

Masthead Logo

**The Iowa Review**

---

Volume 21  
Issue 2 *Spring-Summer*

Article 34

---

1991

# In Starkville

Nicole Cooley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Cooley, Nicole. "In Starkville." *The Iowa Review* 21.2 (1991): 112-125. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4026>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## In Starkville · *Nicole Cooley*

### THE CEMETERY

At the back beside the wire fence, a marker a little bigger than a popsicle stick with “Baby Ramona” on it and nothing buried underneath. Mama doesn’t know it, but I drive out to this cemetery every afternoon. I sit on the grass in front of Ramona’s grave. Every day at three, the caretaker drives by in his red truck and waves. I lift my hat, wave back. He must think I am in mourning, keeping a vigil after all the other relatives have left. I don’t come here to pray or talk to the dead but I am waiting. Janice disappeared last June. She has been gone three months. When she comes home, my sister will find me here, watching over her family.

### MRS. KOGER

The only person in Starkville who still asks me about my sister.

Each Sunday, I pick her up after church. Sitting in the car with the windows rolled down to keep the inside from filling up with heat, I listen to the strains of music coming from the church. “Shall We Gather at the River” ends each service. A moment of silence—the air is heavy and still. Then the acolytes push open the double oak doors. Voices rise into chatter, as the congregation streams out of the church, ladies stopping to admire each others’ dresses, their new hats, men offering stiff smiles as they shake hands. I have always hated shaking hands. Mrs. Koger walks out last. She says she likes a moment of her own with Reverend Pike. Whispering, she presses her fingers into his hand. Reverend Pike was once Johnny Pike, in Janice’s ninth-grade class. For a whole year, he called her every night. She refused his dates. He never acknowledges me now, though he always glances across the church lawn to see the car, shading his eyes from the sun.

Mrs. Koger is seventy, but she doesn’t have the old lady smell I remember from my own grandmother—talcum powder and crushed lavender. Instead, she smells sexy. She sprays too much perfume on. Maybe like Janice she tucks a piece of perfume-soaked tissue between her breasts. I try to imagine it—the piece of kleenex against her wrinkled skin. I remember my mother misting perfume through her hair, along the back of her neck, when she got dressed to go to parties. This was a long time ago, when

Janice and I were little. Maybe I invented this memory—I always see my father buttoning up the back of her dress and that cannot be true.

“What do you hear from your sister, Will?” Mrs. Koger asks, straightening the silk rose she wears pinned to the collar of her dress. She asks this question every week, as if she has forgotten that she asked me the Sunday before.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

I want to say, “Janice jumped in the river” or “She set herself on fire.” Fire is the best thing I can think of to start people thinking about my sister again. To make them remember that she exists. I would never have to finish telling the story because everyone would decide the ending for themselves—Janice died or was sent away to the state hospital in Vicksburg.

#### CHILDHOOD

Janice and I break into houses. This starts ten years ago. She is thirteen. I am ten.

The first time, we don’t talk about it. There is no plan. One night, we are walking back from the park where there was a game of Hide and Seek. I sat on the gravel path while Janice played with the older boys, the ones who are old enough to smoke and drive. When one of them was “it,” and she got caught, she’d scream as he slapped her on the thigh or lifted up the skirt of her dress.

Janice stops in front of Mr. and Mrs. Cranes’ house. She touches her finger to her lips. “Listen,” she says. “What do you hear?”

Cicadas buzz. Wind ruffles the branches of the trees. “Nothing,” I say.

“That’s right.” She tugs on my jacket sleeve. “I want us to have a secret,” she whispers. “Something we won’t ever tell.” I look up at my sister. Her face is pale in the moonlight, but her eyes glow. Round and wide, a circle of yellow around the iris. “Come with me, Will.”

She leads me around to the Cranes’ back fence. She crouches on the ground and clasps her hands together to make a foothold. “Go first.”

“Why can’t we open the gate?” I ask.

“Because. We have to do it like this.”

I climb over the chain link fence, tearing my jacket on the way down. Mama will be mad. My heart beats fast. What is the secret?

The house is dark. We go through the kitchen window, which is left unlocked. We slide over the sink. She grabs my hand in hers and leads me

down the hall, as if she knows the way. Photographs of the family in gilt frames line the walls. Mr. and Mrs. Crane with their arms around each other. Andrew Crane in his baseball uniform posed with a bat. I draw a sharp breath—Andrew is in my class at school. This is dangerous. The carpet is soft and thick; I can feel it through my sneakers.

We enter the first room at the end of the hall, the parents' bedroom. In the middle of the room is a large, heart-shaped bed. "Look," I say.

Janice gives me a stern, warning look. "Shh." Her face is serious. "Let's lie down," she whispers. "Do this with me."

The mattress sinks underneath my weight as I lower myself down. Janice stretches out beside me, spreading her arms out at her sides like she is making a snow angel. Her fingers brush my side. "Let's sleep for a little while."

Now I am terrified. Janice rests her hand on my arm, below my jacket sleeve, and closes her eyes. I stare at the ceiling fan. I figure I'll count to two hundred—One Mississippi, Two Mississippi—then wake her up. I imagine all the bad things that could happen as we lie there—the Cranes will arrive home, find us sleeping in their bed, call our mother, call the police. From next door, I can hear the neighbors talking in the yard. A man laughs. I become more and more scared until my legs start to tremble. Janice breathes slow and even. Her fingers cool against my skin.

"Janice," I whisper. "Let's go."

"Mmmmm." She turns towards me, her eyes still closed. "Not yet. I'm not ready. I'm in the middle of a dream."

I count again, this time to three hundred and back down. A long time seems to go by. I try again. "Janice?"

Her eyes snap open. "Oh, for God's sake, you're such a baby, Will."

We leave the same way we come in. I close the window behind us. All the way home, as we walk in silence along the dark street, I can't think of anything but how she says it, that word, *baby*.

When we reach our house, she stops and turns to face me. Light from the streetlamps gleams in her dark hair. She says, "Mama can't find out about this." I nod to show her that I understand. She moves her hand up to my face and pushes the hair out of my eyes with a quick, light touch.

## NIGHTMARES

“The bad dreams come from her father’s side,” Mama says. It’s five-thirty, and I’ve just woken her up to give her the first dose of the medicine she takes since the doctors discovered her heart murmur. She doesn’t need the medicine, but after Janice left she told the doctors they had to prescribe something for her or she’d check herself into the hospital to die. Every morning, I empty two blue capsules into a cup of hot lemon water. Janice told me once this cleans out your system after a night asleep.

I tuck the quilt over my mother’s knees. She sits on the couch all day and insists she is always cold. The doctors have taken me aside, have told me there is no reason my mother can’t get up, walk, go to work again. She is scared. She is only fifty, but she believes that if she stands up alone, her heart will start to beat too fast. Nothing I can say will make her change her mind.

“I don’t have bad dreams,” I tell her. Because I have never dreamed at all. I will myself to fall into a deep, unbroken sleep every night, a sleep like blank white paper.

She acts as if she doesn’t hear. “Janice left us because she couldn’t sleep in this house. That’s what she said. She expected me to believe that. I’m her mother, so I’d believe anything.”

“She did have trouble sleeping,” I say. Like the time after Ramona. Janice would get up from the couch and go to her room at three o’clock every day. I can imagine her lying down on the oak frame trundle bed, and spreading her fingers flat across her stomach to feel where the baby had been. What did she do after that? Did she ever cry or hit herself in the ribs with a fist or get up to look in the big cracked mirror over the dresser? She told me she was afraid to sleep because the baby appeared to her in dreams.

“Just like her father.” Mama never calls him “my husband” or “your father,” but “her father,” as if he belongs only to my sister.

“Drink the medicine,” I tell her. “Then we can go for a drive around the river.”

“I’m too sick to go anywhere. Leave me alone.” She hunches down into the embroidered pillows on the couch. “My life is over and your sister has ruined hers.”

Mama often tells me that. I’ve learned to ignore it, but, still, each time, I wait for her to tell me that I am the family’s hope, the good son, the one she can count on. I want her to tell me that it matters if I stay or disappear.

### THE BANK

The afternoons, when I sit in the cemetery, Mama thinks I still work at Am South Bank.

### THE MAP

Starkville is three miles wide. You can drive the length of it in ten minutes, in a straight line from the Whitney Bank to the Dairy Queen. A row of houses, small white boxes, built for the riverboat workers fifty years ago, each one exactly the same—three front steps, a bell-shaped door, a window like an eye on either side of the entrance. A square of grass for a front yard. Once in a while, you can hear a steamboat whistle or the callope from the ferry on its way to New Orleans as you drive by. Sometimes, I count off the houses we broke into: the Hamiltons, the Bookers, the Baldwins, the Stamps. I can't remember all of the houses we have been in.

You drive the length of Starkville and there is nowhere to go and you turn back.

I find the map in my mother's bureau drawer, after she decides she is sick and makes me dress her. I don't want to dress her; I don't want to see my mother's body. I am looking for her underwear that day, searching nervously through the drawers, and I pull it out, underneath the garters and silk peignoirs she never wears, a yellowed paper, folded up in squares. Why does she keep a map of the city hidden as if it were a secret?

I sit down on the edge of my mother's bed, tracing the blue lines on the paper with my finger, following the empty roads, charting the route of my escape.

### THE FORTUNE TELLER

I find her on the way home from the cemetery. I have driven by the sign for years—TEA ROOM LADY PALM READER FIVE DOLLARS TO PREDICT THE HISTORY OF YOUR LIFE. A wooden placard in the front window of a house.

I've driven by so many times, but all of a sudden I know that if I were Janice, I'd stop and go inside.

I am thinking of the hot days when we are little and Mama takes the fan for her room and Janice brings me into her bedroom to lie on her bed with her and drink Orange Crush. Janice watches the ceiling like it is the sky, looking for the outline of the face of the man she'll marry. She says that if

she closes her eyes then opens them very fast she can see a shadow in the air sometimes, a faint, blurred oval. There are water marks on the ceiling of her room. She tells me that the rain can come up that high in the house, like the red that rises in a barometer.

The lady palm reader wears a housedress and a single gold hoop earring. I don't know if she lost one earring or if the absence is intentional. Her dress is low-cut and light—I can see the outline of her breasts through the cloth. She grabs my wrist in the doorway and stares at the lines on my palm, then takes the money and leads me by the hand to a red-curtained room in the back. It smells like she has a lot of cats. There are candles stuck in coffee saucers and a plastic incense burner. She lights a cigarette and starts talking.

"First off," she says. "I can see that you have an extraordinary power over others."

I interrupt to ask, "What does that mean?"

She looks at me, her eyes blue and level, her lips parted in a little smile. "It means your advice will never fail."

I am disappointed. "Can I ask about something specific?"

"Go ahead." She draws on her cigarette, tapping the long ash on the edge of the table.

"Can you find out where someone is? I'm looking for my sister." I realize I am talking fast, as if I'm nervous, and I am. "Her name is Janice and her middle name is—"

The fortune teller raises her hand in the air to stop me. "I've got something," she says. "I was just about to tell you that people who have names that begin with J are very important in your life." She pauses, lowering her eyes. "Especially *women*."

I can't think of any Js except my sister and my mother, whose name is Jacqueline, but I have never once heard her called that.

"I don't want to find out about women," I say. "It's my sister—"

"Oh, of course you do," the fortune teller says. "Everyone who comes in here wants to find out about women." She leans forward and I can see down her dress. "What's the real reason you wanted to talk to me, honey? Janice isn't really your sister, now is she?"

## CHILDHOOD

We break into the houses for years. We never once steal anything. We walk around the houses in the dark and lie down in other people's beds.

Janice often warns me about what will happen if I tell anyone about our "visits" as she calls them. "Not even your wife," she says. "Not your own children." "I'll hurt you," she tells me once. "I could kill you, do you know that?" She says, "When you least expect it, expect it. I'd track you down if you ever ran away." I don't really believe all of these threats, but I am scared enough to keep quiet.

One night, I feel a little pinch, a prick, in my finger, and I jerk awake. Janice is standing over my bed. One of Mama's darning needles in her hand.

"We're going to become bloodbrothers," she says. She climbs into my bed.

My finger stings. I squeeze my eyes shut. I put my finger in my mouth to stop the bleeding. I hear Janice's sharp intake of breath and know that she's done hers. "Repeat after me," she says. "I swear—"

"I swear—" I keep my eyes shut.

"That I will never tell another living soul—"

"That I will never tell another living soul—"

"About the secrets I have with my sister, Janice Ann Marie." She pauses. "I will carry these secrets with me till I die, to the grave."

I repeat her words. She presses her finger to mine. I open my eyes and she is smiling at me. "We mixed our blood," she says, curling up closer to me in bed. "Now we're linked up forever."

## FATHER

I hear Mama tell Mrs. Koger she's a widow. "He died before Will was born," she says, then, in a lower voice, almost a whisper, "He drowned." Mrs. Koger nods, her blue hat bobbing on her head. She holds her purse tightly in her lap; there are damp stains from her fingers on the leather. She is the only visitor who comes to see my mother now, comes every other week and brings macaroons in a round gold tin. Mama won't eat them—"sugar goes straight to the heart"—so I smile politely, thank her and stack the tins on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard.

"Janice never got over her father's death," Mama says, shaking her head.

I don't contradict my mother. To the world outside our family, she can't



admit that she was left. To Janice and me, she says once that our father is a gypsy who ran away to New Orleans and sometimes she tells us that he goes there because he is a Cuban refugee and can't wait to take the boat back out of the Gulf of Mexico away from us. She tells it several different ways. What is the real story?

#### NIGHTMARES

Does my mother dream about my father?

Does Janice, wherever she is, ever dream about me?

Who is dreaming my dreams?

#### THE OTHER CITY

When I am ten and Janice is thirteen, Mama gets a letter from our father. A thin blue envelope with a postmark she won't let us see. She stands in the kitchen, leaning against the table, turning the envelope over and over in her hands then slits it open with a bread knife. We watch her read, her eyes scanning the lines, with no expression. She crumples it up into a ball and leaves the room; Janice digs it out of the kitchen trash can. The envelope is stamped Tampa, Florida, with no return address.

He says he is married and has a son. He works on a shrimp boat and doesn't make enough money to support two families. He hopes she understands. He is sorry he has never written before. He doesn't mention me or Janice.

"That bastard," Janice says, startling me. I have never heard the word spoken out loud but I know what it means. She rips the letter up into little pieces, dropping them into the drain of the sink. She looks as if she might cry.

"It doesn't matter," I tell her. "We don't need him." But she doesn't seem to hear me; she has turned on the cold water faucet to force the pieces down.

We are all quiet for the rest of the afternoon. I want to talk to Janice, but she goes up to her room and shuts the door. I sit on the couch, picking at loose threads in the pillows, waiting. Mama comes downstairs in her good blue coat and hat, takes the car keys off the hall table, and leaves without speaking to me.

At first, that makes me scared. My mother is going to leave us too. I start to think how Janice and I will have to live alone till we grow up, cook

for ourselves, tuck each other into bed at night. The more I think about it, the more I can imagine it, the better our new life alone together seems. We won't have to go to school anymore or do chores around the house. We won't have to break into houses anymore because we will have our own house to be alone in.

Then the front door bangs open. Mama is back. "I brought you all a present," she says, dropping a bag into my lap. "Call your sister down."

It is a paper doll book with pages of pieces to construct a village out of paper. Tabs of paper fit together and you can make a city. I don't want to build the city—it's wrong for boys to play with paper doll books. Mama spreads the pages on the living room floor.

"I'll help you," she says, kneeling on the rug beside me.

It gets dark outside. We don't talk. My eyes ache and my fingers stiffen and no one mentions dinner. I want to go to sleep. My stomach begins to hurt. I yawn.

"We can't go to sleep till we've glued every piece in place," Mama says. Her hair falls in wisps around her face, damp with sweat.

She and Janice do most of the work. I fall asleep on the floor, resting my head on a couch cushion.

In the morning, I open my eyes and my mother and sister are gone. The village looks like something that has been rained on: all the paper has folded in on itself. I crawl across the floor and try to stick the pieces back together, but I just make it fall apart even more.

Mama comes down in her blue robe. When she sees the village, she starts crying.

"I'm sorry," I say helplessly.

Later, I know it must be the humidity that keeps the glue from sticking, but still she takes it as a sign.

#### THE DESPERATE HOURS

At night, when Mama lets me help her out to the screen porch to watch TV, she grips my arm, leaning heavily against me. I arrange her blankets in a wicker chair and give her the night medicine in a cup of tea.

One night, we watch *The Desperate Hours*, a movie that used to make Janice scared, about a family held hostage in their own home by three criminals. Trapped inside.

"That wouldn't happen," Mama says. "Those people could leave." Mid-

way through the movie, she falls asleep, and I watch the rest alone, leaning forward in my chair to follow every word and action. Mama's head falls back against the pillow, her mouth open. Her hair is matted, her skin sags around her chin, saliva dampens her cheek. She is ugly now, changed into an old woman.

Will my sister look like this someday?

#### MRS. KOGER

One Sunday, she turns to me in the car and asks, "Do you expect your sister will come back?"

#### THE RADIO

A big black box with square dials that used to be my mother's when she was a girl. The old-fashioned kind you find in junk shops now.

I imagine my mother listening to Billie Holiday as she dresses for a date. She is eighteen. The music swirls in cigarette smoke; dusting powder settles in the air. My mother hums along with the music, "Am I Blue?" She sits on the edge of her bed to slip on her silk stockings, rolls them up past her knees and clips them to the garters, at the tops of her thighs.

She wraps her long hair into a twist at the back of her neck. Her hair is dark and heavy like my sister's. Leaning close to the dresser mirror, she lines her eyes. She pats powder on her face to make it pale, presses some between her breasts. Finally, she slips on her dress, a pink cloud, over the curve of her hips, falling just below her knees.

Sometimes, when I imagine this scene, my mother becomes Janice. I have to stop myself.

It is too hard to stop remembering. Remembering how I used to pick her up after work at the fabric store in our red Plymouth with the broken front seat door, how she'd lay her head in my lap as I drove home. How at night, after we were sure Mama was asleep, we'd push the oak dresser up against her bedroom door and turn the radio on low to jazz or static. How she'd raise her arms like a little girl as I lifted up her nightgown.

#### THE CEMETERY

I study the alignment of the graves. The bodies are buried on an East-West axis. Heads facing west, feet towards the east.

I learn this in Sunday School when I am eleven. We sit in a circle around

a low wooden table in the parish hall. Mrs. Bender reads from a black bound book as we fidget, hands clasped in our laps. "Sit like penitents," is one of her favorite things to say. Janice and I have broken into Mrs. Bender's house. We know that even though she wears a straight brown dress falling nearly to her ankles, there are lace stockings drying on the shower rod in her bathroom. There is a copy of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* on her bedside table. Her bedsheets are stiff though, like the pallets she tells us the saints slept on, itchy and hard.

Janice sits beside me in a pink dress Mama made, swinging her legs, dragging her new shoes across the floor till Mrs. Bender looks up from her reading, raises her eyebrows and goes on. "The faithful will rise to face Christ on Judgment Day," she reads. "Jerusalem lies to the East." Janice kicks me lightly in the shin.

"Stop it," I whisper, bending down to rub my leg.

"Do you have something to share with the class, Will?" Mrs. Bender snaps the black book shut.

"Yes, he does," my sister says, leaning forward across the table. "He wants to know what happens if some dead person gets buried backwards."

Mrs. Bender's face tightens. Her mouth set in a thin, hard line.

Janice repeats the question. Several children laugh.

Mrs. Bender recovers her composure. "Doesn't Will know how to speak for himself?"

"No, don't you know? He's deaf. I was sure you knew that. He can't talk at all, except to make sounds like this—" Janice opens and shuts her mouth, grunting, to demonstrate. "See?"

Laughter spreads through the room. "Out, both of you," Mrs. Bender yells. "I know your mother and I know the kind of family you come from. You ought to be ashamed."

Janice rises from the table, pulling me after her. "What *kind* of family?" she asks, crossing her arms over her chest. "Everybody knows we don't have a father."

Mrs. Bender slams the book down on the table. "You are not welcome in this class again."

Now, years later, I sit on the grass and stare at the graves. Since it's still summer, everyone brings flowers in coffee cans and fruit jars wrapped with tin foil. In the poor section of the cemetery, I have noticed, there are small flat headstones covered with possessions—eyeglasses, broken dishes, medi-

cine bottles, mussel shells. More relatives come to sit beside those graves. East and West. Ramona can't rise up. Her grave an empty space.

#### CHILDHOOD

The first time it happens is when we break into Mrs. Koger's house. I am seventeen.

Janice is working at Hancock's Fabrics, and she hates the job. She says she is bored all day, helping ladies match thread to different colored cloth and showing them the best kind of buttons to buy. When she comes home, she is restless. She sits at the kitchen table, tapping her foot against the rungs of her chair, smoking and flipping through Mama's old copies of *Harper's Bazaar*, waiting for Mama to go to bed so we can leave the house together. Janice wants to break into houses nearly every night.

That night, we leave at midnight. Janice walks fast, her high heels clicking on the pavement. She walks purposefully, taking long strides. I try to catch up and keep falling behind.

She stops in front of Mrs. Koger's house.

"No," I say.

"Why?" She crosses her arms beneath her breasts.

"I don't want to." Her husband died the week before. Mrs. Koger has gone to stay with her sister in Jackson.

"I'm going in." Janice starts across the lawn. "I don't care whether or not you come."

For a minute, anger rises up in me, but I can't let my sister make the visit alone. She is already inside when I run across the grass.

When I find her standing in the kitchen, she touches my wrist and smiles. "I knew you'd come."

Foil-wrapped dishes stacked on the kitchen counter, brought over by the neighbor ladies. One of Mama's cookie tins in the pile. The table scrubbed clean and shining. The two chairs pushed in.

All the mirrors are covered with sheets. The blinds are drawn. Janice and I walk down the hall to Mrs. Koger's bedroom.

Next to the bed, boxes of Mr. Koger's clothes, wrapped in brown paper and labelled with his name. The blankets drawn tight across the bed as if no one ever sleeps there.

"This is wrong," I say. "We should leave." My face burns. I can't look at Janice.

She pulls me down to the bed. "A dead person slept here," she says. "Let's lie down."

I am shaking. When she reaches for my hand, she laces her fingers into mine. She turns to face me. It is too dark in the room to see. She moves closer. Rises up a little. The ends of her long hair brushing against my face.

She touches me. I lie straight and still, then I begin to kiss her back.

"Have you ever done this before?" she whispers. "You haven't, have you?"

I shake my head. I don't want her to see that I'm scared.

She fingers the buttons on my shirt.

#### RAMONA

If anyone knew, they would say it is a good thing she dies.

She dies two months before she is born. The doctors say she is too small to bury. The Mississippi State laws say she has to have a grave. The man at the cemetery unfolds a map and shows Janice the space on the blue grid marked "Infants and Children." Janice pays for one small space, gives it a name.

Why has she never visited the grave?

#### FATHER

I have decided on the real story: he never knows that I am born. He never knows Mama is going to have a second child. Otherwise, he would not leave.

How does he leave? Does he take his hat from the hall table one day, open the front door, and simply disappear? Is there a scene, an argument, a fight between my parents that my sister sees?

I have decided: one day he is just gone. He takes nothing with him for his next life. He leaves when no one is looking. No one expecting him to go.

#### CHILDHOOD

Dark houses. Windows left open. Janice loosening her dress. The shadow of her leg falling across mine.

#### THE MAP

Janice leaves in the middle of the night. I wake up and hear her heels clicking on her bedroom floor as she walks back and forth across the room.

I hear dresser drawers opening. The zipper on her suitcase pulling closed—the sound of something tearing.

I lie in bed and listen before I go to her. Have I been waiting for this to happen? For days, weeks, since Ramona, Janice will not talk to me, except to tell me about her dreams. Dreams where Ramona comes to her at different ages, as a baby, as a young child, as an old woman. Maybe Ramona gives my sister a sign. Ramona could be telling Janice it is time to leave me.

I enter her room without knocking. She stands over the bed, her back to me, putting things into her purse. She wears Mama's old blue robe.

"What are you doing?" I say though we both know.

She doesn't answer, but she turns around. Her face is pale. Her hair brushed smooth to her shoulders. She tightens the belt of the robe around her waist, pulling it flat across her chest.

"Where are you going?" I step closer and she backs towards the wall.

"I have to get dressed now," she says. Her voice is low, almost a whisper. "Go away."

I am still. She stares at me with no expression. She loosens the robe and drops it to the floor. For a second, she stands there, naked, in her high-heeled shoes, then, quickly, she pulls on her underwear, a thin blue dress.

"Janice," I say.

When she looks at me, her face is old. There are tiny lines at the corners of her eyes. "I'm tired," she says. "I'm tired."

I carry the suitcase down the stairs, walking behind her. In front of the house, she takes the suitcase from my hand. "Go back inside."

"Janice," I say.

My sister has already turned away from me. She starts slowly down the sidewalk, then stops, bends down to remove her shoes. She walks along the street, holding her shoes in her hand.

Should I have told her to take me with her? She wants to leave me. I am watching her leave me. She walks past the rows of dark houses. I am watching. It takes a long time for her to disappear.