--"it's late. Annie's sleeping. Turn it down."

(What Bertie was trying to tell me was unimportant because--)

He looked at me, up from the darkness of the parlor, and in that look, hatred. Or maybe, more to the point, it was contempt that glazed his eyes--contempt which is even worse for it is icy, a bloodless emotion, there being no bond, say, between a man and the roach just scuttling from the wall, no tie between a species that is warm-blooded

and one that is cold. It is a far worse thing than hatred, such contempt; born of that mating--superiority and fear--it fans across the face mere seconds before the boot stomps down.

(It was totally unimportant, this news of Bertie's, because, you see, history--)

"Dammit, Michael," I said again, head jerking toward that machine--(what do you call it? a ghetto-blaster? doo-wappa--do-wappa--do-wappa-do!)--that damned machine in the middle of the room, playing over and over again that same, stupid song! "Turn it off!" I said (and the little monster was literally dancing to it!). I said, "Turn it--"

(--history always repeats itself. That's the crux. The crock. The whole damned thing's a circle. A finger tracing grease on the window. War, peace, war--peace circling round again. The ball of the earth going round the sun, itself a ball--seasons chasing each other about like a white dog does its tail.

Look: In Harlow, when we were small, there was this circus once--or, no, "circus" is too grand a term, that's stretching it. What it was, at best, was a carnival, one of those cheap amusements that packs itself up in half a day, in half a dozen little trucks, and heads off for another little town.

They set it up in the square, right there by the cannon. It had all the typical things, too, everything one could expect: great, gaudy wheel, sparkling like the stars

of heaven; half-naked Chicana ("From Egypt! Cleopatra's Dance!"), telling fortunes to farm-hands betwixt six daily shows; games of chance (all rigged); corn dogs and candy and rough, slouching men running "The Ride of Your Life!"--cigarettes rolled in their white cotton sleeves--"The Ride of Your Life" (two bits) that maybe was a bunch of giant tea-cups you could sit in and spin, or tiny airplanes suspended on wires you flew round and round, or maybe was a wheel you stood up in, that twirled you so hard you couldn't fall out when the bottom--"Oooh!" "Aaaah!"--suddenly dropped out.

Really, it was everything anyone could ever expect. It even had animals. Another two bits and you could see a two-headed snake. There was a dinosaur, preserved in ice. A wolf (half-Husky, half-Shepherd). A bird that said, "Don't touch. Don't touch. Howdy. Don't touch"--and would bite if you didn't obey. And, of course, straight from the "Jungle of Africa! Wild Beasts!" which was, really, just one lion, a fat sleepy thing in a cage with fleas.

Don't misunderstand: we thought it was great! Juley and I ate junk and rode the rides till we were sick (I, literally, beside a striped tent); Eddie loved it, too, even after the parrot got him. Really, we spent a magical Saturday down at the square, for each of us had two dollars. On Sunday, they were scheduled to leave.

Who knows what happened?

Perhaps one of those fierce-looking men that ran

the Loop-the-Loop had had too much to drink the night before; perhaps his head was aching and spinning in the bright morning sun, which he saw in a bleary-eyed haze. Perhaps someone said, "Get the lead out, Pete!" and he groaned, thinking Hair o' the dog is whut I need, but he couldn't find it there in the smelly Rambler, and went to work instead, "packin' 'er up."

Who knows what happened? Really.

In the blink of an eye, someone was careless; Fortune smiled--her wheel spinning round. Who knows (and who cares)? For one moment that old sleepy lion was scratching an ear in his cage, sunlight streaming through the bars, a thousand dusty motes--one second he was scratching his ear, the next his cage was upside down, and after a moment's stunned stillness (it caught him in a yawn), suddenly, he was out.

Free. Loose. Escaped. (Lost.)

The last the carnies saw, he was running up the street.

I don't suppose I need tell you, the town went nuts. Someone called Jim (he was very, very young then), and he got in his squad car, turned the loud-speaker on, and in a voice that just quivered with urgency and self-importance, drove up and down the streets, blasting, "STAY IN YOUR HOUSES! PEOPLE OF HARLOW! STAY IN YOUR HOUSES!"--which didn't work, of course, Jim not bothering, at first, to mention the word

"lion," to tell people a beast was loose and such; so what happened was that almost every ambulatory soul (even in pajamas) ran right out on their lawns:

"Whut's goin' awn!"

"--'mergency--"

"Jimmy-Joe, whut the hell're you doin'!" (This, from Sheriff Randall's dad, coming out his Cape Cod house.)

"Whut!"

"Whut!"

And then somebody at the firehouse heard and started blasting away with the siren. (We even heard it, at breakfast, way up on the hill.) And it was really stupid, this warning, because they mixed up the signals. Two short blasts, one long, repeat--this, everyone knew, was for fire (Gideon calling the volunteers in to douse a blaze, say, in somebody's barn). Short, long, short, long--that was another: twister in sight. Finally, short, short, short, long (and I always thought that if I heard this--this, perhaps, the most feared one of all--I would just sit on the porch, looking east, lean back in the wicker rocker, my feet on the rail, and wait. . . you know, go out with something like Beethoven's fifth still ringing in my charred little ear); this blast, of course, was--

"Ruskies!"

"Omigawd! It's the Roo-shins!"

(As I said, at the firehouse, someone mixed the signals up. Not that they had one for lions, naturally.

Then, too, in fairness, it was the Cold War--a thing taken so seriously, they even had drills at the school: they made us jump to a count of five, the schoolbell by the clock ringing; they had us hide beneath the gummy tops of our desks. . . .Lunacy?)

"Sweet Jesus, it's the Roo-shins!" Mildred Chenoweth was screaming to her neighbors.

Lunacy?

Yes. It was insane. Especially when you consider that at that moment Mildred was screaming, clutching the gold cross about her neck (fearing, no doubt, that two thousand years of Western civilization was about to go up in a black puff of smoke), at that very instant, you must know, the lion had made it to the Bit.

He could hardly breathe, he was such a sorry beast; he knelt down by the muddy water, panting so hard the grass lay flat beneath his head. He had been in that cage, I guess, for years; he was in such sorry shape, heart pumping wildly, breath coming not at all save in wheezing rasps, he could barely lap the water to his brown, chalk-soft teeth.

Of course, it was insane. It was awful. And the most terrible part of all was that they killed him.

Oh, not with guns, of course--though there were plenty of men that morning, stoney-faced, putting on boots, zipping up their heavy, winter parkas (for fear of the claws), loading



rifles and shotguns onto their pick-up trucks' racks. Certainly, within an hour, half a dozen "posses" had formed, and those that weren't riding were patrolling the streets on foot, peering into bushes and doghouses, looking under cars, behind white sheets hung out the day before, fluttering like sails in the wind. (Yes, gunfire once--someone, I heard, shot at a Spitz, but beyond that, things were pretty calm.) No, they didn't shoot the old lion. What happened was what Eddie said:

"They'll hunt 'im down! Hound that lion down like a mad dog!" And then, Eddie was racing over to the screen door in the kitchen. "Please, Daddy! Please, can't I go?"

"You're not about to leave this house, young man"-- (Mother, chopping beans, for it was Sunday and the maid was off)--"Besides, it's probably just a hoax."

"Is not!" said Eddie, who was all of nine or ten. Then he ran over to where Daddy was sitting with the paper; he started tugging on his sleeve: "Please, Daddy! You got a gun. You an' me could go out there an' hunt that booger ourselves!"

Daddy laughed. "I don't think so, son."

"Why not!"

Then Mother was looking at him sharply. In horrible frustration, Eddie said, "Oh, shoot!" He went back over to the screen door, pressed his nose flat into the mesh: "They're gonna hound 'im to death--an' I'm gonna miss it all!"

Which, I think, is what happened. Eight, maybe ten

hours later, they finally found him by the Bit. Someone said, "heart attack"--though I have no way of knowing if that was true or not, lion physiology as foreign to me as that thing was, dancing in my house. All I know is that when they found him, toward evening, he lay in the tall grass, tawny and still, flies already buzzing about his head.

And yet, for all of this, I cannot help but wonder (and this is a question I have carried with me since that hot, shining day in July): need it have been so?

Did it have to happen that way? As Eddie prophesized? Eddie who later on the courthouse steps had on his face a kind of gloating, human contempt upon seeing the lion's body. Eddie who, with the other boys, stood around, poking the nose with a stick. Must it have gone that way? Why not another--as Julian said.

And it was Julian who, that very afternoon, the three of us trapped indoors like insects, bumping our faces against the screens to look out, it was Juley who first opened the way to possibilities. For when Eddie said, "They're gonna hound that lion down! Gonna kill 'im with their guns," it was Juley (dream-eyed, staring at the cool, green copse) who said, "Maybe not."

And it occurs to me now that there were many possibilities; at least three beyond that spasm of the heart, its collapse: three possible futures, each equally believable. Perhaps Pete, by four fifteen, would sober up; perhaps he would

track the beast by his prints (fat-toed markings through a bed of zinnias); maybe he would spy a tuft of yellow fur, stuck to a twiggy bush, would call, "Bonga! Bonga!" and the lion would come yawning back, lured to his cage again with corn dogs from the fair.

Not ideal--this: to exist simply, one's cage a dozen shafts of sun and dusty swimming motes, no room to move save when one turns (round and round), with scarcely space enough to scratch that flea, biting the back of the ear.

Or, maybe, too, Eddie's version. Another possibility. A hundred men (blood spoor in their nostrils), a circle of death coming nearer. Guns raised (shakily or not), blasting. Complete, utter annihilation.

Or Jule's.

"He'll get away."

(Eddie, snorting.) "Will not, turd."

"Will so. That lion'll hide in the woods, he will. He'll hide so they'll never catch 'im. He'll 'scape!"

Yes. . .but then, what?

What, Juley, what? What would he do then?

For this is the point of the story, the central issue, the rational purpose of this digression. He could escape, most certainly. That beast might escape, dear brother, and it could be grand. (I have seen this myself, in revery). The old, tawny thing, free at last and out there still--even as I speak--wind, pluffing out the mangey fur, eyes clear

and yellow as suns--every touch of rheum and age and human mistreatment, gone. An excellent ending, this: that he be out there still, walking like a king in the swaying wheat, mistaking the tall grassy planes for savannah and veldt, needing nothing beyond himself to survive--beast elevated to the level of immortal myth.

"He'll 'scape."

True. But drop the punctuation, Jule, and you've got the other side, its twin. Hellscape. Teeth grown strong on human flesh. Red maw, growling. Claws sharp, slashing through razor grass, briars, even the wood of doors. The beast could escape, Jule, but be beastly. Ghastly. Hellish. The beast might itself be death, and once loosed, freed to roam in the wheat, on the hills, oh, Jule--once he is loosed. . . .)

"Turn the goddam thing off, Michael," I said that night to the boy, dancing in the parlor. "It's almost midnight. Too late to be playing. . ."

Silence. Finally, from the darkened room: "I agree."

I waited.

Do-wappa--do-wappa--do. . .

"Well?"

"Well, what, Celia?"

(A breath.) "I said it was too damned late to be playing--"

"And I said," he told me, his voice suddenly deeper than I'd ever heard before, deep as a man's, in fact, so low and echoing in the dark, empty room, for a second I thought,

Who the hell--"and I said, Celia," he continued, now slowly moving towards me in the shadows, "I'm through playing. Not gonna play at it anymore."

I admit it. I was suddenly too frightened to think straight. Involuntarily, I backed up, towards the light.

And you could see it: he was nowhere near the radio that was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, nowhere close at all. But the doo-woppa abruptly stopped.

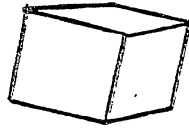
I could feel my heart pounding in the silence. And my eyes--my skin!--such cold! Blasts of it from the room.

And the voice there in the shadows, low and hissing: "Lissen, asshole!" The tone of a gangster. "Lissen!" it hissed, coming into the light. "We're gonna do it for real. Starting now. We're gonna play for keeps!"

## Chapter Thirty

(What happened next. . . .What happened the rest of that freezing night in Harlow, Oklahoma. . .all night long, you see, until the gray came of the morning, the yellow tongues of that conflagration. . . .What happened next, I know--absolutely know--you won't believe. Hell, I'm not certain you can even believe Falconer here, who at this very moment, this exact second my pen in scratching a thin, blue bar across this t--yes, that one there--or putting, godlike, a head on this i. . .and I'm doing all of this, because I'm scared still and hesitating, wasting time, would maybe proceed to doodle, if I could draw anything

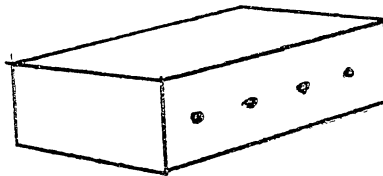
other than boxes like this:



or this:



or this one here:



(small, geometric boxes I sometimes draw holes in, on the sides, and wonder, in a rather stupid, abstracted way, what kind of thing is living in there, because with holes, you see, the boxes could be cages, there might be cats in there or peacocks, ready to be loaded on a ship to China. . .really, almost anything, you know, is possible); but, as I said, I am wasting time--mine and yours. And I am doing it because I am scared. I'm scared you won't believe it. I mean, if you won't even accept the fact that at this moment, this very instant, Mr. Falconer is here with me in the dayroom, lying on the hard tile floor and, literally, beating time on it with his head--beating his head, if you want the truth, into a rather bloody and unattractive mess, mouth flecked with foam and screaming, "Devils! Devils!"--screaming so loudly, making such a bother of himself, that Charlotte, in the corner, on the green plastic divan, is crying, holding a foot in one hand, great globules of water streaming down

her face like liquid glass. . . .I mean, if this scene-- so common in places like this--strikes you as odd, perhaps even unbelievable that human beings (who laughed once in their cribs and picked wild lazy susans on summer afternoons, who went to school and studied sums and Christopher Columbus's most important dates, who did, really, all the things that you and I have done) could sink so far down into the abyss, their gray-green neurons misfiring, even to the point of blood splashing out upon a white, linoleum floor, those nerve cells forking such queer lightning into the hills and valleys of their meaty little brains (and now, you really should be here to see this, for Jo , the day-nurse on the ward, has come running in, on her heels, a fat, huffing youth of an orderly, his face a landscape of cysts and scars; they have come running in here with us, are having quite a time grabbing Falconer by his skinny, deliriously-trembling arms; they are pulling up on him, yanking so hard you can see the sweat-stains--almost perfect circles of dark--beneath his pits. . . probably, I should help them, but he is kicking and kicking hard). . .you see, if such psychic glitches do not move you, any more than they move me, how can I hope to touch you? If Falconer cannot kick them hard enough, one shoe-lace having come undone, hole in his sole, how can I do it, with words? How can I kick you deeply--in the ass or air--deeply enough to make you believe that that night in the house it was small and horrid and white?)

"Michael?"(More of a whisper, I think, than a word,



if it was even that. Perhaps it was nothing but a sharp inhalation of air--that sucking sound you make, touching flame or the head of a pin, air from the outside drawn in and caught in the throat--for it was what I said as it came from the shadows, toward me: it was small, dwarfish, horrid, its face like a toadstool, puffed and white. I am sure, it was involuntary, a spasm of the muscles, how I moved back or moved at all.)

"Look how she trembles," it said.

The mouth, when it opened, was blackish-blue--

"How she shakes and quakes," it said, laughing (great dark maw), "makes a mess on the floor!"

(Which wasn't true--I don't think it was true--but just then, I remember my heel butted back into the riser of the lowest step; it laughed and I began to fall.)

Elbow--"crazy-bone"--hitting a tread. Small moan. Back.

"Oh, how tedious," it said.

Me, trying to recover enough (courage? sanity?) to inch farther away, up the stairs.

"Celia, how very tedious and typical you are!"

(I was breathing hard now, from fear, couldn't seem to catch the breath and hold it in, my head, really, swimming--a thousand thoughts, non-thoughts, feelings, in the midst of this jumble a void: can't be--.)

"Honestly!" it said (and the voice that came snivelling out--could you even call them lips? those white, puffy ridges

curling round the words? the white--"flesh," was it?--changing abruptly to the same, beetle-black of its eyes--the voice that came out had taken on an odd, almost cultured tone.) "Oh, my! Oh, my, my, my!" it cried (same inflection as--what? British valet?) "My, but you always adhere to the same silly routine, don't you? " it sniffed, distractedly waving its stubby white hand. "Always and eternally the same!"

(And now, honestly, its tone was bored.)

"Always that look of horror. And really, you don't comprehend," it said, "you haven't the foggiest notion of how silly it looks. Always the same! Blanching and backing away, blowing like BeeBee's zephyrs--"

(I could scarcely breathe.)

"--oh, that stupid BeeBee," it said, almost strolling out now to the middle of the great hall, giving me time, a tiny bit of it, to pull myself up another step, get farther away (because, I'll tell you! when something like this--a dwarfish little monster, a freak of toadstool paleness, white and pasty as snow--comes stepping out of the shadows of a darkened room at night, stepping right toward you, you do not stop to ponder metaphysics! you do not stop to ask yourself what it is, or even if it is at all! the blood is too busy boiling to the brain, for anything much beyond the next step up!). "--that whiney little brat!" And now, it had stopped. It looked at me, askance, black orbs glittering beneath the chandelier. "That BeeBee," it sniffed. "You want wind?"

it asked.

(Expecting an answer? Pulling myself up, another half-step.)

"You want wind--I'll give you the real thing," it said, "not some sickly-sweet little zeph." And suddenly, it spread the stubs out wide. It breathed in (inhalation greater than my own) and blew--

(And honest to God, you don't question this either. The hands go flying up to the ears, the rushing air around you so loud, cold. You hunch over, trying not to breathe it in, for the stench of it, of It. You try to protect your face, your eyes, from the crystal drops, unhinged from the light, blowing all around, smashing on the tiles and stairs, furniture, shattering like bullets--"STOP!")

Maybe I screamed that--I don't know.

Suddenly, the fierce wind calmed, disappeared altogether.

I looked through my fingers, at the thing below, which seemed surprised, as It was wrinkling its head, that patch of paste sweeping toward wisps of white hair (clumps of it, now, blown about, sticking up at odd angles). "Well," It pouted, lower lip out, "I was just trying to show you the difference."

I sat there on the steps, breathing through my nose, chest, heaving in and out--frozen.

"I just wanted to let you see, Celia, the difference between my wind and the baby's--"

"Baby," I whispered--for the first time, thinking of her. Upstairs.

"Baby B!" It said. "Balaam" (as if I should know)--  
"Baby Balaam--B.B.!"

Annie. Right now. Upstairs--

I pulled myself up another step, another.

"Really, this is tediousity, Celia."

Another.

"Oh, quit shaking, will you? Quit trembling and looking like Jule."

I glanced up, quickly--eight or ten more.

It sniffed. "If you think I'm going to let you get to the top, to her. . .well, you're only fooling yourself."

For a second, I didn't move.

"Look," It said (and this was queer, but clearly It seemed trying to be reasonable), "I can pull you down with a mere thought. Or, if I choose, fly up there, to get you. But let's not be childish, Celia. Why don't you just do it on your own. Stand up like a grown woman, walk down the stairs--let's go in the kitchen for tea."

Tea!

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

Another step, which angered It. Suddenly, something furious arched across the pasty face, then just as quickly as it had come, vanished. Now, It was smiling, wagging a finger, as if some wonderful idea had just occurred--"I know," It said, "I know. We could have Annie down, to join us," It offered, coyly cocking Its head toward me. "That is, if

you'd prefer. . . ."

I pushed myself up to standing, grabbed at the rail for support. "Don't touch her," I said, blustering, trying now to keep the fear--any trace of it--from my voice. "You leave her alone. She has nothing to do with you."

It stood there, staring.

"Do you hear me, Snow?" I said. "It is Snow--isn't it?"

## Chapter Thirty One

(Melodrama. Cheap sensationalism. The stuff of horror films and gaudy novellettes--none of it working at all. I mean, it's funny and awful, too, what I just did now, that last part, all that crap, stuff and nonsense, about It. It with its wisps of hair, its foul breath, its snivelling little speech. It's funny and awful--or awfully funny--how we love to keep things secret, close to the chest, playing it to the hilt, poker-faced, as though the whole, damned thing were just poker, a game of chance.

I apologize. I wasn't fooling anyone. Not even with that stuff about dotted i's, Bic pen scrawling out the cross-beams of t's. It is perfectly obvious we both knew, knew simultaneously, knew the moment the thing came out of the

darkened parlor exactly what it--he--was. We even knew his name, for God's sake. Snow. Snowbelly. And, sure enough, he had that, too--enormous jelly-belly of white flesh, hanging paunch, even in Michael's small clothes.

I should have just said, "Well, Snow--at last, we meet," or "Goddam your soul to hell, Snowbelly," or some other trite cliché, and maybe if I'd done this, the hundred and twenty year old chandelier from France might not have been broken, smashed to tiny pieces and bits in the hall in a juvenile, demonic, display of power. And maybe you wouldn't be mad at me, for trying to fool you, hook you into a lie; maybe you wouldn't be snorting contempt: cloud-sitting, if that's the case, or reclining in a Lazy-Boy chair, this story in your lap, the smoke from your carved German pipe curling like faint Medusan snakes about your hair--like his smoke did, when he sat at the kitchen table, two feet away, and took my cigarettes, saying, "Good invention, these--cancer's fun.")

"But are you. . .real?" For, at the table, the hot, camomille tea that Mother had bought in a small, pink tin, was burning my tongue, bringing me back to a kind of life--chancey or no. "Are you really real?"

"What do you think?" he said, blowing now on his, breath so cold it crusted over the top of his cup with ice.

(Oh, don't misunderstand! His breath was foul. It was cold and awful and tainted with the stench of rot

--or, perhaps that's too mild really to do it justice.

For what it was was decaying flesh, faint hint of a road kill. It was like something that would waft out of that nightmare mouth, colored the same bluish-black of his lemur-like eyes--these cold, too, so much so they could stop the heart at a single glance, cold, but not unexpressive.)

"Honestly, Celia," Snow said. "What do you think?"

(So frightened the words could scarcely make it to the air): "That I've. . .lost it?"

"What's it?"

Stupidly, I shook my head. All the while, I was trying to keep down the gorge, that bile or whatever was there that kept threatening to come up.

"If you aren't sure," he said, holding out his hand, "touch. Pinch, if you like--"

I closed my eyes--

"You're always doing that!"

--closed them in the ghastly bright kitchen and looked inside--waves and waves, peristaltically rising, the yellow bile. "I know."

And all the time, of course, quivering at the sleeping at the edge of consciousness, there was the baby. Annie. God, even Michael; now, Michael, too--

"Touch!"

"Which proves nothing!" I said, so much anger behind the exclamation, it fairly jolted me back to the moment.

Then Snow was smiling, hand slowly coming near: "Shall I then touch you?"



Before he'd even finished, I'd jerked back in my chair--could I run? could I knock the table over and make it up the stairs before--and suddenly, there was this quirky jerking sensation beneath one of my eyes (tremor, tic). I put my hand up to it, hoping, I suppose, he wouldn't see.

Snow smiled again. He blew on his tea (a virtual ball of ice there, in the cup). "Thought so. . .wimp."

I took a breath. "Where is he?"

"The schiz?"

No. (Small wag of the head.) "The boy."

And now, Snowbelly was looking at me curiously, dark orbs glistening. "Which?"

"You know which--"

Feigned surprise--.

(He is playing with me!)

--a fake exaggerated look of confusion: "Which?"

How should I know which you mean? There have been many boys in this house, many tiny little hupricks, many, many boys, as you yourself--"

"Michael!" (Teasing and playing with me! Like a cat!)

"What have you done with him!"

"Oh," he said, slowly, as if suddenly catching on, "that boy--"

"What the hell have you done with him!"

"DON'T!" he boomed suddenly, the voice so loud it rattled the glass of the window, the tea-cup on the saucer (though perhaps that was me, my hand, in shock). Then,

softer, abruptly back in control: "Don't raise your voice to me. I do not like it when animals howl. . ." He looked away for a moment, sniffing. "Michael?" he said, looking back. "Oh, you know where Michael is."

(Asleep? a faint hope rising--upstairs in his room? for wasn't it Annie who had said--)

"You do know where he is," Snow said. "Why," (coily) "you saw him for yourself, just today. I believe you even--"

Oh, my God. . . . the bile so hot, trying to purge itself. The image flooding back: tree and shadow, dirty, swilling water--

--touched him. With your hand," Snowbelly said, and then began to chuckle. "Oh, but I forgot--touch proves nothing." And then: laughter--great hiccuping guffaws, Snowbelly slapping his knee, and I was hunching over, half-falling from my chair, back bent oddly and aflame but not so hot as that clear yellow stuff in my throat, on the floor.

"Oh," he was saying, "my! Touch means absolutely not at all anything, does it? Touch a hose--could be a snake! Touch a rose--could be a fake! Touch a brother--could be a lo--"

"Shut up!"

--ther! Thweet lithle lother--oh, my, my, my! Thnow hath a lithp!"

And now, I was down on the floor--hands and knees, trying to crawl away.

"Tho thoon?" he said. "Muth you go tho thoon?"

"Liar."

"My, but this is tedius. . ."

Filthy, little liar, the door, a few feet away, and then the hall, will get up and run--

"Stop," he said, "oh, really do stop." His voice, an imitation of boredom.

One or two more tiles and then--

"STOP!"

Again, the window panes shaking--sound like a sonic boom, jet--and suddenly the floor beneath my hands and knees was growing cold--or, no, hot. "Ow!" And I was jumping about, it hurt so much, the tiles touching the skin cold as a pump handle in February, so cold it made you stick, made you rip the skin off just to extricate yourself. "Stop it, Snow," I cried. "Stop it, it hurts!" The tiles now, solid ice--like a lake--mirrored, the body falling onto itself. "Stop it, please, Snow! Please, stop--"

And then it was gone.

I lay on the floor in a heap, panting--my hand fanning slowly out across the tiles, roughened by grains of dirt.

"That's better," he said.

And maybe I was even crying, too. "What do you want?"

Silence.

And my head was turned away; I couldn't see him. I just lay there, skinned palm touching dirt, cool tile. "What do you want, Snow? Me?"

No answer.

"What!" And, really, I'm sure I was crying then, face pressed down on the floor. From somewhere, I could hear this rap, rap, rapping. I didn't even care that it was my heart. "Why are you doing this? What do you want from us?" I said, and from someplace, I got the strength to raise myself up from the filthy floor, slowly turn my head to the table. "What do you want, Snow?" I said, but he was gone.

## Chapter Thirty Two

I lay there on the floor, I don't know how long, staring at the empty table (he had even pushed back his chair in place). From time to time, there came the knocking-- such a hollow sound this, like a rock on glass or wood, a vacant sound, unpinnable; you couldn't tack it down as to direction, and you didn't care--no, stop it! such confusion you make with names, Celia, all these you's and tiny i's. The point is, as I lay there on the cool, hard floor, I knew, from the sound, I was losing it; my heart was giving out, this cold, hard thing in my chest; and it's funny, I didn't care.

Then: "Mommy?"

My head went up.

Annie, standing in the doorway to the hall, hair across her face, rubbing her eyes. "Mommy," she said, still half-sleeping, I think, for the soft whineyness of the tone, "aren't you going to get it?"

And then I was on her: hugging, pulling her tightly to myself, "Baby--oh, baby. . ." I was hugging and rocking her, arms pressing her so hard, she began to squirm.

"Mommy!"

Suddenly, I became aware of two distinct things: my fear for her, this presenting itself as a spasm in my chest--dull, heaving thudding--a feeling and sound altogether different from the other thing, the rapping, knocking--

"My God," I whispered, into her hair. "We've got to get out of here!"

Probably, my terror transmuted to her, an electric pulse, body to body, for now she had stiffened and pulled back: "Mommy!"

"Shhh. . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Be quiet, Annie, listen."

And she did, we did. Above her snuffly breath, I heard the rapping--

(She, in a whisper): "It's been doing that the longest time--"

"Hush." Where? For a moment, the rapping (this weak regular little noise) seemed, at least from the vantage of

the doorway to the great hall, to be coming from one of the front rooms--the parlor, maybe. Maybe at the window.

We listened for a few seconds more: rap, rap--then silence. Rap, rap, rap--and now it seemed to be coming from another place, different window, perhaps, or--

"Oh, God," I whispered. "We've got to get out." And I stood up, ignoring the flashing pain in my back. I grabbed her hand, began running with her toward the front door. The sounds shifted closer. I stopped, whirled her around, began running back to the kitchen, through it, past the maid's room--

"We going out!" she cried.

"Don't talk!" I commanded, pushing open the door to the garage. I peered in. Nothing. Pulled her over to the car--

"But Mommy! I don't have my shoes--"

"Forget them. Annie--"

(And now she was balking a little): "or Cherry either!"

"To hell with the doll!" I said, swinging open the back door of the Mercedes, pushing her in.

"Mommy!" she wailed, now really frightened.

"Be quiet!" I said, and I ran to the big, hinged door, hesitated, hand on the wood, listening. I heard nothing now but the wind. I grabbed the handle and, slowly, trying to make as little of that creaky grating sound as possible, lifted it up.

Outside, darkness. Snow falling, wind whipping it about.

I raced back to the car, slid in, felt the side of the wheel with my hand, then sat there (no more than a second, I know, but it seemed like an hour of dumb, stunned--): "Oh, shit!" The key wasn't there.

Annie was curled on the seat, staring. I saw her in the rear view mirror as I reached over and locked the doors. "Stay here," I said, in a voice as hard and mean as I could make it. "I'll get the damned keys."

I jumped out, locking her in.

Back into the house--the rapping, now, in the back, at the window of--what?--the maid's room?--running past it to the kitchen again. Yanking one of the drawers, hand racing with the eye through the junk (strings and bottlecaps, traps)--"Oh, shit."

Where had I left it?

In my purse--but where was that?

Library.

And suddenly I was running again, bare feet slapping on the cold marble tiles, heart about to burst.

(And it was all somehow quite typical, this, quite true to character, in hindsight--which is what this place here, the hospital, is for. Yes, if it is anything, this place--and as I put this down, commit it now to paper, words of squirrely ink, I am in the day-room, again; hours ago, they took Falconer away, have already washed the floor--but



if it is anything, this place of sterility and white, white tile, it is like that rear-view mirror in the car that night; they make you glance there, despite the terror, and what you see, curled in the back seat, is not your daughter or tiny white son, but yourself.. Your own little self. Its horrified stare.

And as I write this, now, thinking back, I see myself racing about that night--trite, but like a chicken with its brain on the slaughter-house floor; quakey little bird, a St. Vitus dance of nerves and feathers and blood--furious automaton, scratching in the filth for its head. Trite.

True. For all my life, I had lost things. Keys--oh, yes, the goddam keys, most certainly, I had lost my share of those. Brushes. Combs. Socks. The detritus of a lifetime, of several lifetimes, perhaps, for things were always vanishing, getting lost--eaten by the washing machine, laundered and flushed away, or God only knows where all that stuff ended up, what dark, little holes and corners to which things ultimately found their way.

So, my hunting and pecking and scratching about for the keys that night was not a surprise, for I was always *been* losing such things: keys and people, losing my lunch (two whole months of that, one summer, head hung over the crusty rim of the bowl in my bath--crusty and smelling, oh, awful, for no matter how much she pleaded, Pearlie, the maid, I

would not let her in to clean, said, "No, Pearlie, no--I'll do it myself."

A quizzical look, her wide eyes narrowing into slits: "Girl, you sick agin?"

No response.

"Girl, I is gonna tell yo' folks--"

"I am not sick!" was what I told her, making my voice low so it wouldn't carry to the hall.

"You is, too! Smell it on yo' breaf."

"I'm just--just--" (just trapped there, in her dark and worried eyes, just looking for a way, dammit, out!) "I'm just trying to lose weight."

"Lose weigh'--Lor', girl, you skinny 'nuff as it is t' fall down a rabbit ho'! What you doin'?" She said, and now, she was really growing concerned. "You not stickin' yo' finger down yo' thro'!"

I bit my lower lip at the lie. "The other girls-- at school--they all--"

"Good Gawdamighty! Chil', what you wanna go lookin' like that Twiggy fo'! Stickin' yo' finger down--what you think? You think any man gonna like take hol' that stick?"

But what could I do? It was too awful, too horrible to tell her! And if I did, she'd just run and tell Mother and--

"She a awfo' thing, Cee--tha' Twiggy. Look like a stick. Now, I tellin' you," and now, perhaps it was the

mother in her, for she stood there in the middle of my bedroom, shaking the dirty dustrag at me, "you bes' lissen. You stop frowin' up, hear? Stop it righ' now! You needs yo' dinna'."

I pursed my lips.

"'Cause if you don'--I tellin' you--I gonna go righ' down an' tell yo' Ma. Yo' Pa an' yo' Granpa, too. Keep it up, gal, an' they gonna do wif you what they done wif that crazy Ju'. Put you in the hospital--straight you ou' too."

And then she was gone. She closed the door behind her, muttering, "that Twiggy--oh, she name righ'--no man wanna touch her wif a twenny foo' po'!"

I lay back down on the mussy bed, feeling awful--hating to lie to her, but not able to bring myself to say what was wrong, to tell her that I was--

And, oh, God, it hurt, too. It hurt so bad to be sick--all the time, for the last few months--oh, why had I done it?

Honestly, at that point, I think I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life. (Snow be damned! All of Jule's demons--they did not compare with this! Gasping and hacking at night into my pillow, throwing up in the day, so tired I could barely move. All the craziness in the world meant nothing compared to--). And probably, I rolled off the bed. It felt better somehow to walk, to pace about the pinkish room, holding my aching belly, and imagining--no, really, seeing their faces. Mother's particularly. How they'd look (and sometimes the fantasy was even, perversely delicious),

how one morning they'd rush in and there'd be shouts and screaming and Mother, for once, falling into a crying, white-faced fit on the floor, how she'd be bawling and pulling out her stiff, oh, so "perfect" hair, all the while holding my (cold, white, very dead) hand. Yes, sometimes, as bad as it felt to see myself, arms politely crossed, laid out dead in my bed, sometimes too I almost enjoyed thinking about it. Particularly, when it came to her.

What nonsense life was!

How useless and pointless, pitiless!

And I don't remember, of course, exactly what followed that altercation with the maid--my horrible lies. But probably, sick as I was, I did what I'd been doing for the last year or so, even since I turned thirteen--

Short and pointless and pitiless!

--so, why the fuck not!

Probably, I went over to the dresser, second drawer on the right from the bottom. Probably, I reached down, way, way down below the bulky winter sweaters, and pulled one out. A match, too. Probably, I moved like a sulky, little child to the window, stopping to listen first for sounds in the hall. Hearing nothing, no doubt, I sat on the sill, put the cigarette to my lips, lit it.

Pitiless!

I took a drag. What the hell! I already had cancer. Was dying by inches, had been for months--what difference could smoking make now?)

But you see what I mean--don't you? (Damn. Again that problematic pronoun.) It is, though, perfectly clear, is it not, how I was always and forever in a state of loss?

Keys, yes. Lunch. People. Bits and pieces of myself. Even time. And now, this is a strange thing to admit, but my memory --for remembrance is, I think, akin to seeing things clearly in the first place--my memory was often quite faulty. And it was odd, because I'd do well enough in school: 1492, 1776, 1812, 1898 (land run in Oklahoma), 1945 (dropping the bomb). I always did well enough with books and such, could swallow with the best of them those squiggly lines of knowledge, parrot back the words as though they had meaning in themselves, sit back down again at my desk, polite and folded hands. It's odd, but though I could do this academic nonsense adequately, even well, there were other things--quivering, obscure bits of time and space, yes, often with Jule--that just seemed to vanish in the haze.

Really, sometimes it was like trying to capture the past as though it were a butterfly or fish, the net in one's hands too full of holes to do the job; you'd see it, flash of color above a thistle, silver scales gleaming, enticing, just beneath the refracted plane of the water's surface--you'd see it and swoop for the capture, come up empty, in your hands, a nullity of air.

My point is this.

It is not at all surprising, what with all the nonsense floating and swimming about in my brain, what with feeling I

had no brain, no reliable, certitude of mind, it simply does not surprise me--nor should it you--that I raced about the house that night like a decapitated fowl on sawdust. I suppose you could say I was looking for my head, along with the keys, and that when I found them, both, it was just too late.

The damned purse had fallen beneath the sofa. When I finally made it back to the garage with the key, the rapping had stopped. And so did my heart. To see the back door of the Mercedes open, light shining on nothing but the seats, low, dying huzz of the buzzer.

My heart simply stopped functioning. For a moment, at least. And then I looked up. Past the empty car to the great square hole beyond. I looked and saw him standing there--big as life! Standing alone. Reeling, covered with snow.)

## Chapter Thirty Three

I suppose I knew the moment I saw him, standing in the open door. There was something about the pale ghostly light of the snow, falling behind him, the improbable angle of his stance (how tenuous he seemed--reed-thin and obscure, insubstantial, as fantastic as a tree in hoarfrost, emerging from the fog). Perhaps it was just that vague, inexplicable something we have always been reputed to share (B screaming up from a restless sleep in Denver, hands gripping the sheets in clammy terror the very moment, that self-same instant that A, in New York, rides the C Train down, plunging thirty feet to his death--you know those stories about twins;

the literature is rife with them--X in pain as Dr. Z takes Y's appendix out, etc.) And I suppose I knew, too, knew without seeing his face, not even its shadow, knew by the way he reeled in the wide, snowy door, the way he fell as I called his name.

"Jule?"

(I said before that I was surprised, actually shocked, implying that I was very nearly frantic and out of my mind that night he came home. I think, though, now--writing this--it isn't true. Oh, yes. On the surface my face, to a stranger, to you, might have seemed that way, for by this time, I was pale and white myself, could scarcely breathe from so much running; and no doubt my skin did wrinkle, for a split second, with a kind of horror and disbelief. But this is surface only. Reflected light. What is real in humans, as in even the clearest lake, is unknowable by the senses, though ever so acute, lies far, far below such ripples and refractions, illusions you can touch. And for me what was real, burning deep beneath the breastbone, was this: I never believed I could lose him, too. Julian gone? the mind might ask, good-bye, farewell, adieu? Jamais! C'est impossible! No way, Renee, could that be true. . . . So, you see, I suppose I had always expected this. In that tiny part of me that never quivered, expressing doubt, that most human thing of all that in spite of everything still burned with



own pure light, I knew--knew beyond a trace of shadow-- that I would see my brother again. I would not lose him to the snakes, those plastic tubes at the hospital in Jefferson, those awful machines cutting time in twain with their thumpings and whackings and obscene sounds. I could not, would not lose him, too.)

And I didn't. I ran over to where he'd fallen on the snowy, concrete floor. And that was when the horror started, for he was in ghastly shape.

"Jule?"

I turned him over, brushing off the white, heavy flakes from his face, scarcely knowing where to stop, his skin so much the same color--

(And I know, I know. I should have listened to Bertie. I should have heard the man out on the porch, for if I had, so much of this could have been avoided. I knew at that point in the garage what he'd been trying to say, "I'm so sorry, Celia. . .he's escaped. Gotten out. I heard it on the radio just this afternoon!" This was what my Mother's lover--God, even to write it is disgusting--what trying and trying to say. And had I but listened, as even Snowbelly chided, I could have packed Annie up in the car, with her shoes, and coat, even that damned little doll, found the key and gone looking for Jule myself. Maybe we would have found him walking

somewhere, miles away, saved him such a killing journey, for as I said, he was in ghastly, God-awful condition.)

His face had very little color left, a slight hint of pink--and this, mostly about the eyes, though when his lashes fluttered up and he looked at me, even the light seemed taken from them, the gray of his irises dull and blank.

"Julian!" I whispered, a sense of terror there, urgency, "he's here! Snow!"

(For I had not forgotten her, Annie. Far from it. The whole time I knelt there by Jule, my bare knees frozen on the hard, stoney floor, I was pulled--split asunder, (mind and heart, eyes scanning my brother and simultaneously the landscape of the open garage--Where!).

"Julian!" I screamed, and now I was practically shaking him by the shoulders. "Snowbelly's here! Where's Annie!"

He was in such a weakened, horrible state, he could barely speak.

For a moment, all he could do, in answer to my frantic questions, was blink his eyes.

"Juley!"

And then, it was odd, but you could almost see him trying to gather his strength, pull it together, for he was breathing hard now; one of his arms (hand a loose fist) came up slowly; he waved it slightly, as if trying to claw the word from empty air. It was almost a Herculean effort,

this, for his eyes began to move, along with the arm, to search with me, the light now coming back just a bit with that movement.

"Jule! Annie! Have you seen her!"

Finally: "Ann--?" Pale lips trembling. "She. . .wen. . . babe."

"What! She went to get the doll? The baby-doll, Jule?"

(Honest to God, I almost left him.)

He blinked his eyes. Yes. He tried to speak, but his voice came out not in words, something that makes sense, but in a moan. Faint rattle.

(Honest, I almost left him there on the floor to run and find her. But it was so clear to me, even in the relative darkness, it was visible--you could see it on his exhausted face: he was freezing. And if I left him there, even a few minutes, left him out to the cold and snow, he might be dead before I returned.)

"Help me, Jule. Help!" I said. And I grabbed him below his arms and started pulling him towards the door to the kitchen. "Please, Juley, do what you can--use your feet!" I screamed, or maybe that was my back screaming, that lower spine of jelly and fire, for he was heavy, despite his wasted frame, big and awkward, almost dead-weight till he started pushing with his shoes.

(So, you see, your'e wrong. Dead wrong. Oh, I know

what you're thinking, exactly what's turning and churning like a cow's green cud in your mind. I know precisely that you've stopped suspending disbelief here; I know what you're thinking about me now and Jule, that he was--. But you're wrong. He helped push himself into the house with his feet! I saw him, felt him do it. My strength had nearly given out, just as I dragged him past Granddaddy's scrunched chair, my back aflame, nearly paralyzed itself.

I was panting like a dog--hiccupping air.

I was almost played out, and though he moaned from the strain, he pulled his left foot up (filthy wet shoe, white melting coat of snow, broken lace and the sole undone, loose and flapping on the concrete floor)--he pushed! He did it himself, quickened the process, for I am not strong enough, I do not have that kind of power in my spine or breath, to haul dead-weight back to life in the house.

You are just fucking wrong.)

And he did come back to life in the house, warmed by the furnace air, though it took a while. And frankly, I didn't see it--not all--for the moment I had him inside, in the hall leading to the maid's room and kitchen, the second I had him in and slammed the door, I started running. I literally jumped across his body, heading for the service stairs.

"ANNIE!"

Jolting up, two steps at a bound, screaming.

"ANNIE! ANNIE!"

Screaming her name, for she had gone back into the house for the doll, that fucking little baby! She had gone back in with Snow (inside, or out?)--

"ANNIE!"

--all for that stupid baby!

Which was all that there was in her room, of course, up on the second floor. Door thrown open, room illumined by the light of the hall, mussy bed, and Cherry--sitting up on the pillow, on her face, that frozen smile.

## Chapter Thirty Four

(Once, I saw Falconer watching tv. Caught up in the day-room in that great blue eye of the set, having a jolly old time, a great, fantastic time of it, giggling and scratching himself, for Mickey Mouse was on. Boop--ditty--boop--boop--boop! They were all singing this stupid song behind the glass, Mickey and Minnie, in pearls and black pumps; hell, even Pluto was dancing. And all the while, at the top of the screen, they ran the music so you could follow: stave floating like a flag, grace notes, words. Of course, too, that little white ball. Boop--boop--ditty--boop! The white ball was bouncing with the notes, and Falconer was tickled to death! Pluto, I think, was jitter-bugging. Falconer pointed and

shouted in glee, "Dis!"

I was curled on the plastic sofa. I lit a cigarette. Shook the match out. "Dis what?"

Boop--boop--boopy--doop! (Sang Pluto.)

Falconer laughed again. "Dis, dis, dis!"

"Dis what?" I said, looking down to the floor where he was sitting, legs folded up like a yogi. "Mr. Falconer," I said, "dis what?" For I was determined--and maybe it was utter boredom that drove me to it, as I had been in the hospital some months, little to do but look out the window and talk; so maybe it was just that I was at that moment sitting on sticky plastic and bored--but I was determined, suddenly, to have a conversation with him.

"Dis what?"

And, yes, maybe it was a personal viciousness, too, which I suppose is often born of plastic and boredom. But I remember thinking that if the doctors, with all their magic (their pills and electrodes and Lazy-Boy chairs, couches--plastic or not--having long ago been replaced), but if they with all their voo-doo couldn't coax words from him that made sense, I recall thinking that perhaps I could, with torture. "Dis what? You dumb fucker."

Falconer turned and (now this was odd) actually looked at me. His face fell into seriousness. Distinctly, he said, "Dis dog."

He turned back to the tv, giggled again, for Pluto

was now diving out the window (Mickey and Minnie pulling back in surprise).

"Dis dog--what?"

Falconer stiffened.

Pluto was out in the back yard now (chasing a cat?), at any rate, slipping (front feet sprawled out)--

"Dis dog do!" said Falconer.

--Pluto smashing into a pile of garbage cans, coming up with the skeleton of a fish on his head.

"Do what, dummy!"

And out from the bush, jumps the cat. It grabs the fish from Pluto's head--the dog in intense surprise.

Falconer was laughing: triumphantly, he pointed, "Dummy--de dog do dat!"

Two bites and the cat was gone.

Or, I don't know--perhaps I imagined this last part, had already closed my eyes on the plastic couch, for the utter senselessness of it! the complete pointlessness. Conversation with a mad-man? What for? What can you get from it? Glitches? Nonsense? The gray meat so fouled. . . God, were he to eat you up, in two satanic bites, you could not even assign to it blame. . . .)

"Julian. . ." And now I was downstairs again. I know I was crying, pulling on his clothes. "Where is she, Juley! Where is my child!"



I had looked all over the house.

Running, screaming again, almost frothing at the mouth, because unless you are a parent yourself, or better still, a mother and have lain on the white table, organs curling inside out with all the blood there and the pain (a hurt so bad--I realized that night with Jule--you must forget it, must! you cannot remember that awful pain. . . and do not, especially when you see it healthy and squirming, hear with your own ears its startled cries), unless you have been there yourself, have given birth to a child, and have felt the wonder--its strong, small fingers wrapping around the one, of your own hand--unless you have felt this, have loved a child enough, literally, to die for it, you do not know what I was feeling that night. You think you know terror; but unless you've lost her, the child, terror is just a word.

"Julian! Julian! Pay attention--where's Annie!" And I was shaking him now, as he half-sat on the hallway floor, his raggy coat came undone--

Oh, it was horrid! His neck, grotesquely swollen, there were still circles, blue-black rings of flesh where the cloth-rope had cut him.

--"Juley? Can you hear me?" I said, for, really, he seemed to be falling asleep there. I pushed my face so close to his, you could smell the sickness in his throat.

Ether. Infection. Then I shouted at him again, the sound so loud the whiskers of his unshaven face, even the pores, trembled. "Julian! What am I going to do!"

Slowly, his eyes opened. "Wait."

"But Snow, Juley. He's got her, hasn't he?"

He blinked. Yes.

"What does he want?"

(Vacant stare.)

"What does he want from us, Julian? Oh, just tell me what he wants!"

(Nothing.)

"Is it me?"

But there was nothing. Though his color was better--in the warm house, you could see it, the gray-ashiness of his face had begun easing into pink--he was also clearly so exhausted and ill, he could barely keep the eyelids open. From his throat there came this wheezing, rattling noise, and maybe that explained the obfuscation of his words. (And here, you must be told the truth: In the house that night, Julian really did not speak so much as croak the phrases loose. His voice--perhaps because of the damage to the chords--came out in a raspy whisper, hard to hear at all, even harder to ferret such meanings as I got.

And I admit this, too. Sometimes I was wrong.

When he, for instance, said, "She. . .wen. . .babe," I naturally assumed he meant the doll. Cherry. I did not,

could not, know it was the other. Though that night, it came and flickered in my consciousness, this other one. Good God, it was even rapping at her window, trying its damndest to get in, and I shut the drapes.

I admit I didn't catch all the meanings--perhaps even made some of them up. That long low moaning "Wait" in the hall, Juley nearly dead, if I am any judge, could in truth have been a wail. Not speech at all, just pure animal sound, viscera.

Real or not, it made no difference.

The mind read "wait," and the truth was, there was nothing else to do.

Annie was gone. Julian--no doubt, they were searching for him that very night, Jim Randall and the rest of them, hill and dale in their snowsuits, with their guns; history had come round again, and they were looking, I knew it--and Julian, all the while, was just laying there, weak and harmless as Pook.)

Where the hell was that dog?

For after a while, I was hearing her.. In the parlor first, and I ran there, thinking it was Annie. Or up the stairs, and I ran there, too, not finding anything but empty rooms.

(What could I do but wait? Wait and search the house? Jump at every fucking sound, my sanity--yes, perhaps even this--going the way of the horse-drawn plow. What could I

do? What would you do? With Julian here in the hall, then--miracle!--up on the maid's old bed, white sheets pulled round about all of him, save the face, with my brother here, and the men out looking with guns, maybe even the idiot from Jefferson, MacKenzie, who could I call? Besides--)

In the kitchen, finally, I reached for it, picked the black plastic up, brushed the hair from my sweaty face, disbelieving.

(--besides, the phone was dead.)

### Chapter Thirty Five

And so, we waited till nearly three--a tryptich of strokes from the library clock.

Mostly, I guess, I sat with him.

In Pearlie's old room, or Bea's, or, really, any of those women that came and went in our lives (often with Jule or his ghosts snapping the dust at their heels, sweeping them out--insanity being akin, I guess, to a tired, insensate broom). Sometimes, when he gasped for breath, and his eyes rolled up to the ceiling, when his hand made clutching gestures at the sheets, sometimes I got the feeling that he, too, wanted to leave. Just like the maids. Up and out--with the exception of the

Darby's--gone, virtually, forever. Sometimes I got that sense with Jule. There was even, once, this pleading in his eyes (like, I forget, whats-her-name, this Mexican woman Mother hired, who stayed for almost two months in the summer once, and then Eddie--for once, not Jule--caused a scene; if I remember right, he accused her of taking his baseball mitt, a brand-new one he'd gotten for his birthday; he called her a thief, smack in her face: "Oh, you're just a stupid thief!" he said, and then, when she was down in her room--this room--packing, he found the damned thing in the parlor behind a palm, where, instantly, he remembered having dropped it the day before, blah, blah; but everyone had jumped on her, of course--except for Jule: Mother in a loud, offended voice, had threatened to search her drawers, and Daddy was just as guilty, throwing up his arms, retreating behind the desk; Granddaddy, at first, had said, "Good Christ, Lilli! What would she do with goddam mitt--look, I'll buy the kid another," but she shut him up; she said, "I will not have a thief in this house, Pappa!"; and I admit, even I did it too, for somehow, at nine, was it? ten?, for some reason the idea of A-THIEF-IN-THE-HOUSE--A-THIEF!! upset me; and I went into my room, searched my own drawers to see if anything else was missing, . . .really, only Jule stayed pure in it, uncorrupted; and then, of course, the mitt was found--a tumult of voices--Oh, for God's sake, Eddie!--  
Where is she?--Hurry, Daddy, hurry! She's at the front door!--Good Lord (Mother) we can't have the poor woman

leave! We can't let her go thinking we think she's a--  
on and on; and then, like a pack of vultures, we all  
descended; we struck her with our tongues: a misunderstanding--  
just lost--you know kids--yes, we want you to--but, of course,  
she didn't, she wouldn't stay, couldn't bring herself to  
stay in a place where. . .and Eddie even grabbed her, got  
her by a black sleeve (travelling blouse with lace); he  
said, joke, it was just a. . .oh, but her eyes said different;  
they were huge and shocked and she tried them on Grandfather,  
then Mother (Daddy was too busy to be caught, looking, as  
he was, at his shoes); she tried them on me, finally with  
Jule: great huge eyes pleading, Please. . .let me go. . . .  
And we did.) That night, though, in Pearlie's old bed,  
where Bea smoked her tiny cigars, and What's-her-face  
lay down, suitcase out, crying, that night there was the  
same, pathetic pleading in Jule's eyes, too. Please. . .  
let go. . . .

But I couldn't.

I loosened his clothes. I went to the kitchen, and  
while the water was warming in the faucet for the towel,  
tried the phone (dead--God, it's dead, too), then put it  
back (not at all remembering, of course, that I'd left the  
extension off that afternoon, upstairs in her room). I  
went back to where he was laying, and I put the warm com-  
press on his face. I sat beside him on the bed, stroking  
his hand.

We talked.

(Of course! Absolutely, we talked! Did you think I could let it rest? Really? This red wriggling thing, like a worm, that was always, eternally, in my consciousness, had been since Christmas--did you think I would not bring it up? Want answers?)

"Why, Juley?" (My voice, like a child's, tiny and quivering.)

A vacant gaze.

"Why?" (And so much pain in it, too--echo of a six year old, quizzing his leaving parent: Why, Daddy--hand on the balled sock, just packed--why can't you live with us anymore? As much pain as that, from my throat.)

"Why, Juley--what happened?"

But no answer was forthcoming. Just this gurgling sound, deep in his chest.

And my eyes narrowed (the snow outside so bright and blinding in the drapeless window): "Julian, were you here?"

Blink.

"You were?"

Yes.

"Was it. . .was it you, like the sheriff said?"

Vacancy. (Undecipherable.)

"Was it you, Jule? Or him?"

Naught.



Damn.

A breath.

Quarter-hour clock.

"Julian, listen," and I pulled a bit closer. "What about Michael? Where's Michael?"

Eyes wide open, indescribable.

"Eddie's boy! Is it true? He's dead? Was that Michael I saw in the river?"

Another blink.

"When? Juley, when did he--was it that night?"

Yes.

"The night the others--?"

Yes.

"Then. . .all this time? In the house? The whole damned time, Jule, it was. . .Snow?"

Yes, yes, yes.

(Sharp inhalation of breath): "Michael, too? Snow killed him too?"

Yes.

"Then" (slowly) "it was that--him--you took to the river? That was what you dumped?"

Yes.

"Not the gun?"

"Oh, of course, not the gun, Celia!"

(And, yes, it was that snivelling voice, the same damned voice--above my head?)

"You stupid little twit! You think I'd give that

idiot--that schiz--a loaded gun to play with? Are you mad?"

(And there I was, in the bed, shivering, just like Jule, for I couldn't place it. First, it seemed above my head, but now. . .now, it was somewhere else--at my left? I turned.)

"Tee-hee!" it cried.

(I looked in the shadows. Nothing.)

"Oh, for gaaaww's sake, Celia. You're worried about the gun?"

(Behind! Near the door! I whipped around.)

"Why, Celia," Snow said, white as a ghost. "It's right here! In my own little hand."

### Chapter Thirty Six

The blast was deafening.

I fell forward onto Jule and I suppose that, for a moment or so, I thought I'd been hit, the roar was so loud in the tiny room--and the smoke! Like sulphur, almost. Sound and sulphur conmingling.

(Really, this is so ridiculous.)

It was absolutely stupid, but it took me a second--feeling and touching and groping myself--to realize he'd shot the ceiling, that all that stuff coming down was not snow (which would be logical enough, in this crazy metaphysics), but plaster. Flakes and chunks of it--big enough to batter the back--slivers of lathe, all this junk raining

down upon us in the bed.

Then, a moment later, "Mooooooooooooooooooooo?!!!"

She was standing there behind him, too scared, it seemed, to move.

And suddenly, Snow turned. He grabbed her by the hand and took off running, smoking gun, too--

"NO!"

(A sound from me like tiger, a leopard, its cub wrenched away.)

"NO!"

(So drawn it was almost a growl--pain and fear, everything I'd ever felt, all the loss of my life, mixing and churning in the dust.)

"NO! You can't have her!"

And then I was off the bed, running after them in the darkened house. Down the hall, past the service stairs, into the kitchen where I--

"Tee-hee!"

--smacked into an open drawer.

(Dazed. Stunned. Wind knocked out. Footsteps pattering down the great wide hall.)

"No!"

And I was up again. Running. Almost catching up. Their footsteps now on the spiral stairs.

(Back and belly hurting--horrible pain--really, it was. Really, I didn't care.)

"Give her back, Snow!" I screamed, panting at the

bannister, grabbing it, throwing myself up the stairs.

"You cannot have her!"

Up one flight. Down the hall. Then another.

Footsteps plain--bodies just always out of sight,  
out of reach.

Up the darkened stairs to the third floor--God,  
a fucking mountain, this!--up one, two, three steps--

Horrible squealing!

Soft, squishy, underfoot--

Yowl of hellish pain.

--oh, God. And I was falling. Falling on the  
puppy, the she-bitch, howling and yelping, skittering down  
the stairs.

"You cannot have my baby!" I screamed, started  
crawling, on all fours, up the steps.

Got to the landing just in time.

In time to see the white door to the attic sweep  
shut. Lock.

Out of breath. Running again.

Down the hall. Slamming into it. Grabbing its  
lock. Shaking and pounding the door with my fists.

"Tee-hee!" (Snow, from behind, trying, I think, to  
immitate her--not succeeding, for the voice was false,  
too low and ominous, too evil.)

Pounding and pounding and throwing myself against  
it. Kicking. "You cannot! Cannot have her, Snow! I

will not let you have my baby!"

(Pause.)

"Oh?"

I stopped pounding.

(Another pause.)

"Oh," he said again. "Why not? Celia, I've got  
the other."

## Chapter Thirty Seven

(The other. The other one. No great surprise, I suppose, to anyone--to you. Nothing really held close to the chest or kept secret. Nothing shocking to anybody save, of course, me.)

"What?"--this, almost a whisper, outside the attic door.

(My guess is, you already knew. My guess is you've known for some time, have been sitting back, waiting, patiently listening for the drop of the other shoe. The other! Surely, it is no big shock. For I have given enough clues, planted them for you like tiny, germinating seeds of wonder--seeds to make you ask, in that Lazy-boy chair, why,

I wonder what that means (infernial stomach-ache), or up on that high, pristine cloud of yours: what! doesn't feel she can have a baby (this, to Lee in the woods) what! what nonsense is this! Really, I've been telling you all along. Not that I care much what you think. Perhaps I was only really trying to tell myself.)

"What did you say, Snow?"-- this so soft, I think I probably said it without words, only in my mind, for there so much going on: door white as snow, and Annie in there, weeping. Snow himself, laughing, "Tee-hee! Tee-hee!" And all the while, this other sound: weak, high-pitched, infant crying, strange and so mewlish, a noise that never was.

(Look, if you are shocked, if your moral sensibilities-- for you also know who the father is, I'm sure of that--if these are offended and horrified and appalled, if you are disgusted to the very pit of your soul. . . hey, it's nothing compared to me. Your "shock" is a little smear of tishgod on the floor. It's naught. A nullity. Considering what I went through.)

"Snow. . ."--or was that "no," mixed up with a sigh?

(For it was awfully hot that summer.

Hot, so hot, and the june-bugs huzzed at night. Moths bumped against the screens. The cicadas made a noise that hurt your ears. They poised on the trunks of trees and left empty, transparent shells.



Hot.

It was hot and the wheat was full-yellow, great swaying stalks, heads so ripe with grain they bent, swayed and stained to earth in the wind.

Hot.

And storms would come up. Huge, blue-black clouds from the south. They would mass in the afternoons on the horizon. Swelling and growing fierce. The wind would blow--cottonwoods bending northward, away from its fury. Bend against the pattering of the rain, hard, heavy drops, cooling things down.

The leaves got wet. Clear drops dripping. Dripping. Pattering down, long after the cool had left. Sun coming out again, heating the flagstone path. From certain angles on the porch, you could see the steam.

So hot!

And I, that summer, was languid. Bored.

I remember lying on the porch swing, King Arthur on my stomach. Swinging and swinging, pushing against the post with my foot.

They tried to burn her, you know. That Guinevere.

And in the evening, Mother, fresh from that tepid pool of bath-water, in the evenings she'd come down the spiral stairs, smelling of rose-water or lilac. Waist cinched in by the blue, cotton dress. Fabric flouncing.

"Bye, all!"

Daddy, in his den, stopped asking, "Where, tonight?"  
For she had a way, Mother did, of heading it off.

"Bye, all! Churchwork!"

"The ladies' bazaar!"

"Bye, all! Trudy Dotbill's sick again--in Jefferson.  
Be late--don't stay up!"

Good-bye. As if I care what you do!

In Camelot, they almost burned her. But then Lancelot  
showed up, him with that huge, white horse.

That summer, it was sultry and hot, so much so you  
could almost see him up in the leaves. Greenish-blue. If  
you squinched your eyes together and looked up where Juley  
said, you could almost see that Ork, with his wings--

"Like a dove, you say?"

And Jule, beneath the apple tree, would laugh. "Yes,  
like a huge, green dove."

"Is he talking?"

"Yes." And he took the blade of grass, that long,  
greeny thing, out from between his teeth.

"What does he say?"

And Jule laughed.

"Tell me, Jule. You know I can't hear him."

Laughing and laughing. Touching me with the grass.

"Well, what's he telling you?"

Feathery tip of the thing on my face. Julian tracing  
a circle, round my cheek.

Hand brushing up. "Stop it, Jule. That tickles."

"That's what he's saying."

"What?"

The grass again. "Orku says it tickles."

Good Lord, but it was hot.

And all that summer, until I got sick, I was restless. There was nothing to do but books and mirrors (and all the time, it seemed, I was looking at those).

Brown hair, lank from the heat.

Lips. . .gross! Too big, awful! And sometimes, sitting before the silver lake there in my room, I'd bite in the lower one with my teeth. Better, but still. . .how can you go round like this all the time? how can you talk, fat thing in your teeth!

Nose: okay. Maybe.

Okay skin, and maybe if I try the hair up, like this-- but God, that makes the lip look ever fatter!

Oh, gross!

As I said, I spent a lot of time, "grossing out" before the mirror. And when I wasn't doing that, it seems, I was pacing in my room, sneaking cigarettes on the sill so the smoke would blow out the window. Funny, how on a blue hazy day, you'd see it hover in the screen for a moment; then the wind would come and carry it off, to the fields, maybe, maybe to Kansas.

Maybe, maybe, maybe! What crap this all is! Pacing around, then, dropping butts in the toilet.

So hot. And the house too big, too old, with too many holes round the windows to air condition.

"I thought we were rich, Jule," I said one evening when we were laying cross-wise on the bed, passing the last Camel we had between us, back and forth. "Blow it out," I whispered.

So hot.

And at night, he would creep into my room when the others were asleep, Orku gasping in the grain, seedy heads fluttering. He would come into the window, still hot, blowing the smoke back at us, as we dropped an ash on the spread.

"Watch it!"--me, smearing black into the white chenille.

In the days, we couldn't breathe for the heat.

And then one night, he came very late. He pushed Lancelot and Arthur from the bed--they, falling to the floor with a thud, like Guinevere's faggots--

So hot!

--those burning, flaming blocks of wood they piled around her shoes, screaming, "Adultress! Treason!"

And Julian crept on the white, white sheets. He touched the rosebud on my chest--

"Suffers, does it? Burns?"

--he touched the woven flower and the one, weaving, underneath. He said "so beautiful"--

lissen, lissen

--"Orku's whispering it in the wheat," he said.

"Can't you hear it now?"--

lissening, lissening to the pulse of grain.

In Camelot, you know, they almost burned her. But that was just a story, not true to life at all.)

"Snow!" I was screaming this at the attic door, fairly clawing it with my hands. "Give her back!"

Pounding and pounding the wood. Hands getting bloody, just like--

(Before. Before it happened, things got crazy, you know? Everything went to smash, with Pearlie going back on her word:

"That gal be sick, Mistuh Pendleton. You bes' do somethin' is all I kin say."

She went back on her word to the dusting or polishing of doorknobs--whatever the hell it was she did about the house. She went back on her promise not to tell, and, honestly, I think I could have killed her, when Granddaddy popped his head in the door a little later:

"Pun'kin?" he said in the darkened room, as the light had been hurting my eyes, hurting my belly, and I had pulled the curtains. "You sick? Pearlie says--"

"Leave me alone!" (this, turning away from him, in the bed).

But they didn't.

They called Doc, who came with his little brown bag, who came striding into the room--so officious!--who felt

my forehead--

"Hm."

--my wristy little pulse--

" Uh-hm."

--my belly--

"Oh!"

--tried to touch my belly, but I pushed his hand away.

"And so, you have a tummy-ache?" he asked, going for the thermometer or something like that in his bag. "And what have you been eating, my dear?"

Nothing! Oh, God, but nothing made sense anymore! It hurt so bad, the cancer. And at night, I would lie awake in my bed, touching the tumor, for I swear, you could almost feel it, touching and groping myself in the dark--yes, this week, it was bigger than last. It even stopped the blood. . . .

"De mait says you are die-ettink?"

Nazi.

"Your muther, she says you eat nothink, like a birt."

Panzer-man. Killer of small children.

He stuck the thermometer in my mouth. "Don't think you have the fever, but vee'll zee."

See what! See my dreams at night, Doc? Will you come into my head and see my dreams? For that was almost the worst thing of all. And they came so often, these strange,

distorted, truly unknowable visions. Which were all about Jule, of course, which were all so real--your eyes flashing side to side beneath the thin, trembly skin of the lids--they made you start and kick your legs. They woke you up to sweaty sheets, gasping for air, hacking, your belly a cold hard thing from the tumor. They almost choked you, these dreams, they were so very realistic. Then, two seconds later, you really woke. You tried to call them back, but they were gone, like smoke in the window.

Oh, vanish, Doc. Leave me alone. Get out of here. Go away.)

My hands, literally, were clawing the white wood.

Where the hell were they when you needed them! Lee and Jim, Brother Wendell and his impotent, clattering cup! Virgil, dumb, inarticulate--hell, even Doc--

(Didn't know.

The tall, sharp-featured man wanted to listen to my chest, to my belly, the tumor there.

But I knocked his hand away, screaming: "Leave me alone! Alone, damn you!"--I screamed so loud that Mother ran in and Granddaddy, too; Eddie stuck his head in the door, dull eyes wide in alarm that Cee should be screaming, making such a fuss, this girl, sister--what the hell was I now? to any of them?--this thing in the mussy bed, screaming and screaming and--)

"Goddamit, Snowbelly! You cannot have her, too!" And now I had picked up a chair from the hall. I had it in my hands and was slamming, splintering its wooden legs

against the door.

(Against the door.

Against the door to my bedroom, leaning, sinking into it, for it felt so bad.

It was very late that afternoon. Doc had come and gone, placing this thing on my tongue, a capsule. Giving me water.

He had told them I was upset--"hysterical"--and to give me this thing, every six hours, to put it in my mouth, and leave me alone. He said all sorts of ridiculous things out there in the yellow hall.

"Jule?"--whispered, for the voices were talking downstairs.

"Jule?"

I made myself go down the hall to his room. Door wide open, empty.

"Jule?"

A noise upstairs in the attic.

Climbing the steps--slow, sluglike.

Attic door open.

A breath.

Down the hall to it, almost falling. Stopping to put my hand on the papered wall--hand so cold it was trembling.

"Juley. . .help me, I'm sick.")

"You are sick, Celia! Sick as a schiz you are!"--Snow, from behind the door.



"I will kill you!"--the chair in utter shreds--  
just a leg now, a flounce of upholstery, banging and  
slashing the door.

"Tee-hee!"

"Kill you. . .Kill you. . .Kill. . . ."

"What?" Snow shouted. "Kill? Kill me? Like  
you did the other?"

"Snow!"

(No, no!

Up at the top of the attic stairs.

Falling.

Something wet, then cold on my legs.

No!

And I tried to put my hand down, to stop it.

I crawled inside, back in the attic as far as I could,  
crawled in the dust. Parrot cage. Sport.

I crawled way back inside, back to the darkness and  
shadows, sun dying out in the attic-eye.

I was cold, panting--all this blood!

"Ju--"

But, of course, he was not there. No one was there  
in the attic, but me--me and the pain, the blood, the dust  
and dying light--just me and, suddenly, in my bloody hand,  
the Other.)

## Chapter Thirty Eight

(I suppose now you'll expect that the door swung wide open, that memory complete, or nearly so, would simultaneously portend the end of obstruction. I mean, if you're one of those picky types, hunting symbols for fun--Freudian or not--that white door to the attic is a perfect image; just as that apple tree signified blank, or the snake cut in twain in the virgin field signified something blank else, so this door--pristine and white, but most important, closed--so this portal then must symbolize blankety-blank-blank, too!

But you're wrong.

The door was a door! Real, physical, impervious,

or so it seemed, to my efforts.

It was not a symbol at all, but a thing made of oak--hard, impenetrable--the face of it battered and stained with my blood. Behind it, this thing, this monster, with my child!)

With the leg of the chair, I battered the lock.

I bashed and bashed it, all the while of course imagining that hard little metal thing to be his face-- Snow's. White, pasty, goddam face. I beat the thing to a pulp.

Finally, it was Jule who opened it.

God knows how he made it up the stairs, but he did. Clumping and wheezing, very nearly dead, but I needed him. And he came up the stairs.

He threw himself against it--a second later, I was smashing into it, too.

The knob sheared off, clattering to the floor.

(And, oh, I am so tired of this thing! This story.

Right now, I am sitting on the grass in the garden--therapy, they call it, but I have so little interest in spades and hoses, those tiny green bugs that irridesciently crawl upon the leaves, eat round the silver veins, leaving holes.

Really, this place is not interesting at all, though Willie, to watch him, might divert one for a while. Willie is the gardener, a tall, horsey man with veins as silver

as the yew trees he tends. His face is like a block, huge and flesh--not pretty at all, or remotely handsome, it is tan though from the summer's tilling, and when he smiles, it is so genuine a thing (born of a turtle, say, that has wandered through the fence, or of that peony, finally bloomed), those straight white teeth are illumined by an inner sun and you cannot help but be snagged.

Vastly different, this, from the others. Like Jo, for instance, who wanders in the craftsroom in her white, shirred smock, who looks at all the stuff we make from clay: pots and vases--slumping on the side--ashtrays a six year old would not be proud to show her mother. She looks at all this junk, the drying clay, and says, "How nice"--as Dr. Z has shown her the ropes, taught her rules of when and how to smile.

Oh, you'd like to throw it in her face, or on the wall. You'd like to smash Warren, too, for even patients pick this up, and Warren, in group, grows so tiresome with his joviality:

"I had to pardon him," he says (phoney smile). "Had to, had to extend him clemency" (smile) "mercy, pity, peace, love" (smile). "Had to pardon that Nixon or the whole country" (smile) "would" (smile, smile) "whole damn country'd go" (smile) "down the drain."

Honestly, only Willie seems immune.

Perhaps he is saved by the sensitive plants--morning glories and moon-flowers that will close their petals if

roughly touched, the pink roses you must fertilize, water, powder, clip, stroke into being.

Once, I remember he was cutting some for Zuckermann's wife--birthday, I think. He was out in the rose garden, sharp, silver shears, clipping the very best blooms at an angle. Whistling. And Falconer was there, a few feet away, playing in the dirt, face down.

"How can you whistle?" I said, taking from him the bloom, putting it with the others in the plastic bucket.

Charlotte was spading in one of the beds, muttering, face awash with tears.

"How can you whistle?" I said, for Warren was pestering Jo, following her about in the garden (and she, on her break!), trying to tell her why he had to, had to--

"How can you whistle in the midst of this?"

"Because I promised the Doc his roses." Clip. Another bloom in my hand, but this time, Willie held on. "Look," he said, "look how nice it is."

And I suppose it was true. There was not an aphid, or fungus spot, or worm-hole in sight.

"This bloom's a beauty," he said, dropping it into the bucket himself. "And that's the bare-faced truth"--turning back to the bush. "Beauty. . .that's the only truth I know. It's all you need to know, Celia," he said, "to be happy."

Oh, Lord. The man could write for Hallmark! His aphorisms, deep as the puddles of water and mud the rain

made there in the garden, his aphorisms jumped like aphids in the air--what the hell are they worth, words like this?

"You don't really believe that crap," I said, and I turned away, because I knew he did, because any further conversation would now just go round and round like a caterpillar on a vase or urn, round and round the cold, clay rim, the bug convinced--absolutely certain--it was travelling in a straight line.

I turned away from the whistling. I walked past Falconer, face down in the dirt, staring at the mud. From his vantage point, those puddles must have seemed huge, like lakes.)

Abandon all hope, ye who--God, Mother was as bad as Willie with his maxims. Those stupid stitched samplers tacked up in the house (Bless this mess! for the sewing room; Too many cooks! for the kitchen)--crewell-work, the point of a needle, all these stupid, self-parodying samplers, framed and tacked to the walls, attempts to excuse bad dinners, rooms piled to the rafters with junk, the mess of a lifetime. And this--Abandon all hope, ye who enter here-- this one, stitched and tacked to the attic wall, bumping and knocking itself almost from the nail, for the wind there was so ferocious.

Jule and I tumbled in.

And almost from the moment the white door opened, the

door leading to the last wooden steps, from the very moment, we were assailed by flying junk, debris, papers and stuff that the great black wind was bashing about in the attic.

(And, oh, this is tedious. This is tiresome and as boring as Warren's guilt, for I have said it all before. That morning when it was done, the flames still licking up at the gray-black sky, I told it all to Jim and Lee and Henry Vance, the fire chief from Harlow. I told and re-told the story till I was hoarse, their faces growing stoney, or pained, or black from the ashes and smoke.

Tedious, you see?

Tiresome and boring and worst of all, fundamentally false. Yes, this, at some level. At some point inside--perhaps where the stomach yawns wide, shivering and cold, at the elevator's drop, somewhere under the breastbone, this story rings false.

Not that it didn't happen--it did. Why, if you don't believe me, you can drive there yourself: Route 66 to Harlow, Oklahoma, to that north-west hill, overlooking the town. You can go and see with your own blue eyes the charred corpse of the house. Little remains now but foundations, a cellar dug deep in the earth, dark tower of native stone, the chimney, going up and up, broken off where it meets the sky. Perhaps weeds. A flower

or two from the ashy soil. Wind. . .shrill and hollow, whipping the ruins.

Rest assured, it happened.

And it happened just the way I have said and will say it, tongue working over the teeth, pen scratching like a chicken blue marks on the page. I will say it and say it until, perhaps, I have even convinced myself. Oh, yes, it happened!

And still, it rings false. It has the same clammy plastic feel as the sofa here in the dayroom--sit on it, in shorts or a rag of a skirt, and two seconds later, you're sweating. Touch it with your palms and they sweat, too. Rest your soul itself upon it, and I'm sure, positive, the same thing would happen: it would stick, in the heat, like naked skin; you could not pull it off without losing the pearl veneer.

Yes, it is false. It is tedious and boring, the stuff of horror films and stupid novels, for there was no heroism involved. Really. Skim beneath the surface and there was nothing in the least heroic about my act. Quite simply: I had no choice. I had to follow him, to get her back!)

The black, black wind--swirling round--trash and debris, so strong the torrent that Jule and I were nearly knocked off our feet. I clung to him, one hand on the top



post of the bannister. I shielded my eyes against the wind and the vortex's hideous light--yes, right there, in the middle where Snow stood with Annie--cat's-eye of the maelstrom, a furious yellow.

"Tee-hee!" he was laughing, snorting like a pig.  
"Tee-hee!"

And maybe he shot another round in the roof--heard something, but hard to tell what in so much thundrous noise.

And Annie, like a statue, frozen to the spot. Crying. The Other crying, too, for she had him there, in one crooked and frozen arm, just like Cherry--exactly the way she held the doll, only it was this white thing, still miraculously covered with blood, still coated though it had lain so long--

what pain to remember: the casting away, bloody hand thrown out with he moved, thudding to the floor, and later, later, crawling back to it, to him, prying up a floorboard, last bit of strength, dropping the Other in --where he had lain--

"Oh, what is that awful smell? Have we rats?" Mother said, sniffing up the stairs of the attic. "Edward, really, you must call someone. I will not tolerate rats and mice and things dying in the house!"

--where he had lain, this Other, in the house, in the attic, growing less and less offensive, less memorable

(till, really, he vanished like smoke), growing less and less, you see, in the dull, thudding passage of years.

And now he was out. And Julian seemed as surprised as I to see him--surprised, almost, as much as the first time, up there in the attic, Indian-summer night--Julian, bored, I think, poking around, sniffing, nothing to do. And all the while, I sat on the hard steamer trunk, near Mother's sport; all the while, I was kicking my legs--these, as fully recovered as my belly, save for the cold there, and the ice--just kicking and kicking the heels. Julian, bored, not talking in the yellow light. So I jumped off the trunk, stepped four boards away from Julian's cache, bent down and pried the loose board up:

"Look," I said (whether out of boredom or something darker, far more cruel, I do not know). "Look," I said, trying to explain away the heat, the stifling, sick air; "We are rich, Jule," I told my brother in the attic. "Look down there," I said. "This is ours."

And Juley reeled back--reeled so far, if you want the truth, he fell out of the house; he flew across the fields and the trees, the muddy, squat ponds for the stock; he reeled himself back to Vinita, to the hospital there, where he stayed a long time, months and months, our house growing quiet again, my face placid and assured.

But now, this night, the Other was out. Annie was

holding him just like the doll! And Julian was horrified, in a vacant sort of way, his eyes wide and blank to the swirling torrent in the attic.

"I've got them both!" Snowbelly yowled, his fat legs straddling that hole in the attic where Juley's papers were, wind and yellow light blasting out, Tishgod's ravings shredding to bits, all around, the vicious whirlwind.

Which I tried my best to bluster through.

"You cannot have her!" I screamed, fighting the wind, which once, literally, blew me from my footing, picked me up, danced me around like so much trash. "You cannot, cannot have her!" I screamed again, then suddenly, the wind was gone.

I thudded to the floor. And before I could recover, move an inch, Snow had tightened his grip on Annie--she, in fright, tightening hers on the Other--and Snow, in one sweeping move, jumped down, yanking her with him, into the hole.

"NO!"

The scream--from my lips? Jule's?--vibrated in the devastated air.

"NO!"

I began to crawl toward it--the yellow light, like a dying fire, beginning to fade away.

I could scarcely breathe for the shock and fear, and Jule, poor Jule, that same look on his face, that very

expression I'd seen so many times, as he, too, went to the hole. He looked at me, then down at the dying light (we could hear their footsteps running, growing fainter). He looked at me again, blinking: I cannot.

"Help me, Jule. Help me"--and now, I was crawling near the lip.

I cannot go, Cee. His face saying, caught--looking between the hole and me--caught. If I go, I'll be--

"Oh, Jule!" for the light was dying, dying out.

And the truth is, I never waited for him to decide what to do. I could hear their footsteps pattering away, fainter, fainter, and from the hole (this echoing, as if from some enormous metal room deep below), "Mommy?"--so scared and lost, her voice--"Mommmyyy!" and with it, the Other's weak cry.

"Damn you to hell, Jule," I whispered, and plunged, feet-first, down the hole.

### Chapter Thirty Nine

I do not know how long I fell, even how I fell-- the metamechanics of his world, Snow's, being quite different, I think, from our own. It seems I dropped a long, long time--and it was odd, because, in a way, there was not even the sense of dropping, what the stomach feels, say, on the C-train going down, or what a stone must surely feel, dropped by a rude boy, into a placid lake, ripples fanning out.

If I had to describe the journey, what it was most like and akin to in our world, I would tell you that it felt the same as that night-flight home from Europe. For

so much of the time, you see, we chased the sun, that yellow ball turning to red on the cloud-flecked horizon. We hurtled after it--jet engines roaring; glaring light and the solar wind in my lashes; stasis, almost the sense of standing still, though the land passed beneath our wings and turned to murky ocean. We chased it, this star, half-way round the world, half-way back, before it lunged ahead suddenly, dropping out of sight. And still, the engines roared. They would not give up their thundrous flight, even in the gathering darkness, would not give up though the destination--America, home--was also hell.

This was what it was like, falling to Snow's new world, for the whole time, beneath my feet, there was this glowing yellow light, fading and flickering, a red fringe about its edges. I fell and fell, as though inside an empty tube of air, seeing, at the passing periphery of vision, only darkness, hearing (always this) her voice:

"Mommmyyy!"

Such a terrified, frightened calling, identical--but far worse, as it echoed--the same voiced fear she uttered in waking from terrifying dreams.

And suddenly, the column seemed to bend a little, my backside bumping, ever so lightly, onto something solid. I spread my feet out, flailing with my arms, for I was sliding now, down and down toward the fading light, then--

Crashed. Rock-bottom rock.

--I fell to a heap on the floor.

Battered, numbed. Listening.

"Mommy!"

That voice rising and falling like the faint whistle of a train. Fainter still, their footsteps, and the light.

Without even stopping to think or look about, I was up and running after them.

And I wish, now, that I hadn't been so frightened, or single-minded, that I hadn't narrowed my eyes, pupils to dark small points, looking only ahead--my peripheral vision, like a horse's, obscured by those terrifying leather flaps of the blinders I erected myself. I wish I had looked and seen what this world, beneath even the foundations of my house, was like, for now I feel almost lost, blinded again, in my attempts to describe it.

We must grope ahead now by touch alone, the simplest visceral feeling, for that was all I allowed myself at the time--all that time I spent down there, running.

Running and running.

The "floor" at first, metallic, like lead, my feet pounding out the same rhythm already in my ears.

Running.

And soon the lead dissolved to something soft and hot, like ash. Yes, like ashes, there, body sinking to the ankles and calves; above me, and all around, a firestorm of wind and smokey flakes, blowing back into my face, into the nostrils and eyes, obscuring the tiny vision even more.

"Mommy!"

Just that sound!

Hot ash dissolving now to water, in water--a slow, sluggish stream?--becoming mud. Wading there, wading, following the sound of my baby's voice.

And something "solid"? A bank?

Yes, maybe a bank. Scrambling out of the water.

"Mommmmy!"

And something soft again, obscured by mist. Huge black shapes, vaguely around, all around me--like a forest? A springiness beneath my feet--akin to pine-needles? softened thorns?

Always and forever, you see, hurtling after that sound, that light.

Then--sand? Yes, and I was sinking into that, too, whatever it was. Sinking, trudging forward on this obscene beach that fronted the water. Again. Water there and suddenly I was moving down, down, always that direction, being swept away. In water again, a great rushing fall, almost drowning.

"Mommmmm-yyyyy!"

Then: plop.

(Obscene, too, trivializing--completely absurd perhaps, to describe one's final fall into the abyss, into hell, with a comic book expletive: plop. A trivial description, this, and yes, absurd. . .but also true, for it sounded just that way, you know. Plop. It sounded and



felt like a drop of water, clinging to a winter leaf-- the last remaining bit of liquid in the world, growing heavier and heavier at the brown withered tip, pendulous, too heavy to hold on, then. . . plop. Insignificant tiny thud on the ice.)

And now, I looked around.

I had to, with so much whiteness here, blinding, brilliant white--

(which Jule once said, brain brilliant as that summer day, was "all the colors of the universe, Cee-- purples, yellows, reds, fuchsias, greens--all of them, a billion rainbows, jumbled in your eyes")

--I had to look, for this world, this place of ice and whiteness was. . . enormous. Like some great cavern, but without a roof (you could not follow with your eyes the stalactites high enough to see the end), without sides (just crusty plains of snow, hoar-frosted trees-- these, sinking back into softness of fog and white mist), without even a floor (the ice so clear and brilliantly-reflective beneath my body that to look down--again, that old direction--to look down was to see, mirrored, my self).

"Magnificent, yes?"

I whirled around--fish slipping on the ice.

"Not as bad as you thought?"

I tried to lunge at him, Snow. "Give her back!"

I screamed at him--this small, white dwarf--screamed at his hand (not skin now, but almost sculpted: frozen crust of rime); I screamed at this thing, still holding my daughter. "Give her back!"

A moment's pause. Hesitation. From somewhere, the sound of glass, tinkling--icycles, maybe--bells. Annie just stood there, her hand in his, the Other, in her arm, not squirming anymore, or crying--just looking, his small eyes wide, in them a sense of wonder.

"Give her to me!" I screamed at the dwarf.

And I swear, I swear! (for if nothing else in this is "true," at least, verifiable, if nothing else can be said to certainly, most positively, have happened, this must be the exception). I swear, Snowbelly sighed.

Another moment.

Then: "You want her back?" And suddenly, he was turning, taking the Other from her arm. He released her hand, made a clicking noise in his mouth--tck, tck--"Go on," he told her. "Go back to Mamma."

Annie walked across the ice, and I grabbed her. I pulled her tight, practically smothered her with my body. And it's strange, but there seemed not the least bit of fear in her, no stiffness, or its converse, squirmy wriggling.

"Annie, Annie!" I cried, breathing this into her hair. And it strange, but in a way, she was not my Annie

at all, the up-world Annie, all wriggly to be tucked into bed at night, afraid of bears and such in dreams (the Annie who, in a wasteland of so much ice and snow, should screaming in terror--is that not true?) It's odd, but though her eyes were wide open, clearly awake, this Annie seemed also, simultaneously, asleep. She seemed now not to comprehend anything. Worse, as I held her, her pink skin was growing whiter, colder and colder to my touch.

I held her tight. I tried to shield her against the numbing chill. I rubbed my hands on her arms, felt the hot tears from my own eyes, begin to well and fall.

"Annie?" I said. And then, because she didn't respond, I started screaming it--"Annie!"--screaming and screaming this name in her ear.

I did everything I could, and then, still clutching her, I turned to him. "SNOW!"

The sound echoed like a bullet, ripping the waste. From someplace too distant to see, I could hear a rumbling, a great noise, building and building, like an avalanche.

"SNOW!"

And I knew! I knew it at the very core, the seed, the nucleus of my soul--that tiny never-quivering spot, the smallest indivisible atom of myself that was now, oh, believe it, shivering, quaking and shuddering in the waste, the utter waste of this winter--I knew I was losing her, too. She was--

"SNOW!"

And from somewhere, great walls of the waste rumbled down.

"SNOW! SNOW!"

And still. . .my protestations, struggling human voice, even with that echoe (a thousand, thousand other voices, out there, rumbling, too). . .still, it did no good.

She was slipping away in my arms. I could feel it. No matter how much warmth and crying love, regardless of how I tried to smother her to safety, her bones were growing stiff there, skin, too. There was frost in her hair, the lashes of her eyes--

"SNOW!"

--insane, insane! I was losing her, too.

"Oh, Snow," I said, my voice muted now, stunned.

"Snow, what is it you want?"

He thought for a moment (my eyes like wild things, darting back and forth between them).

"What the hell do you want!"

Finally: "Seven."

What? I tried to breathe.

"I want seven," he said.

"Seven what!"

"Six plus one," Snow said, and said it as if he were explaining it to a dense, little child, "equals

seven."

I think I closed my eyes.

"Tck, tck, tck, tck, tck!" he clicked, frozen tongue against ice. "6 plus 1--Michael, too," he said. "But then you know that, you saw him there yourself, in the river. Let's see," he said, suddenly becoming quite officious, ticking it off. "There was the Grandfather, and the Mother, the Father. . .there was Eddie and Pamela and M-for-Michael-2. . .that makes six, does it not?"

Really, I couldn't answer that.

"Well, look! You saw it yourself, the order--"

"What order?"

"The order!" Snow said. "The writing on the wall! You saw it yourself, with your own little eyes. . .which, for a change," he said, almost snickering, "you actually had open."

I looked at him, dumbly.

"Oh, my, my, my! This is tedious, you know. Look, Celia. It's pure mathematics. Chaotic or not.  $6 + 1 = 7$ . Count it on your fingers! Use your toes! Use your nose--"

"What?" (my face, frozen, into a grimace).

--tally it any way you please, but I have to have seven. I've got to have seven bodies from this little American tragedy--"

"'Little tragedy'?" I repeated.

"--well," he said, speculatively. "I suppose it does depend upon your point of view. Seems little enough to me--"

"Little?" (and all the while, I was holding Annie, losing her, little by little).

"Well, little in the scheme!" he snorted. "Of course, little in the cosmic scheme! It's hardly the Titanic, you know. The invasion of the Goths! It doesn't even begin to compare to what you'd see in the jungle, on a single afternoon, or in Korea, Vietnam--hoo-ey! now, that was a job--"

"Job?"

"Or hell, Celia. Take WW-III! Hoo-ey, you just wait--"

And, oh, my head was spinning. All this nonsense!

"Look, it comes down to this," he said. "I have to have seven. Seven bodies. And I've looked high and low, I've gone to that stupid house of yours, I've gone to that hospital in Jefferson--hell, I've looked all over, and to date I've only got six. Can't you see?" he said. "I'm just trying to do my job! I'm just trying to follow the order--"

"What order!" I screamed, rubbing Annie's hands as hard as I could. "What order. . . From whom?"

"What?" he said, seemingly taken aback.

"Who ordered this?"

He seemed puzzled for a moment. Then, he snorted again, "Oh, for gaaaw's sake, how should I know? Really. You think they tell me?"

Oh, spinning and spinning, this head of mine--utterly, completely confused!

"Look, all I know is what I read on the order. 6 + 1. Now, I wrote it again, on the jail wall myself--in my own little hand--so you'd know, Celia. 6 + 1!"

"Are they just. . ." I said, scarcely able to say it myself, "are they all just numbers to you then?"

Snowbelly rolled his eyes. He started shaking his finger at me (creak, creak of ice). "Now, the problem," he said, slowly, "is that '1.' It was supposed to be Jule. For gaaww's sake, I even suggested to him the shirt, that silly sheriff having taken everything else of value--"

And, oh, the hatred! The black, seething hatred I felt!

"--I told him, Julian, quit acting like a wimp. Just take off that shirt, will you--quit wasting time!--"

And it was not even the absence of color, this hatred! Not black, but red now. The hatred now shifting in my breast to red, seething--such hatred I felt for this sick, little worm, strutting about on the ice!

"And I must say," he continued, "he finally did what I told him. He took off that stupid blue shirt of his, wrapped it--just like I told him to--around his

neck. He looped it about the bars--oy veh! ach du lieber! zut!--those stupid bars!"

Spinning, spinning, head going round and round like a bright, white ball.

"Those idiotic bars!" Snow said, in a voice that was clearly preturbed, angry at himself. Oh, I suppose I should have considered it. But just when he finally got guts enough to do it, take his foot off the cross bar and drop--"

And in my stomach, spinning, too. Sickness.

--just then," Snow said, disgustedly, "you pop up!"

"Me?" (a whisper).

"Yes, you, Celia. You. Cog in the wheel, just like always! A monkey--"

Me?

--wrench tossed in just at the wrong moment! Stupid bars! Oh, yes, you can hang yourself on them. But--and I should have remembered this, given him a heart attack or something--but you can also grab them with your hands and hang on, too. And that's what he did, you know?"

So stunned. So confused I could scarcely think.

"That idiot schiz--just as he dropped--thought of you. Celia. Dumb schiz thought of you and tried to hang on."

And what is this? Tears now--ice?

Snowbelly snorted. "And later, at the hospital, I



tried to tell him. I got right in his ear and said,  
Jule, boy. . .just look at yourself. You can't speak.  
You can't move. You can't see. You can't hardly think  
anymore. . . .What the hell're you hanging on for, son?  
 And then you come in. Remember?"

I could not speak now either.

"You come prancing in, standing by the window. But, for gaaww's sake, you don't see him. You can't get past the damned plastic snakes and all that fool machinery, which is all that's keeping him alive, you know? Hell," he said--and now his voice was pure Oklahoma--"you cain't see nothin' but your own lil' self--standin' there, lookin' in the glass at him. 'Sposedly lookin' at him!"

My hands were trembling. My child was so cold now, I could scarcely feel her breath, her chest almost still.

"All you ever see's yoreself, Celia. Yore pain. Yore worry. Yore own selfish soul!"

I am losing her!

"Now, really, Celia Tripp," Snowbelly said (and now, his voice was British again, the functionary, the bureaucrat). "Tck, tck, tck! I simply must have seven! And here you are, throwing a monkey-wrench into the plan! That Jule! That silly, pathetic brother of yours was supposed to be the one--six plus one equalling seven. But now, here he is," Snow said, "running about like a bloody fool! And you just won't let loose of him!"

q "Me!"

"'Me?'" Snow said, now sounding more like Michael than anything else, mimicking my tone. "Yes, you! You will not look. You will not see. You will not--"

"Oh, shut up."

"--tck, tck, tck! Honestly, I don't care who the seventh is--your generation or the next! The order says to have a seventh, and I shall have it!"

"SNOW!" (for Annie was clearly fading, there was barely the thinnest, thready pulse left).

"If not Jule," he said, "then her, Annie! I don't care which. . .oh, my, my, my. But that isn't precisely true either., now is it? That schizophrenic boy is just running about like a fool, floundering--oh, for gaaaww's sake, Celia, look for yourself!"

And he pointed then--ice-arm, creaking, fairly shattering, up. He pointed off into the fog, where--

ssshhhh, ssshhh

--Jule was limping toward us, fairly dragging his leg on the ice.

Sshhhh, ssshhh.

And his face was whiter than I'd ever seen it before. The gray of his eyes had almost faded to the color of dirty snow: not white or dark, not bright as with the living yet not quite--

"Jule," I said, whispering his name.

Sshhhh, ssshhh.

--really, the only part of him that still seemed to be living were the rings: those livid circles of flesh about his neck, red bands changing to bluish-black, exactly the color of--

"I can't," I whispered, into the ice of her hair.

--death. That maw which led to snow and ice, eternal stillness.

"I cannot lose you, Annie," I said. "I will not lose you, like the other."

I looked up. Snow (what was he doing? rolling his coal-eyes to the glistening ice above, as if to say finally? what was he doing? smiling and shaking his head? what the hell was he doing there, in so much ice? crying, too?) Snow, almost gently, was handing the Other to Jule. They turned around--

ssshhh, ssshhh

(not even goodbye?)

--and began to walk away.

"SNOW!" I screamed. "SNOW!"

Hesitation. Rumbling.

"Snow," I said, and for a moment stopped rubbing the life into her, my hand poised on her back. "Why?"

The white dwarf turned his head a bit, his eyes black and glistening.

"Snow. . .why?"

And I swear--just before they vanished, the three

of them, just before they disappeared, walked into the frozen waste--I swear, that little bastard turned to me and shrugged.

## Book III

And now I suppose you and I are at that point-- exactly 4832 words distand from the end of this story, that slightly skewed juncture of time and space, now only 4801 words away (not counting these six in parentheses) that point where the dinner will be burning, the phone ringing itself to death on the wall--outside, the kids will be making a racket, poking a stick at a toad. Something will happen just 3759 words from now, and you will go back to your own life again. Which is as it should be.

And as far as I am concerned--me and my stories-- well, you can do with us what you will. You can fold this

damned thing up like a moon-flower, toss it on the back shelf there, where the dust and moths will get it. You can stuff it in the lower right drawer of your desk, for "future reference" (how is it such "cases" are cured?). God, you can even drop it from the nether sky, sixty two miles up, let it flame back to earth like a meteor--it'd make a good show.

Honestly, I'm just rambling. I've already said almost everything I have to say, all that I know. I've tied up all the relevant loose ends, made bows of them for you, neat packages that gleam like presents in the parlor--

What?

What are you saying now?

Oh, that. The burning house. You want to know how the house burned down, is that it?

Well, as I said before, I've already told this story. Told and retold it to Jim and Lee and Henry Vance till I was blue in the face (their faces turning to stone and pain and ash, in the morning light).

What happened was this:

They vanished like smoke into the great snowy waste, and suddenly Annie and I were in the cellar.

She was so cold (the frost still on her lashes and hair, her skin still so pallid, lips nearly blue), I was grateful--yes, grateful to God--that we "reappeared" in the furnace room.

"Annie, Annie," I said. And I tried to warm her with my hands and body, but that was absurd--98.6° was naught compared to those hundreds there, just behind the iron door.

Which I opened.

And I pulled her close to it, the orange glow of the coals illumining her face like--and I have to say it, for something in the analogy seems apt--a savage child next to tribal fire, a thousand centuries before the wheel.

Still, her teeth were chattering.

And, probably, you can guess the rest, for, as you know, that damned thing never worked right. That furnace was always and forever glitching up, knocking and thumping itself into a frenzy of impotent attempts.

Her teeth were chattering! Even with the machine, it's mid-tech heat and light.

And worse, it seemed to me, the coals were glowing dimmer. Maybe it was the fact that the door was open, maybe it wouldn't work that way.

So, I started stuffing stuff in--you know? to get the heat back? God only knows what I threw. Handfuls of coal, surely. Sticks. Papers--maybe some of them even Jule's, for who really knows how bad that storm in the attic was? It might have blown some papers of his all the way down here. I was just stuffing things--anything

I could get a grip on.

And, you know, too, Virgil never moved his wooden box.

The crate was still down there, next to the furnace door, with all those tools, his fix-it-up magic. Who knows what he had, really, in that old wooden box. Maybe flammable glue, for sticking things together; gas, perhaps, for cleaning.

A random spark was all it took, I'm afraid.

And I pulled her back from the errant flame, just in time. I carried her up the stairs, down the great hall, out the door, just in the nick of an eye--

for that was how it looked, turning back, the whole house an orange mushroom there of light and flame, so bright it almost nicked the eye and skin and heart to watch it burn

--point is, I got her out. Myself, too.

And then, gradually, or quickly, the others came. Doc, who was driving by (he said). Henry Vance and his men in rubber boots. Jim, looking as serious as he must have looked that day in town, you know, when the lion got loose. Lee--oh, of course--Lee, Sylvia tagging along behind him (since then, they have broken up, made up, broken up again). Poor Lee. His face was, literally, a mask of anguish, there on the flaming hill. He grabbed Annie from me (she saying, "Daddy, I'm sleepy," rubbing her eyes; "I'm sleepy, Daddy, but I don't want to dream anymore. . .").

He wouldn't listen.



None of them would.

They--all of them--their faces ashy and orange in the fire's light, kept asking, over and over again, the same question:

"Where's Michael?"

"Is he still in the house?"

"God, Celia, where's the boy?"

"Where is he!"

And I tried to tell them, in that strangely beautiful juxtaposition of time and space, of forces (for the fire there was so intense, house flaming up and out like a fallen star, it melted the snow; there was almost a perfect circle now of wet, sodden earth, warming. And this may be apocryhal, but they told this, later, after they brought me here; I believe it was Bertie, in fact, who said, "You know, that fire was so hot--such an awful fire--your Mother's crocuses came out early." Yes, right up through the ash.) But I tried to tell them, that night, when they asked and asked-- "Where's Michael?"--I tried to tell them the truth:

"That is not the right question," I said.

"What?" they asked.

"Oh, no," I said. "That is not the right question. It isn't even close."

For, of course, they shouldn't have been asking, demanding, where. Not where at all, but what! What is Michael? (at least, that thing they knew to be Michael).

Just what the hell is he--this small, white thing--to torment one, to torment us all?

And then Doc, I believe, was sticking something in my arm. More gumballs of flashing light, the ambulance. Doc rode with me, if I remember it right, all the way to Jefferson, where I stayed for a couple of days in the hospital, and then was transferred here.

On that ride, I think he asked me: "You've heard about Julian, yes? That he died, this morning?"

And probably--this, for the medicine he shot me up with was beginning to fuzz me out--probably I shook my head, yes, Doc. I know.

But you know, the awful truth is--and it's horrible to say this, so close to the end. . .my God, we're only 2945 words from it now (very soon, those kids will be finding that toad! they already have the stick!)--it's really quite horrid to admit this, but the truth is, I don't.

Screw what I said to Doc.

I don't know it.

Julian dead? I don't know what that means!

I don't know what that means at all--even though I saw it with my own eyes. I saw him, and the Other, and Snow, walk into the waste. I saw them vanish before my own gray eyes. (And believe me, at night, even the dreams

I have of my parents, Granddaddy, who comes sometimes in his white, white suit, smoking a smelly cigar--at night, these dreams also of Eddie and Pam and Michael, how he looked in the Bit, in his little blue coat--believe me, on an existential plane, of clammy hands and sweaty sheets, such visions of loss are as real as Julian was, limping away on the ice.) Oh, yes, I have seen the carnage.

And still, I do not know what it--any of it--means.

What?

What are you asking now?

No, of course, not! I am not content to leave it as a question. (That's the sort of shit Snowbelly pulled on me, me asking: "Why?" Snow, shrugging, malevolently, or stupidly, "Why not?" No, that's a pure pile of dogshit, and I shall not drop it that way, with you.)

Of course, I have my theories.

(And I know, I know. Time and words are running out. That toad has just emerged from the storm drain. The children are rounding the corner, almost in sight.)

Really, it is like that lion--the one that escaped, remember? I told you then that we--Eddie and me, Jule--we all came up with possibilites; if you will, possible futures.

(And that is what "The End" is about, isn't it? The future? In stories, you have the beginning--which is virtually always the past; the middle--great, huge, mass

of confusion, which is always the present; and the end,  
oh come now, what is left, but the future?

And, I know. In stories, tales, spells--an archaic  
term, but apt, as you can apply it to so many other things,  
this multi-purpose word; really, you can make it mean what-  
ever you wish--in stories, you see, this stuff about "The  
End" is really crap. Oh, yes. You can read the last  
sentence, the last word, look at the last letter--"s",  
snaking as it does into the final period--you can do all  
this, slam the cover shut, run out to those nasty brats  
by the mailbox and scream:

"What the hell're you doing to that toad!"

The kids can look sheepish.

"Jimmy-Joe," you can say, or, "Sally-Sue, haven't  
I taught you better? Put down that stick!"

And the kids can drop it.

"That toad never did nothin' to you!"

You can do all that. Or save your dinner--and maybe, thus,  
your house. You can answer that phone, hang up on those  
idiots from Grollier, trying to sell you the Harvard Classics.  
Oh, you can do any damned thing you want. The spell is  
over.

But. . .what about me?

What do I do, sitting here, just 2752 words away  
from "The End," without an answer?

What the hell do I do, just because you--whoever

you are--have gotten to the end of this. . .what? story?  
 confession? fit? frothing, insane spell?

Just what the hell do I do? For the memory of it  
 is still so clear. And the funny thing is, if you go back,  
 if you start at the beginning all over again--because you're  
 bored, maybe, and would like to hunt allusions; because  
 it is your job to search for "clues"--I know, you want to  
 help me, Dr. Zuckermann; because you (sorry, You) are  
 counting my sins, want to check the tally--look, if you  
 start reading all over again, I shall have to re-weave myself,  
 feel it twice, and the pain is too great for that. Which  
 only proves the lion right: the whole damned thing's a  
 circle.)

Enough!

(I'm sorry. The toad is dead.)

Enough!

(I'm doubly sorry. I don't know what that means.)

Enough! I have my theories, dammit. Three of them,  
 in fact.

(Trebly sorry here, you and you and You. But what  
 can I do? Three is a magic, nay, sacred number. And I  
 am caught in it, just like you, just like my old English  
 teacher, Mrs. Malvina "Pixie" Harper--you know, the one  
 with the wart, oh, yes, on her nose--old Mrs. Harper down  
 at Harlow Senior High, who taught me everything I know

about writing, who always said, "Now, class"--smacking her ruler on the desk--"class, for every thesis point, there must be three reasons to support it." Three!

Good God, and she was right. The trident, tryptich, triad is important, and I am thoroughly caught up in that 1,2,3 progression of X and Y and Z. So many of us are, in the West, for so much does come in threes. Bad luck. Tines of the modern fork. Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost-- or, no, this is far too confusing to handle. The individual elements here are too mixed up. And, too, I am in a madhouse, so let us say, better, it comes to this: parent, spirit, child.

And look, I am in a madhouse, here. You must remember that--you, my audience. I am in a madhouse, because I do not know what it means. That and, perhaps, because I'm too tired now to choose, to distinguish between futures.

So, this is where you must jump into the fray, help me out, because--)

--in the garden, shortly after I came here, Falconer caught a toad. It was a great, green, sad-eyed thing, only a tiny bit slimey. Still, Willie didn't want him to keep it. He tried first to pry it from Falconer's fingers, but Falconer got upset, and fearing, perhaps, the toad would be hurt, Willie soon switched to "reason." He tried, the best way he could, to talk Falconer out of

the idea of "pet ownership":

"But what would you feed him?"

"Dat"-Falconer, pointing to a fly.

"One fly, Mr. Falconer?"

"Dozens!"

Willie sighed. "Okay, let's say, you could get all the flies you'd need--"

"Dozens and dozens!"

"Okay--dozens, millions. Let's say you'd catch them all. Still, that critter might need more than that. What if he gets sick and--"

"Dies?"

"Could happen, Mr. Falconer. What if he doesn't make it. How would you feel? What would you do?"

"Dance?"

"You'd dance?"

"Da."

Willie, patient as he was, was losing patience. "Be reasonable, Mr. Falconer. That toad will be happier left alone--"

"Dipshit."

Willie closed his eyes. "Okay, okay, it's just a toad. But where would you keep him?"

"Dere," Falconer said, patting his pocket.

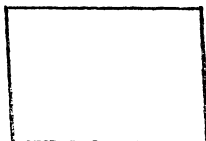
"Oh, no. Not in your pocket. You'd kill him."

"Dere?" Falconer asked, now pointing to the bedroom

wing, to his window.

"No, not in your room. You can't keep animals in your room, you know the rules."

And Falconer was getting angry. "Dis!" he cried. And with his hands (one of them holding the toad), he drew a figure in the air, like this:



Willie scratched his head. "You mean a box?"

"Da."

"You'd build him a box?"

"Da, da."

"Out of what? And besides, Mr. Falconer, even if you caged him, he wouldn't be happy--"

Well, Falconer blew up. Still squeezing the toad in one of his hands, he started gesticulating wildly. "Dis, dis, dis," he cried, and his eyes roved wildly as his arms, as if he were searching. "Dis, dis, dis," he said, "toad! Delighted!"

And the whole hospital went nuts. It was, apparently, the first time in fourteen or fifteen years that Falconer had said a word not beginning in D. My guess is, they called a conference--the doctors and nurses, probably, Willie too. They all got together and decided the toad would be good therapy or something--perhaps they were even hatching plans for salamanders and newts, other reptiles to tempt Falconer's language.



Well, someone--I think it was Jo--scrounged up a shoe-box. Put holes in it so the toad could breathe.

"Toad, toad, toad," Falconer said, and pretty soon he was collecting Fudgsicle sticks from the cafetorium, got to be a horrible pain saying, "Dimme--dimme dat," almost pulling it from your mouth before you were finished. In the craftsroom, Falconer glued the sticks together into a better box, a cage that he painted red.

He put the toad, toad, toad inside, and spent more time catching flies than watching tv.

And you know what?

The toad lived a long, long time.

Falconer carried him everywhere. To dinner. To O.T. where the toad watched him making a new cage--slowly, meticulously, with clay, into which he stuck beads. The toad sat in his Fudgsicle house and watched Falconer put his new apartment in the kiln, fire it up.

I can't swear to this, but the toad seemed happy. He grew fatter, greener. His eyes watered less. I'm sure he didn't know where he was--what the hell x was, or the spot it marked. I know he didn't know he was in a nuthouse. But he had all the flies he could want.

Really, the toad lived a long, long time.

And if Charlotte hadn't gotten sick of him looking at her, dipping out his fat little tongue through the

Fudgsicle bars in the craftsroom--look, if she hadn't gotten fed up one day and pushed him out of sight with her rhythm stick (onto, I'm sorry to say, the hot-air vent), I believe that toad would be with us still.

At any rate, this end was easier to handle than most. (For me, at least, though Falconer, at the gravesight in the petunia patch, was dismally unhappy. He kept looking at Charlotte--herself, in tears--muttering "Dastardly! Dastardly!" throwing darts at the sobbing thing, with his eyes.) But, it's true--I've thought about this a lot. What happened to the toad.

Not just the existential bullshit of that cage, his happiness with the plentiful flies. But, more to the point, the epilogue--what comes after.

Imagine! (And this is Ending One. For Jule.)

This is our journey now.

Take that tiny pinprick dot--there, at the very tip of the eyelash, brother--yes, that one--that microscopic atom of carbon. Six months in mother earth, it comes loose. It lies against the dissolving cheek (that billowed and grew pink at birth); this dot settles, eventually, to the casket floor. A year, or two, or ten: it is completely free.

The apple tree sucks it up. It is that spot now of pearly iridescence, part of the white bloom that

whithers in the summer head and with the breeze is gone. It falls to earth.

The apple tree sucks it up. A bit of seed now, it is part of that bitter green ball the webworm eats, that in turn is consumed by the mantis, that in turn is consumed. The sated grackle caws, flies on.

(Really, we cannot help but meet again. Jule and I. It is purely a physical thing, and too fantastic to think, at any rate, that in this infinite range of possibilities, combinations, that in a million, million years some bit of me will not reside in the inner ear of a bird! Grackle or sparrow or something else--it does not matter what. It is too fantastic not to think that, not to see Jule, too, some tiny bit of him, solitary atom, as part of a leaf--quivering, orange, irridescent, in the cooling autumn wind.

Really, in this world of the toad, the wormy earth, we cannot help but meet again. It is simply a matter of physics.

And I have tried telling this to Charlotte, this ending, to console her. I have said, "What's his name? George? Was that your husband?"--was, for he is dead, her brain so glitched, in a unipolarly depressed way, she barely sees anything--toads, other people, hot air vents--anything else but tears.

"Oh, Charlotte," I tell her, trying to console.

"You will be with him again! You have to. It's physics!"

"Get away."

"No, seriously. Make the plot of it yourself, Charl. You can be that particle of cherry and George, that bit of tongue--"

"Oh, Jesus," she says, rolling her eyes.

"Him, too. You could be atom-to-atom, right there with him, in the belly of a fish! The breeze will have picked you up, and in a million, trillion years, you'll be at sea--"

"Jesus H. Christ," she says, comes out of her depression long enough to call Jo. "Get this lunatic away from me!" Charlotte says. "She's nuts!"

That, too--this, whispered, to myself. In a million, million years, I will come back, at least once, a macadamia nut (Hawaii), or a chestnut, in Prague, laying in the street. That, too. It is inevitable. . . . )

Which one day, I might tell Zuckermann.

(Ending Two. For Dr. Z)

And then one day, I march right into his office.

"Dr. Zuckermann," I say, "I have figured it out."

"Oh?"

"Uh huh."

"Have you?" he says, today in a nihilistic mood, for Mrs. Z has left him. She has taken the three children in the Saab. Even the sheepdog is gone.

"Dr. Zuckermann," I say, my face, placid as lake-water, for I am totally certain and sure of myself, "today, you take the Lazy-boy chair."

I absolutely insist on it, pester him, like a slow, insistent gnat until he yeilds. And I know, he's tired anyway--having stayed up the night before hunting for the key to the safety-deposit box that bitch, his wife, has copped.

He goes and sits, like a lazy boy. He lights his pipe (imitation of my grandfather, old man in white?).

"I want to talk about physics," I say, standing by the window. "Chestnuts. Immortality. I have figured it out."

"Really, Cecily," he says, his voice more cruel suddenly than tired.

"Celia," I remind him.

He sighs. "Let's just get back to where we were last Tuesday, all right?"

On the outside, that placid water is changing to rock, hard bank of packed earth. "But I want to tell you about--"

"Be a good girl, now," Dr. Z says (and what is he after? transference? that I should treat him like my father?). "Get your file, will you, off my desk."

Quivering inside, I get him the file--his notes, mine, all that I have written. (At his suggestion, too, I might add--the whole five-inch thick "book." O, don't worry if makes sense or not, he said, do it like an essay in school.

He flips to the end, the final page or so.

"I want to tell you about--"

"Last Tuesday," he says. "I asked you about Harlow, remember?"

I say nothing. (Yes, like my father.)

"Cecily?"

"But I wanted to tell you about Jule and me and--"

"Let's talk about Harlow," he says. And maybe it's that his wife has left him, that he has no one left to cut roses for or care about--but, oh, he is in a black, black mood. His eyes throw out a thousand volts--shock therapy? out to get a rise?--such a black mood he is in when he says, "Remember, Cecily? I asked you a question about Harlow."

Really, I would like to bite my lower lip, suck it in, for this is ghastly! This man is ghastly. . .sadistic . . .more torturer than father, more ghost than--

"Can you possibly explain," he says, tiredly, as though he's asked this catechismic question a thousand times, as though he's talking to a goddam toad here, something without a brain in its head to remember or recollect, "can you possibly tell me why we cannot find Harlow? On any map?"

--which cannot be.

Which cannot be at all, for Annie comes.

(And this is the third: for her, for the child,

for Annie, who comes on Sundays, her hands sticky from chocolate ice cream, touching my dress.)

Really, it would be ghastly without her.

For it is fall again, October, and Noab is painting the leaves. Just last week, I was out in the garden with Willie--me, sitting, feet up, in a white net chair, pulling that rusted cardigan tight (Snow's first breath already blowing from the distant fields); I was pulling the sweater around my bones, watching Willie there, with his tiller-- up and down the petunia patch, with the daisies now, turning their dry stalks under.

"Why do you do that?" I asked, when he began to lay out the yellow straw, an act so practiced and inexorable I could tell he'd been doing it years.

"Better for the beds to protect them!" he cried (and, oh, what Zuckermann would do with a line like that!).

I sank into my sweater--Willie, behind a row of white mums from which, just then, a Monarch emerged: great orange wings, black spots like holes, he hovered in the crystal air for a moment, near Willie's arm, then, fluttering, took off across the south garden wall.

Oh, it would be ghastly without her.

What with Falconer in the dayroom, with me, those few hours a week they grant us of "unstructured time." What do they think? That the clocks stop? That galaxies no longer whirl or comets hurtle on account of ash-trays not

being made? It is honestly too ridiculous to describe, these "unstructured hours." You know how it goes. God, I sit there, trying to read (the Ladies of the Moose having donated to us volumes and volumes of dog-eared tomes--not bad stuff either, most of it. You should know. I've copped enough of it--just like Zuckermann's wife, perhaps, who copped the key. Really, it is so ridiculous, for what does that make me? A bitch, too? Which is what Falconer says--)

"Ditch. Ditch."

God, I sit there, trying to read, and the man is fairly shouting it in my ear.

"Ditch!"

The toad dead, he has latched onto me.

He wants my full attention. He follows me everywhere, even into "unstructured time." (And I know, I know. You know it, too. I should never have tried that with him in the tv room--talking. I am being paid back now, in slimey spades, for my torturous attempt to make sense of him.)

But then Annie comes.

Lee brings her Sundays to the dayroom to visit, her face and hands a sticky mess from the double-dip ice cream--nuts, too, by the look of it, that stain on her new wool dress.

She comes with Lee in the car from Harlow--Lee, balder than ever, his extravagant pate gleaming in the harsh, fluorescent light. He sits in the dayroom with us,



(Falconer too), Lee, looking glum, uncertain, guilty.

Good Lord, the guilt!

Lee carries it like a tan; he fairly glows with that dark, inner melanin that has even crept into his eyes. There is so much guilt when he looks at me--

(me with that idiot, Falconer, who right now is babbling on the bench, just feet away from us, who has in his hands that damned toad apartment he made, lidless, from clay)

--so much guilt there, when he looks at the wall and sees Michael's shadow, his eyes still asking, where? which I've tried to answer, telling Lee the facts: they've sifted and sifted the ashes--no bones, Lee, nothing--

(and all the while, that Falconer is drivelling, drawing me back, trying to steal my attention with "Dis, dis, dis toad!" so furious the sound this idiot makes! I would like to hate him--)

But then Annie comes.

(I would very much like to hate Falconer, tell him the truth--)

But then Annie is coming across the room, her new doll, Sherry, in her hand.

(Falconer, you made it of a piece--)

But then Annie is walking to me, small, lovely, her fingers sticky with chocolate ice cream. Her face, too.

(--fired the clay cage perfectly: plenty of airholes

and room to squat, but of a piece! A solid web of clay,  
hingeless, lidless, of a piece. . .no way out, Falconer,  
yes. . .but also no way in, because--)

Annie is here.

Small and sticky and saying my name. Chestnut  
hair more lustrous, even in artificial light, than Noab's  
leaves in the window.

(no way, because--)

Annie is here. Her body warm.

Her small sticky hand worms into mine, the fingers  
interlace. She says Mommy and squeezes hard--hard--inspiring  
me to clutch back, bring her to my bosom where she belongs.

VITA 2

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