AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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These six stories represent a child's search for identity. The first story, "Road Map," is intended to be independent from the other pieces in this collection, but has been included because it is clearly set in the same place and explores many of the same themes of the other pieces. Specifically, the remaining five stories are part of a fictionalized memoir, detailing the life of Daniel, a mixed-race child growing up in a small Minnesota town. Children normally construct their identities based on three major factors: race, community, and family. With a Chinese-American mother and a (lapsed) Jewish father, however, Daniel does not fit into any pre-defined racial or ethnic categories. This point is brought home to him by the surrounding community (largely white and Christian), which treats him as an outsider. Daniel thus turns to his parents for direction, but as radical graduate students of the 1970s, they are uncomfortable serving as standard role models. These stories, while standing independently, also work together to document Daniel's efforts to "orient" himself in the absence of clear guidelines.

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The Orient King, and Other Stories

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Demian Hess, Author

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THE ORIENT KING, AND OTHER STORIES

ROAD MAP

"Aw, shit," Dad said, and banged through the screen door into the dark.

Jessie looked at me over the kitchen table and listened hard. Some nights we heard the gravel crunch as Dad ran down the driveway to the dirt road. Jessie would relax then because she knew he'd be back soon. He was just going to stretch his legs, walking or sometimes running in the dark, stopping to light a cigarette at the mailbox before coming back. But that night, instead of footsteps, we heard the car engine start, then Dad drove away.

I looked at my plate and hoped that Jessie wouldn't cry. We were eating hot dogs and baked beans and Veg-All.

"He probably went for cigarettes," Jessie said. "The gas station closes at ten."

I nodded and kept eating. The corn was soft and watery. The carrots tasted a little like paste.

"He's getting milk for breakfast tomorrow, we're almost out." Jessie picked up the milk carton and shook it to show me. Some milk sloshed in the bottom, and she tipped it into my glass.

Jessie had been worrying that Dad might leave. All day he'd sat on the couch in the living room, smoking cigarettes and listening to the same records. The couch was by the window and he'd stared outside, through the porch, looking at the horse pasture on the other side of the drive. "Some say the heart is just like a wheel," the woman on the record sang, and I thought of a heart turning over and over, rolling farther and farther away until it was gone.

All that morning, before Dad left, Jessie and I had played in our room so as not to bother him. Around noon, Jessie got out the little metal church with the slot in its roof where we kept our allowance. I lay on my back and held the church upside down over my head, shaking it to get the coins to line up over the slot. Whenever I saw a coin, I stuck a paper clip inside to tip it on edge. Dust fell into my eyes and the coin I was fishing for came out and hit me on the forehead.

"How much we got?" I asked, sitting up. Jessie was counting the money.

"Dollar thirty-seven. That's enough."

I shook the church. There weren't many coins left.

We snuck out through the living room, got our bikes, and rode into town to the general store.

"We should get him something nice," Jessie said as we went inside.

Plates and table things were stacked on a counter at the back, near the jeans and work clothes. Jessie found a salt and pepper set for $1.10 and we decided that was best. The shakers were made of clay and tan colored with little flowers painted on the sides. The salt shaker had three holes on top, the pepper only two.

"That's so you can tell them apart," I said.

The man at the front rang the shakers up and put them in a little white box with a sheet of tissue paper. He folded the box together like in the bakery.

It felt good to buy things for Dad. Jessie always knew when to cheer him up. We bought a set of mugs once, and the week before we had gotten bowls. We had to wait for our allowance or we'd buy more. I got fifty cents every week and Jessie got seventy-five because she was a year older. Dad had forgotten to give us our allowance that morning, but I hoped he'd remember when he saw the shakers.

We needed to be nice to Dad because Mom had left in the spring. I woke up one morning and she wasn't in the house and her car wasn't in front. Jessie went into the kitchen to ask Dad where Mom was, but I stayed in the living room and threw a rubber ball against the wall. Every now and then I went by the door to the kitchen to look inside. Jessie was in Dad's lap, still crying. I kept throwing the ball against the wall. I didn't know why Jessie had to ask where Mom was because I already knew she was gone. I finally caught the ball and went to the kitchen.

"What's going on?" I spoke real loud and said it like I was sighing, like I was tired.

Dad looked up. He'd had his face in Jessie's hair and he blinked his eyes.

"Your mom and I are getting a divorce."

He spoke really softly, and Jessie kept crying. All of a sudden, I wanted to cry, too, but I nodded and looked at the table. The stuff from last night's dinner was still out. I picked up a jar of mustard and read the label.

"This sure is hot," I said. Dad nodded and reached out to put his arm around me. That made me want to cry some more, so I put the mustard on the table and went back to the living room to throw the ball.

Dad was still on the couch when we got home from the store. We snuck into the kitchen and left the salt and pepper set on the table in the box for him to open.

Jessie wanted to hunt butterflies outside, so we got her net and went to the horse pasture in front of the house. The grass was thick and long, up to our waists, and I was afraid because of the daddy long legs. Jessie said that they ate mosquitoes and were good bugs and nothing to be afraid of. I followed behind her so that she would knock all the spiders to the ground ahead of me. The grass parted around us like we were wading in a lake. Jessie held the butterfly net up in front of her with her elbows out like it was a shotgun. She had started collecting butterflies last summer when she turned ten and Dad gave her a net and a mounting stand and a plastic terrarium. I followed Jessie all the way across the pasture, but we didn't see any butterflies.

"They don't like the long grass," Jessie said, and neither did I, so we ducked under the barbed wire fence and went into the dirt road. We followed the road toward the mailbox, still looking for butterflies along the banks and collecting agates.

"City kids can't walk this far," Jessie said. It was a mile to the mailbox.

"I can run really fast," I said, and sprinted as hard as I could, staying on the balls of my feet. Jessie tried it, too. We looked back at our tracks, little round pockets in the sand where just our toes had hit.

"That's ostrich running," I said.

"It's the fastest."

"There's nothing better than living in the country," I said.

We stopped when we came to the old schoolhouse next to our mailbox on the paved road. No one used the building, but the town still mowed the lawn.

"I'm hungry," I said. We'd had English muffins with peanut butter and jelly for breakfast.

Jessie nodded. "There's berries."

We went around to the back of the school and picked blackberries off the bushes. There were little green plants with heart-shaped leaves growing nearby in the grass. The neighbor kids called it duck weed, so we ate those, too. Then we ate some round white mushrooms which Dad had said were puffballs. He was always collecting mushrooms and could identify all of them with his books.

"We can take care of ourselves outside," I said.

We started walking back home, then stopped to pull up a tall yellow flower which Dad said was a Jerusalem artichoke. The root was supposed to be good to eat, but it was full of dirt and tasted bad.

"I think you're supposed to cook it," Jessie said.

Near our house we found a dead snake in the road. We dug a hole in the sand with our hands and buried the snake with the agates I'd picked up. We put the yellow artichoke flower on top to mark the grave.

Dad was sleeping on the couch when we got inside.

"Do you think he liked the shakers?" Jessie whispered. We went into the kitchen. The box was still on the table, unopened. Jessie frowned, her mouth twitching at the corners like when she cried at night.

"That's okay," I said. "We can use them for dinner. You can ask for the salt and he'll see the shakers and it'll be a surprise."

Jessie liked that, so we took the shakers out of the box and filled them.

"Let's make dinner, too." Jessie went to the refrigerator and found a package of hot dogs and a bag of Veg-All. I climbed onto the counter and got a can of baked beans out of the cabinet.

Jessie and I set the table while the hot dogs cooked. When they split open, we knew they were done. Music was playing in the living room and we went to the door to look. Dad was smoking cigarettes on the couch with the lights off. It was getting dark outside. I wanted him to come in and taste the beans, but we went back to the stove. We wanted to cheer him up by showing that we could take care of ourselves.

"Let's start eating, he'll come in," Jessie said. "Did you wash your hands?"

I shook my head and went to the sink. Jessie turned on the faucets and twirled the soap over and over in her hands, then she passed the bar to me. We

kept rubbing our hands together until the soap suds built up like shaving cream and dripped into the sink.

"We're getting them really clean," I said, and showed Jessie how white my hands were after I'd rinsed them. I rubbed my fingers together and they squeaked.

We filled our plates and sat down. I ate some baked beans, but they didn't taste very good. Jessie was staring at the door to the living room. I tried to think of something to say, but just then I heard Dad get off the couch. "Aw, shit," he said, and then the screen door slammed, and the car started, and he drove off into the dark.

Mom never liked to cook. She had long black hair that fell straight down on either side of her face and she didn't smile when she talked to us. "Get in the car," she'd say, her hair hanging down like weights.

At night, after dinner, Mom used to sit at the kitchen table with Dad and talk. When she was with him, she pushed her hair back behind her ears and smiled and laughed. Jessie and I listened to them. Dad talked about what had happened during the day around the house, or maybe at the restaurant where he worked sometimes for extra money.

"Crazy night last night. Everyone wanted fries. The fryer was full all the time, we were way behind. I picked up a basket, turned around, and dropped it all over the floor. Scraped it up, put more salt on it. Special seasoning, I said."

Mom laughed. "You should take some time off," she said. "We should travel."

Dad shook his head. "We can't go. My thesis committee won't give me more time."

"Why finish? You can't get a teaching job. There aren't any jobs. How many openings were there last year? Two?"

Dad nodded and lit a cigarette.

"We should go away. Let's go west. Let's go to California. Or down to Mexico. Shit, we should go overseas. We could go to India."

"We can't travel." Dad looked at Jessie and me.

"How long does it take to write a thesis?" Jessie asked.

"Years," Dad said.

Mom got up from the table. Her hair was down around her face. "Go to bed," she said.

Dad still hadn't come back after dinner, and I scraped the leftover food into the garbage while Jessie filled the sink with water.

"Make the water as hot as your hand can stand," Dad always said when he washed dishes. Jessie checked the water, dipping her finger in and pulling it out right away. It was red as soon as she brought it into the air. We washed the glasses first, then the bowls, then the plates, then the silverware and pots. You needed to have a system.

A car slowed down on the dirt road and pulled into the driveway. Jessie and I ran to the living room window. It was dark outside and we couldn't see the car, just its headlights as they swept around, past the house, over the pasture, and back down the drive. The car turned onto the dirt road and drove away.

"Just turning around," Jessie said. "Dad might have stopped at the restaurant after going to town. We probably don't have much time before he gets back. Or he might talk for a long time. Let's get ready so he can tuck us in."

We went to the bathroom, brushed our teeth, and put on our Dr. Dentons. Jessie finished ahead of me, and when I came out of the bathroom, she was kneeling on the couch, staring out the window. I sat down next to her. It was black outside with no cars to light up the road.

Jessie got off the couch and found the phonebook. She opened it on the floor in the strip of light falling through the kitchen door. I squatted next to her.

"We should call the restaurant and find out when he left." Jessie turned the pages, but couldn't remember what the restaurant was called.

"It's the 'C and R Restaurant,' isn't it?"

"The owner's Jim," I said.

There weren't any restaurants under 'C' or 'R' in the phonebook, so we started going through it a page at a time. Jessie looked on the left half and I looked on the right.

"What's the owner's last name?" Jessie asked. "There's a Jim here and his last name begins 'C,' like the name of the restaurant." I looked at the name, but didn't think that was him.

"Look under 'J,' maybe it's called 'Jim's Restaurant,'" I said.

Jessie looked, but couldn't find a number. She went back to the page she'd marked.

"I think this is him," she said.

Jessie carried the book to the kitchen and I followed her. She stared at the page, then picked up the phone and dialed the first part of the number before hanging up. We went back to the living room and looked out the window. There weren't any cars.

Jessie walked around the room, then went to the kitchen. I watched from the doorway. She dialed all the number this time, but hung up again.

"Did it ring?"

Jessie nodded and bit her lip. She looked back in the book.

"He lives on Fourth Street. I think that's near where the restaurant is."

She picked up the phone and I went to the living room and sat on the couch. There were still no cars. Jessie dialed the number in the kitchen.

You could tell when a car was coming because the road went over a little hill at the far end of the horse pasture. When the cars drove up the hill, their headlights pointed into the air and you could see it from our window. First there

would be a flicker around the top of the hill, like something white moving on the other side. Then the headlights would come over the top like an explosion.

I heard Jessie talking on the phone.

Something white was flickering in the sky, but it wasn't a car. It was too high up, way above the trees. Dad once said it was the Northern Lights and that sometimes they turned orange and red and were better than fireworks.

Jessie came out of the kitchen and climbed onto the couch. She was crying. I stared out the window. The Northern Lights were still white. It didn't look like they were going to change color, although I really wanted to see that.

I'd never told Jessie, but one day I was going to go away and find some place for us to live. It'd be in the woods or maybe the mountains, and it'd be clean and nice.

Jessie moved on the couch next to me. She'd stopped crying and was waiting for Dad to come home. I wanted to go to bed and closed my eyes.

Maybe I'd live in a cave and heat it by making a fire. I'd need to block the entrance, so I'd use branches at first and then make a door from old boards. I'd have to take a saw and hammer and nails. I'd put everything in a backpack and take a bus to the mountains. I could catch fish and squirrels and rabbits and smoke the meat to eat in the winter. I'd pick berries and make bread out of acorns and eat Jerusalem artichokes and mushrooms. I'd take one of Dad's books on how to survive in the woods.

I opened my eyes and looked at Jessie. She was on her knees, her arms resting on the back of the couch, her forehead pressed against the window. I knew she wouldn't want to go with me. I'd have to leave first and get everything ready. Then, in a year, I'd send a letter and she'd come and stay with me. When Dad and Mom finished traveling, they could stay with us, too. Or maybe it'd be better if they built a cabin nearby so that Jessie and I could visit.

"I think I know where Dad is."

Jessie pulled her forehead off the glass and turned toward me. "Where?"

I got off the couch and went to the shelves to find the book of road maps. "I'll show you."

Jessie followed me to our room and I got on her bed and made her get under the covers.

"I think he's gone to get Mom." I opened the atlas to the front where there was a map showing all the states together. Jessie stared at it, then touched the page.

"This is where we are," she said.

"He's probably taking this road." I traced a squiggly blue line with my finger. "He probably won't get very far tonight. He doesn't have much gas. He'll have to stop . . . here." My finger stopped on a town and I leaned forward to read the name. "Sioux Falls."

I held the book so Jessie could see. She looked at the little black dot, imagining what was there.

"Tomorrow, he'll head west, Montana probably." Jessie lay back and watched my finger as I moved it along the road. "But here, see, the interstate meets this other one going south, and Dad will look up and think, 'That looks like rain up there, maybe I should turn here.'"

I stopped and looked at Jessie. She nodded, so I kept going.

"So Dad will drive south, this way, down through Wyoming. And then he'll think about going all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Maybe he'll work on a fishing boat, he always said that was a good way to make a living. So he'll drive south through Colorado and into New Mexico, and come to this road that turns east. And then Dad will look at the road and think, 'I wonder what's happening at home?'"

Jessie was really quiet. She was staring at the map, her eyes only half open. The lamp was on next to the bed, the light through the shade making everything look orange.

"So Dad will turn east and drive all the way back here. He'll come down the paved road to our mailbox, turn in front of the school building, go up the dirt road, and then he'll be home."

Jessie kept staring at the atlas. I flipped through the pages to show her the exact roads Dad would take in each state. We went over and over the route, and after a while, her eyes closed and she went to sleep. I kept looking at the maps. I wasn't tired anymore. Outside Sioux Falls, there was a place called Wind Cave. Dad had once told me that caves were the best places to live. They were warm and

dry inside, the temperature never changed. You could live there all winter long with just a little fire, the snow swirling above ground, everything white outside. Water would trickle in and make a lake at the bottom of the cave. Eyeless fish lived there, pale white, easy to catch. I searched through the atlas one page at a time, looking for more caves and parks, forests and mountains. There were so many good places to live. When I got to the last page, I shut the book, turned off the lamp, and went to sleep.

IN MY AUNT'S APARTMENT

There was a place in my aunt's apartment, high on a shelf, in the kitchen, above the dishwasher, in a large glass jar with a white screw-on lid, where she kept the dog biscuits. Whenever my sister and I came to visit, my aunt would take the jar down from its shelf and give us each a dog biscuit to eat.

"Here you go, little puppies!" she'd say. Sometimes we barked and begged like dogs.

I didn't see my aunt very often because she was Chinese and still lived in New York. My mother had moved away from there when she married my father, a Jewish boy from Scarsdale, and I have only a few, random memories of ever being in Chinatown. I recall eating dinner in a restaurant once with my aunt and grandparents, all of us sitting in the dark, unable to see the carpet. Carts moved up and down the aisles. Voices murmured. I balled rice in my fists because I couldn't use chopsticks, and my grandfather pointed at me and laughed. Another time I hid from dragons that were dancing in the street. Firecrackers exploded. A drum went bong bong bong bong bong, over and over, never ending, until my father carried me upstairs, my fingers in my ears.

"Shh, it's all right. It's only Chinese New Year."

"Why do they *do* that?"

"They think it brings good luck."

And I remember sitting on the counter in my aunt's apartment. This is my clearest memory. My mother is rinsing dishes next to me, putting them in the washer. The air is steamy. It is very warm. Sunlight slants over the white counter top, drops off the edge, and slants over blue tile floor. I want another biscuit, but can't beg like a dog for one because I already did that this morning. What else likes to eat dog biscuits?

I bounce up and down on the counter. "I'm a nigger!" I shout, and wag my tail.

My mother turns from the sink and slaps me across the face.

"Don't ever call yourself that!" she yells, and runs out of the room. The door swings back and forth, back and forth.

I lie on my back on the counter, my head hanging over the edge. The sun is bright on my face. My eyes begin to hurt. Outside the window, clouds race across blue sky and I think the building is moving. I am falling, falling, falling.

My father finds me and takes me outside to get ice cream. He talks to me quietly, disturbed by what I have done.

"You should never use that word," he says. "It upsets your mother."

"Why?"

"It's an insult. You can't let people call you that."

We reach the ice cream parlor, and he orders me pistachio, my favorite.

"Be careful of what you call yourself," he says, handing me the cone.

The ice cream is cold and green and sticky and sweet. I nod my head, sorry for what I have done. I didn't know it was bad, I say, and choke over words. Winnie the Pooh. Orange and black stripes. Bouncy bouncy bouncy all day long. Ice cream runs down my face, staining my clothes.

My father listens carefully, then sighs.

"No, that's not right," he says. "That's the wrong word. You meant to say tigger."

THE ORIENT KING

Carp swam in the slow-moving, chocolate brown water of the Rum River near our farmhouse in Minnesota. My parents had moved to the country when I was six, and my father fished in the Rum almost every weekend. The carp had red scales as wide as my thumbnails and golden eyes flecked with black. "Trash fish," the neighbors said. "Can't eat them, too muddy." Whenever they hooked a carp, they threw it on the riverbank and left it in the sand to die.

But my mother was Chinese and had grown up eating carp with her family. The trick, she said, was to let the fish swim in clear water to clean out its system. When we caught our first carp, my father put it in the bathtub, and the next morning as I sat on the toilet, I watched it swim back and forth, amazed by what had been hidden at the bottom of the river, how dark it was against the white porcelain, the way its tail slapped the water and sprayed the tiles. After a week, my father hit the fish over the head with an ax handle, then gutted it on the kitchen floor over spread newspapers. He showed me everything that came out of the fish and named it all, the stomach and purple air sac and intestines, so it didn't seem terrible, but more like a secret finally being revealed. My mother hid in the bedroom until the killing and cleaning was over, then roasted the carp with soy sauce and green onions and ginger. The fish came gaping out of the oven, eyes protruding, flesh soft and white, traced with faint black veins, like sediment collected on the edge of the river.

"Fish food!" my mother said.

"Carpe diem!" my father said, and everybody laughed.

Being Chinese meant eating carp whole, with the head on. It meant grouse and pheasant cooked in soy sauce, and packages of paper-wrapped preserved plums, *mui-muis*, smelling of licorice and old oysters, so salty and sweet and black and wrinkled they made my eyes water and mouth pucker. Being Chinese meant my mother had long, straight hair and moles on the side of her face—one at the corner of her right eye, another beside her nose. She soaked cotton balls in alcohol and stuck them to her face in the mornings to dissolve the pigment. We had boxes of firecrackers under the sink and Roman candles and bottle rockets that Grandma and Grandpa sent from Chinatown once a year, the fireworks arriving in a box with the *mui-muis* and shrimp chips and dried bean curd and golden needles and cloud ears and cellophane noodles and bottles of Panda Brand oyster sauce.

My sister and I lit the firecrackers in the farmyard after school, blowing steaming craters in the mud. We emptied gunpowder from the fireworks onto paper and watched it blaze in a rapid red flash. Once we made an enormous bomb by putting a dozen firecrackers inside a toilet paper roll and taping the ends.

"It'll make a hole ten feet wide," Jess panted as we collapsed in the grass, a safe distance from the bomb.

"Everyone'll hear for miles," I said.

We covered our ears and hid behind a gopher mound. Eyes squeezed shut, I counted to a hundred, then a hundred again. Nothing happened. I opened my eyes

and peered up over the wild peas. On television, when the safe didn't blow up, the cowboys played odds and evens to see who would have to take a look, but I didn't know the rules. I got slowly to my feet.

"Wait here," I said to Jess, and crept back to the bomb, staying low, imagining I was the brains of the outfit even though she was a year older.

The paper at the end of the toilet paper tube was still smoldering. I circled the bomb carefully, examined it from all angles, then turned the tube over to check the fuse. With a bang, the firecrackers inside exploded, making the field tilt from side to side, stunning my ears.

"I'm deaf! I'm deaf!" I screamed, and ran back to the house. My mother was at the stove, boiling mason jars for canning.

"What happened? What happened?" she said.

Suddenly realizing I could hear, I shook my head. "Nothing!" I said, but she spanked me and sent me to my room anyway.

Being Chinese meant that we had words no one else used: *mung-mung*, for the brown crusty rice at the bottom of the pot, not too burned, but perfect for scraping out and eating with our fingers. *Boopees* for our butts—"I'll spank your *boopee* if you don't stop!"—the universal threat from either parent if Jess or I got too loud, called attention to ourselves. Our *boopees* produced *but-buts*, when we farted, and *yay-yeah*, when we sat on the toilet. We made *shoo-shoo* when we peed. "Do you need to go to the bathroom? What kind? *Yay-yeah* or *shoo-shoo*? Wipe your *boopee*! Call if you need help."

If we were daring, Jess and I shouted the words in public, on the swings behind our school at recess.

"*Yay-yeah*!"

"*Shoo-shoo*!"

"*Boopee*!"

"What are you saying?" Brian Williamson asked, his face an absolute blank. Jess and I laughed and swung higher and higher, proud that we knew more than everyone else.

On television, we watched "Kung-Fu," the story of Kwai Chang Caine as he walked across the American desert, looking for his lost brother, Danny. His father was white, his mother Chinese, just like our parents. He didn't even look Chinese, but everyone knew he was different. He spoke softly and had special powers. He could fight and walk through walls and snatch a pebble from your hand before you closed your fingers. "Hey, Chinaman," everyone called him, as if his white part didn't matter, just like our Jewish part didn't matter. "Hey, Chinaman," Jess and I called each other, but softly so that Mom wouldn't hear. She didn't like us acting Chinese, or showing we were different from everyone else. When people stared at us in town, she always ignored them. If someone came up to her in the grocery store and asked where she was from, she just said "New York," and then pushed her cart away, not waiting for them to ask anything else.

"People are stupid," she said. "They think they've figured you out, but they don't know what the fuck they're talking about." She shook her head and loaded

groceries into the car. Jess and I stood in the parking lot and tried to snatch a red jawbreaker from each other's hands. My mother slammed the hatch. "I know what you're doing. You think you're so clever, but how would you like it if I didn't let you watch that show anymore?"

At home, Jess and I drew tigers and dragons on cereal boxes and then cut them out, leaving a hole in the middle of the cardboard. We dared each other to hold the templates against the wood stove and burn the shapes into our forearms. The dragon was a sign of power, the tiger of stealth. I imagined going to school with long-sleeved shirts to hide the scars. Tracy Million, the brown-haired girl who sat in front of me, would wonder why I always covered my arms, even when it was hot. Then one day some men would come to school, looking for the milk money in Mrs. Anderson's desk. I'd leap up to fight them, and they'd rip off my sleeve, revealing the dragon brand glowing red on my skin.

"Turn off the television," my mother said. "That shit'll rot your brain."

On TV, the white lady in the laundry was always asking: "Mr. Lee, how do you get your shirts so white?" And Mr. Lee would grin and say: "Ancient Chinese secret!"

Jess and I loved that commercial, convinced there was an ancient secret, something mysterious about being Chinese. We were always angry when Mrs. Lee stuck her head through the curtain at the end, waved an empty detergent box in the air, and shouted, "We need more Calgon!"

"She's so stupid!" Jess wailed.

"She should have just waited!"

At school, I looked for chances to use my special powers, opportunities to discover the ancient secret of being Chinese. Walking to the pencil sharpener, pretending my lead was broken, I stole the lunch tickets and gum erasers that the other kids left lying on their desks. On the playground, I glided past the boys playing tether ball, the girls jumping rope, walking on the balls of my feet, blending perfectly into the background. In homeroom while Mrs. Anderson talked about addition and counting syllables by clapping your hands, I stared out the window, past the muddy fields bordering the playground, beyond the leafless line of trees, and imagined walking barefoot across the country, a flute in my simple leather shoulder bag, crossing mountains and deserts, looking for my lost family.

One day while I daydreamed at the radiators by the window, hot air blowing on my face, a group of three kids came up to me.

"You see this?" Tony Blaine asked, pointing to a small, green country on the globe. Tracy Million was with him, and another boy, all of them grinning, like they knew something I didn't. I peered at the country. Nigeria.

"You see that? That says 'nigger.' That's where you're from, 'cause *you're* a nigger."

Tracy and the other boy laughed.

"No, but . . ." I started to say, wanting to explain how the spelling was different. All three looked at me, and Tony raised his eyebrows, his face glowing and expectant. I knew then that he expected me to cry or yell or run away, that he

thought nothing I could do would surprise him. But instead I smiled mysteriously. I gave a slight bow, a dip at the waist, inclined my head and closed my eyes humbly. Then I turned back to the window, dismissing all three, letting their laughter wash around and through me, like water draining through a sieve.

I tried to feel sorry for the other kids at school because they didn't know what it meant to be Chinese. They had never lived on the East Coast or ridden in an airplane or had parents who had won fellowships and were writing dissertations. "Try not to show off," my father said. "They haven't had the opportunities you've had." But it was hard not to, especially since their parents were ugly, stupid, and white. The men had hair growing out of their noses, teeth black from chewing tobacco, fingers cut off in sausage machines. In town, the women waddled around with curlers in their hair, peering through thick glasses. On Sundays they'd get dressed up, the men in dark suits, the women in skirts, and come to our house with gold-edged Bibles in their hands. My mother would slam the door in their faces, but my father always laughed.

"*Baruch ata Adonai ehloheinu,*" he'd say. "Good thing you came, I'm speaking in tongues."

One Sunday a month after school started, my music teacher, Miss Gunderson, came to the house and knocked on the door. When I saw her pull into the driveway, I hid in the cold room off the kitchen because I knew she'd come to talk about God. During music class, she always lectured about the angels and the sweet healing power of Jesus, leaving me confused and shaken since my father had

said the Constitution guaranteed a separation between Church and State. I peered out the side window onto the porch to see what she would do when my father answered the door.

"Would you like to hear about Jesus?" Miss Gunderson asked, holding out a Bible in her gloved hands. She was dressed all in black, like she was going to a funeral.

My father grinned and shook his head. "Sorry, not part of the same club," he said. "I play for the other team, had the *bris* and everything."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Miss Gunderson said. "What about your wife? Your children?" She looked around the porch, as if searching for the rest of the family, and I drew back from the window. For a moment I thought she had spotted me, but she was only staring at the metal trough where a carp was turning lazy circles. "Oh my, is that a pet?"

"Food." My father grinned. "Let's just say we're following our own road to salvation."

At school the next day, the other kids told me that Miss Gunderson always went to the farms on Sundays, working her way slowly from one end of Anoka County to the other. It took her an entire year to visit all the houses.

"Everyone said I'd die," Miss Gunderson told the music class. "The cancer was in my bones, but sweet Jesus heard my prayers, looked down at me from Heaven, and cured me." She raised her hands and the sleeves of her white cardigan slid down her arms, showing blue veins like thick wires under her skin. "Let's

make beautiful music so the angels will smile." And she brought her arms down, marking time as we sang.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord . . ."

Whenever we missed a note, or fidgeted, Miss Gunderson would shake her head, soft white jowls quivering, and tell us that *He* was watching (a single finger thrust upward). Sometimes during class she asked students to name the Twelve Apostles, or the children of Adam and Eve, or to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. I never knew the answers, and she'd stare at me sadly, asking question after question, while all the other students giggled and a hard lump grew in the middle of my stomach.

The Christmas pageant was the most important event of the year for Miss Gunderson, her personal project. At the end of November, she took us to the auditorium and showed us the set the janitor had built for her—the hay bales for the manger, the two by fours hammered together and covered with blue fabric for the stable. Cardboard palm trees leaned at odd angles, and a low wall made of milk cartons and construction paper ran along the back of the stage.

Lining us up in front of her, Miss Gunderson announced the parts for the pageant, a nativity scene, in which we would all gather to adore the little baby Jesus. Tracy Million with her oval face and pale skin made a perfect Mary, Miss Gunderson said, while Tony Blaine, the biggest boy in the class, would play Joseph.

"And Daniel," she continued, "will be the Orient King. Our special visitor from the East!"

The class applauded as I stumbled forward, tripping over my own feet to take the costume list from her hand. I was stunned to have a part, and read the list over and over on the bus ride home. "The Orient King is the wisest of all who came to adore the Christ," the list said. "He carried with him fabulous treasures from his exotic kingdom. Robes should be sumptuous, recalling the splendors of the Ancient Silk Route . . ."

Wisest of all! I imagined the sumptuous robes glimmering around me as I crossed the stage with treasure in my hands.

That night during dinner, my father read the costume descriptions and laughed.

"King of the Orient, not bad," he said.

"I can't believe they can get away with this shit," my mother said. "What're they going to do next, a minstrel show?"

"Maybe he can be King of the Jews next year. That'd be appropriate."

"It's not funny," my mother said, and threw her napkin down. "They've got no idea what they're doing." She stood up from the table.

"Ah, Julia. Of *course* they have no idea. That's what's so wonderful."

My mother went to the living room without saying anything, and the door swung shut behind her. My father shook his head. "Eat up, kids," he said. "For soon the sky will rain blood and we'll have a plague of frogs."

We had rehearsals for the Christmas pageant every day in school, Miss Gunderson running around the stage, waving her hands, dropping sheet music all over the floor.

"No! No! Angels, please, you must take a deep breath, deep breath. Stand further back, don't cluster like that."

The play was supposed to open with the Shepherds staring up into the night sky and seeing a light o'er Bethlehem.

"Oh, what light? What light? Is it *our* Bethlehem?" the First Shepherd asked.

Standing in the wings, I rolled my eyes in disgust. I'd already memorized the entire pageant, right up to the closing finale when the Archangel wished for "Peace over all the Blessèd Earth on this most special of nights when our Lord is born." I wished that I had some lines of my own to read, but Miss Gunderson had explained that the Orient King couldn't speak since he didn't know English.

"No, no! Orient King, walk more regally. Why are you shuffling?" Miss Gunderson clapped her hands. I'd been carrying my gifts, headed for the lighted center of the stage where all the characters were gathered, just like in a beautiful Christmas card. "Sedately, but not half asleep. Don't you have a costume yet?"

I shook my head and twisted miserably from side to side, still dressed in my normal clothes. It was already the second week of rehearsals and all the Angels had enormous *papier mâché* wings covered in chicken feathers, and Tracy Million's mother had made a white wimple with a gold cardboard halo to show her

Divine Light. Tony Blaine strutted about in sandals and a feed sack tunic, a real silk necktie around his waist for a belt. The only prop I had was a shoe box I'd covered with tin foil to represent gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

"Oh dear." Miss Gunderson sighed. "Well, tell your mother to get you a costume by next week!"

But my mother never asked about the pageant, and I didn't dare bring it up, afraid of her snort, her irritated look if she realized how badly I wanted to walk across the stage. Public schools weren't even supposed to celebrate Christmas, my father had told me, so I knew that I shouldn't want to be part of it. Nevertheless, every morning I would leave the costume list on the kitchen table as a subtle reminder, pulling it out of the basket of pens by the phone. When no one was looking, I opened all the bags and parcels I could find to see if my mother had bought any cloth or glitter or sequins.

By the third week of rehearsals, I was the only one without a costume. The Shepherds ran around in long white robes, and even the townspeople had something to wear, either aprons, or wooden shoes, or furry caps that Miss Gunderson said made them look rustic. Each time Miss Gunderson asked me why I didn't have a costume, I stammered and tried to find excuses she would understand, explaining that we didn't have many lights in our house for my mother to sew at night, or that we didn't have any cloth, especially since the costume was supposed to be silk. But she only shook her head sadly, never satisfied with my explanations.

"Doesn't your mother know how important this is?" she finally asked, exasperated.

I hung my head and shuffled to the side of the stage to wait for my next cue. Tony Blaine was standing in the wings wearing his tunic and carrying a long black staff.

"Don't you believe in God?" he asked, a cardboard halo encircling his head.

I stuck my hands in my pockets. "I'm Jewish," I mumbled, remembering that it had a religious significance.

Tony puckered his eyebrows, confused. "But do you believe in Jesus?"

"I'm Jewish," I said, more loudly this time.

Tony scratched under his halo. "You're going to burn in Hell," he said, finally.

At the end of the week, Miss Gunderson pulled me to one side, away from all the other students and asked if everything was all right at my house.

"My mom's busy," I said, trying to think of a new explanation.

"What does she do?"

"She's in school."

"What about your father?"

"He is, too," I said.

"It must be very difficult for them," Miss Gunderson said, "still trying to get their education."

I smiled, grateful that she finally understood how hard my parents worked. I was tempted to boast then, to tell her how my mother and father read all the time, or how they took notes on index cards. I didn't want to show off, though, so I simply nodded.

On Monday, Miss Gunderson stopped me in the hall and gave me a package. Inside was an old red bathrobe with a bamboo print, a red skullcap, and a long Fu Manchu mustache made of white cotton wool. The robe was faded, but it reached the ground when I put it on, and during rehearsal I swept across the stage with no one seeing my feet, just like I was floating on air.

"You look wonderful," Miss Gunderson said, and clapped her hands. "Such grace, a natural star!"

I blushed hearing her, standing just off stage in the wings. Tony Blaine was watching me, and I kept my face expressionless so he wouldn't think I was taking myself too seriously.

"It's a Chinaman!" Tony said to a few of the Shepherds who were standing nearby. "He looks just like Charlie Chan!"

I suppressed another smile and bowed, trying not to show how flattered I was. It's just a pageant, I reminded myself, but it still felt good to be recognized as something special.

At the end of practice, Miss Gunderson gave me a note and told me to give it to my mother. On the bus ride home, I imagined Miss Gunderson recommending

that I go into acting, that I become a famous star. The lights! The costumes! I unfolded the note to see what she'd written.

> Dear Mrs. Levine [it said],
>
> Please accept this costume as a measure of my respect for how hard you are working to further your education. I know how difficult it is to go back to school, and there is no shame in accepting a gift during this most precious of seasons. Jesus said that we are all each other's Neighbor, and I always hold that in my heart when I see someone in need.
>
> God bless you, Miss Gunderson

The note didn't mention my acting so I stuck it back in the bag, not remembering to give it to my parents until after dinner, when I put on my costume and glided up and down the living room for them. My father laughed and clapped his hands while my mother read the note.

"What the hell does she mean, 'when I see someone in need?'" my mother said.

"I think she's offering us a helping hand," my father said, and gestured to where I stood posing, my arms crossed and tucked up into the sleeves of my robe.

My mother scowled. "Take that off," she said.

Disappointed, I removed the robe and handed it to her to fold. She gripped the costume, balling the fabric in her fingers, and for a moment I thought she'd tear it in half. She shoved it roughly into the shopping bag Miss Gunderson had given me.

"She's absolutely nuts, what's she thinking?"

"Just a little something to keep the natives happy," my father said.

"Who's he supposed to be, Ming the Merciless? He's not wearing that. I don't care if he walks fucking naked across the stage."

"You can explain that *your* people don't believe in clothes. He's one of the gentle Tasaday, the noble savage, one of the lost tribes of Mindinao."

"Oh, shut up." She looked back at the note. "'Further my education'? I'm writing my dissertation for shit's sake. How far did *she* go in school?"

I went to my room that night wishing I didn't have to be in the pageant. Everyone would stare at me because I didn't have a costume, and they would lecture me about burning in Hell and not believing in God. No one at school understood that there were hundreds of other religions in the world, that Christianity was just one of them, that a stupid pageant didn't matter.

Jess came to my room later, and I showed her my costume again. She touched the fabric, envious because her class was too old to be in the play.

"You look just like Master Po," she said, meaning the blind Shaolin monk who had taught Kwai Chang Caine to fight. I let her try on my mustache and showed how I could walk by gliding over the floor. Then we turned out the lights and moved about like we were blind, relying only on our extra senses. "Looked for, he cannot be seen. Touched, he cannot be felt," I whispered in the dark, and shrank away from Jess's searching fingers.

On Sunday, my mother came home late from the city and put a white plastic shopping bag on the kitchen table. After taking off her jacket, she carried her Singer sewing machine to the kitchen and pulled her hair back in a ponytail.

"Come over here," she said, and held up a yellow measuring tape. I craned my neck, trying to see what was inside the shopping bag.

"Hold still," my mother said, stretching the tape across my shoulders.

She measured my arms, around my waist and neck, and all the way down from my shoulders to my ankles. When she had written everything down, she reached into the bag and took out a long piece of shimmering gold cloth. It looked like silk or satin, or something special and smooth. She shook the cloth, then doubled it over and lay it on the table. With a piece of chalk, she sketched in the outline of a long robe, marking the corners off with straight pins that she held in her mouth. I sat watching as she fed the shiny cloth through the sewing machine, making folds and pleats, outlining a button hole, trimming loose threads. I hadn't even known she could sew. The Singer always sat at the foot of the bed, and whenever a button fell off my shirt, I sewed it on myself. She pulled the costume out of the sewing machine and broke the connecting threads.

"Here, try this on. Arms up."

The cloth was slippery and cold, loose threads tickling me around the arms and under my throat. She buttoned the collar under my chin and tapped a loose sequin back into place. Cautiously, I turned from side to side, feeling suddenly taller and older. The robe rustled as I moved. She had glued red and green sequins to the front to make glittering dragons, and the cloth felt stiff and heavy. I spun, letting the robe swirl out around me.

"Careful, the glue's not set!" my mother said, and helped me take the costume off.

"It's perfect," I whispered, and she grunted.

"Let's see what Gunderson thinks of that," she said.

On the night of the pageant, the school was crowded with parents and teachers, the floors wet with black melted snow. Miss Gunderson rushed around backstage, quivering, waving her hands, trying to get all of the students ready but only making us more nervous. Tracy Million had forgotten the barrettes to hold the wimple away from her face, and Miss Gunderson collapsed on a folding chair, close to tears. "It'll be fine," she said, wringing her hands. "It'll all turn out just fine."

"Sure it will," Tracy said, and patted Miss Gunderson's knee. "There, there."

A thousand faces seemed to fill the auditorium, pink ovals floating in a dark sea. The stage felt strange, too full, crowded with extra props—a plastic Christmas tree and giant cardboard cutouts of camels and sheep and cows that the older kids had colored with markers. In the wings, the Shepherds and Angels and Mary and Joseph and townspeople waited, nervous and frightened.

Miss Gunderson led the choir through one more warm up, and I slipped away to put on my costume, the robes feeling cool and silky. Miss Gunderson finished the warm up and she leaned against a wall, her face red in the backstage lights. "That will have to do," she said, and then caught sight of me standing in the

wings with my pipe cleaner crown on my head. Her mouth opened and she took a step toward me.

"Oh my," she said, blinking her eyes as if she had just seen a bright light, a figure stepping out of a book. I smiled and swept past her, past all the other students, and took my place on the opposite side of the stage, waiting for the play to start.

Everything seemed to slow down then, to become calm and quiet. Miss Gunderson stopped rushing around, and the rumbling in the house died down. One by one, the students took their places in the wings, some coming up to look at me, as if to make sure I was real. Every time the gawkers came near, I bowed my head, and they backed away, running back to tell the others what they had seen: a tall figure in the shadows with a crown on his head. When the curtain went up, the Shepherds spotted the light in the sky and led their flock to the manger without forgetting their lines. The Angels danced across the stage without losing their wings, and none of the townspeople knocked over any of the palm trees as they positioned themselves around the manger where Mary and Joseph sat side by side, a warm light in their faces.

A murmur rose up from the audience as I entered the stage in a spotlight at the end of the pageant, my robes flowing down my shoulders like the purest silk. Miss Gunderson smiled blindly in the stage lights and led the choir in "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem." Voices rose up higher and higher. All eyes were on me as I paced across the stage, my back stiff and straight, holding the gold, frankincense,

and myrrh before me. Tony Blaine and Tracy Million reached out to welcome me at the manger, halos around their heads. Somewhere in the black bulk of the audience, my parents leaned against each other, watching. I reached the manger and knelt down, the sequins of my crown reflecting a spray of silver and red light all around me.

After the show was over, parents stopped me in the hall to look at my costume, and I turned for them, modestly dipping my head. Iva Bird took my picture and clicked her tongue. "You look like such a little prince!" she said.

My mother and father and Jess were waiting in front of the auditorium, clustered near the table with the Kool-Aid and Oreo cookies. For the pageant, my father had worn his best shirt, the one with peacocks embroidered on the shoulders, their tails hanging down in green and purple swirls. My mother wore a black velvet dress and high heels, her hair piled in a tight bun, making her neck look long and delicate and beautiful like a swan.

"Let's get out of here," my father said. "The crowd makes me nervous. I keep waiting for someone to shout, 'Hey, let's get the Jew!'"

"Tell me about it, white boy," my mother said and laughed. I helped myself to some cookies and a cup of cherry-flavored Kool-Aid.

Miss Gunderson came out of the auditorium and looked around the hall.

"Ah, there you are!" she said, and came towards us, her arms rising as if she were going to take my mother's face in her hands. My mother stepped back.

Miss Gunderson clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "Thank you," she said, giving her hands a shake to emphasize each word. "I wanted to tell you how grateful I am. The costume was wonderful, Daniel was wonderful. You've really come through." She touched my mother's elbow gently. "It was like an angel spoke to you. You're our Christmas angel!"

A warm feeling spread through my chest and I felt myself growing taller, my shoulders straightening. My father was standing behind Miss Gunderson, and in my peripheral vision I could see he was smiling at me, as if he were proud of the way I'd played my part. I almost smiled back, but then he rolled his eyes, grinning as if he had seen something funny, and I let my gaze slide past him to the Christmas decorations on the far wall, a reindeer pulling a sleigh full of presents.

My mother cleared her throat. "It was nothing," she said, her face as expressionless as my own. "Least I could do."

Miss Gunderson nodded. "No, really, it was marvelous."

"Well, it doesn't take much to make a costume," my mother said. "Although I wonder about some of the things the kids were wearing. I mean, fur caps! It was like Doctor Zhivago." She laughed.

"Oh." Miss Gunderson brought her hand to her throat, and I remembered how much she had liked the hats, tilting them to just the right angles during rehearsal. "You didn't like the caps?"

My mother shrugged. "That reminds me," she said, and retrieved a paper bag from the floor behind her. "Here, don't forget to take this." She pulled out the

red bathrobe Miss Gunderson had given me, letting it dangle at arm's length, the cotton wool mustache clinging to it like lint.

Miss Gunderson took a step back when she saw the costume, but then recovered. "Yes, of course," she said, and reached out to take the robe. The skullcap, which had been caught in the folds, fell to the floor, landing in a puddle of slush. Miss Gunderson stooped to pick it up, then rose stiffly, her face a little red from the effort. "Well, thank you again," she said. "I think it means so much to the children."

My mother smiled sweetly, and Miss Gunderson walked away, costume bundled in her arms. Parents stood gossiping in groups and children ran through the hallway, zigzagging back and forth, but Miss Gunderson moved through them without stopping, without turning her head or looking either left or right. Parents parted for her, still talking, and she passed silently through the crowd, unnoticed, like a ship floating through an ocean, not leaving a single ripple behind her.

"You're an angel!" my father said to my mother later, on the ride back home in the car. My mother laughed and leaned against his shoulder.

"Frightening!" she said. "Absolutely terrifying thought!"

We laughed and I felt relieved that it was all over, that everything had turned out all right in the end. "You're an angel!" we said to each other after that, whenever someone did anything well: when Jess won a ribbon at a gymnastics meet, or I got a good grade on my report card. It became a family saying, and I thought of Miss Gunderson every time I heard it, remembering the look on her face

when she took the costume back from my mother's hands, the blood rushing to her cheeks. "You're an angel!" my parents would say to me while I hung my head shyly, grateful but cautious at the same time.

Outside the car, an empty field glowed white in the moonlight, ringed around with trees. I imagined walking through the snow like Good King Wenceslas, looking for a poor man to bring food and wine and clothing. At home, we had a Jewish Christmas tree, with tinsel and red glass balls and a silver Star of David on top that my father had made out of cardboard and covered in spray paint. I thought then what a perfect family we were: a mother and a father, a brother and a sister, both of my parents always laughing and smart and good looking.

"We're Christmas angels!" my father said, and my mother put her arm around him.

"God bless us," she said, "every one."

GIRLS AND BOYS

Girls and boys always avoided each other at school, standing in separate groups and playing different games. Boys kicked soccer balls and threw snowballs in winter and ran screaming around the yard. Girls played hopscotch and made piles of leaves and jumped rope. But Jess and I always spent our time together, meeting during recess by the jungle gym. We would climb up to the top and hang by our knees, or go to the swing set and swing back and forth, pumping our arms and legs, pretending we could fly. Sometimes Jess tried to play with the other girls, standing on the edge of the group, listening and nodding her head while they talked. "That's funny," she'd say, even though no one ever listened to her. I knew the other kids didn't like us because we looked different, with black hair and dark skin and slanty eyes, since our mother was Chinese. I'd blush and stand back with my hands in my pockets, embarrassed by the way everyone ignored Jess. When the girls finally walked away, Jess would wave, say good bye, and come back to me, smiling like she'd just made friends.

"Why do you do that?" I asked.

"Sarah's really nice. She has a pony," Jess said.

"She's snobby—she won't even talk to us."

"She said hi to me yesterday." Jess raised her eyebrows and nodded her head, exaggerating her words as if she were explaining something obvious to me,

being reasonable. I kicked the toe of my shoe into the dirt, making a hard angry wedge.

On weekends, Jess and I climbed the birch trees in front of our house if it wasn't too cold, or we stayed inside and read books to one another on top of the laundry in her closet. We loved *My Side of the Mountain* and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and would go through with pens, underlining the good parts and writing "NB" in the margins. Sometimes we did research on the human body, using anatomy books we found on the shelves in the living room. We studied the diagrams of the cervix and uterus, and read about the importance of testosterone and estrogen. Since my parents walked around the house naked all of the time, I thought that I knew how boys were different from girls. My mother had brown skin and small breasts and dark nipples. The little tuft of black hair between her legs reminded me of a rabbit's tail. My father was hairy all over, with large muscles on his back from chopping wood, and a penis that was big and red, especially when he came out of the bathtub. "Nearly boiled my *oobies*," he'd say, toweling off in the living room.

"We'll tell each other when we start growing hair," I said to Jess.

"And when you have a wet dream," she said.

The anatomy books belonged to my mother, left over from her biology classes in college. She and my father were in graduate school, and they had hundreds of books which smelled musty and sweet. Jess and I spent hours going

through the books, looking at the pictures and having contests to see who could find the longest words, which we'd look up in the dictionary.

One day, while we were reading in the kitchen, someone came to the front door. Jess answered and found Iva Bird standing on the porch.

"Knock knock," she said, and held out a plate covered in tin foil. "I brought you some fried chicken!"

Jess thanked Iva and took the plate while I stood gawking, my toes curled because it was cold standing on the kitchen floor. Iva lived a few miles away on the paved road, and her daughter, Bonnie Bird, sometimes babysat us when my parents went to the movies. People almost never came to our house, and I wasn't sure what to do.

"Are your parents home?" Iva asked me, still standing on the porch.

I nodded, and Jess ran to get my father, who was pacing in the living room, writing his dissertation. My mother had gone to the city to do research.

"What lovely children," Iva said to my father when he came into the kitchen.

"How's tricks, Iva?" my father said.

"They're so studious!" Iva stood by Jess's shoulder and looked down, smiling. Jess and I were reading about the reproductive system, and the book was open to a drawing of the testicles. Iva squinted, then took off her horn-rimmed glasses to polish. "Can't quite see."

My father glanced at the book and started to grin. "Say, kids," he said. "Why don't you take the books and play in the other room?"

Iva didn't stay in the house very long, and I never got to eat the fried chicken that she'd brought with her. As soon as my mother came home, she threw the chicken away and made meatloaf for dinner instead. While we ate, my father explained that Iva had stopped by to ask why we didn't go to church.

"'Why, Iva,' I told her, 'I'm Jewish.' And then I pulled the bar mitzvah routine, let my people go and all that."

My mother laughed. "What'd she say?"

"Fell on her knees and begged for forgiveness—I shit you not. Turns out we were being ostracized!"

"Ostrich-sized?" my mother said. "Is that when we stick our heads in the sand?"

"Carry bells, wear funny hats . . ."

"Life in the leper colony."

I laughed along with my parents, enjoying the sound, the way my father threw back his head so that you could see his fillings.

He wiped his eyes. "But don't worry. Since we're Jewish, Iva said she'd straighten everything out with the church."

"Why would they like Jews?"

"We might be wrong, but at least we're not godless."

"Great, don't tell them you're an atheist." My mother raised her beer. *"L'chai'm."*

The other kids at school seemed friendlier after Iva's visit, and a few weekends later, our nearest neighbors, the Schaefers, called to invite Jess and me over to play with their sons. They only lived a half mile away, and I'd seen Brad and John getting on the school bus in the morning. John was about Jess's age, and Brad was a year older. They always smiled at Jess and me, but they'd never talked to us before.

"New kids!" Jess said, hopping up and down in the kitchen after lunch, waiting for our mother to drive us to the Schaefer's. I ate my peanut butter sandwich slowly, worried they might have dogs that would bite or chase me around the yard.

The Schaefer's place was a brown ranch house, set back from the dirt road at the end of a long driveway. Mrs. Schaefer met us at the front door wearing a quilted, pale blue house coat.

"Don't mind me," she said, patting the curlers in her hair. "I'm just dolling myself up for church tomorrow. Let me call the boys." She led us into the kitchen, calling for Brad and John. The house smelled like baking cookies and looked like a dollhouse to me, or a set on a television show, all the walls and carpets white and clean, too tidy for anyone to live in. A plastic runner covered the carpet in the hallway, and the ceilings sparkled with a layer of white stucco that looked like

frozen shaving foam. Brad and John came up the stairs from the basement, and then stood side by side, grinning at us in the middle of the kitchen.

Mrs. Schaefer took some cookies out of the oven and put them on a rack to cool. "Why don't you boys show Jess and Daniel around?" she said. "When these are ready you can have a snack."

Brad and John giggled and led us through the house, not saying much, but pointing out the color television set in the living room, the sliding glass patio door that led to a deck at the back, the bunk beds in their room. They didn't have any books or wood stoves, and there were carpets everywhere, making the floors soft underfoot. Finally we went down to the rec room in the basement and they showed us their pool table and dart board.

"So you guys don't go to church," Brad finally said, fiddling with a cue stick.

"I've been to churches before," I said, because before we'd moved to Minnesota, my parents had traveled in Europe with Jess and me, and we'd visited cathedrals in France and Italy. Jess and I told them about Notre Dame and a black dog that had lived across the street from our Paris hotel, and then we taught them how to ask for candy in French—*"She fur de bon bon."*

Brad and John opened their mouths as we talked about all the foreign countries and languages we knew, and before long we had them pretending they were black panthers and ring tailed lemurs. Brad grumbled and blushed when we tried to get him to open his eyes really wide and call like a lemur, but John laughed

and tried it. Eventually, even Brad began hopping around, pretending he was jumping from tree to tree.

"What a bunch of monkeys!" Mrs. Schaefer said later, giving us cookies and milk upstairs. "I thought I'd have to call the zoo!"

Jess and I played with Brad and John on most weekends after that. Normally we walked to their house, but sometimes they came over to ours and we'd play Hide and Seek, or explore the woods by the slough, or, when the snows came, dig tunnels in the drifts alongside the roads. "The Hardy boys called," my parents would say if Brad or John telephoned, which I knew was supposed to be a joke, since they always laughed afterwards. I liked playing with the Schaefers, not just because their place was clean and their mother made us snacks, but because they listened to Jess and me and would do whatever we told them. At school, the other kids still ignored me, although Jess had started making friends since she had signed-up for gymnastics. I wanted to join gymnastics, too, but the team didn't take boys.

"I could do Cub Scouts," I suggested.

"The Hitler Youth," my father said.

"Do you know how much they charge for a uniform?" my mother said. "What a scam."

By the spring, Jess didn't play with me nearly as much as she used to, spending time instead with her friends from gymnastics. Sometimes John played with me during recess, bringing his set of plastic Army figures, which we'd line up

for battles. The figures weren't that interesting, though, since they could only do things like fight or dig holes, and I used to look across the playground to where Jess was playing hopscotch, wishing she'd come over and we could do our pretend games. We had a lot of different characters, like talking chipmunks named Chip and Dale, or a Russian wolfhound named Silverfang who had an owner called Master.

"Have you ever seen Jess's titties?" John asked me one day.

"Sure," I said, lining up my soldiers for an attack. "But she's not old enough to have breasts. She has to go through puberty." Since John didn't know what that was, I explained how women had fallopian tubes and a uterus and where babies came from. I spoke slowly, carefully, presenting the facts, imagining that I was a teacher, a doctoral student like my father, explaining how the world worked while John rolled on the ground, appreciative of my knowledge.

"Whoa, down boy!" he said, and fanned his crotch like it was on fire.

After school let out for the summer, Jess and I could finally spend all of our time together again. With no classes and no gymnastics, we spent the days hunting for butterflies and collecting agates and reading to each other in her room. I would have been happy spending all of my time with her, but Jess suggested we start a club with John and Brad.

"It can be the Billy Goat Club," she said, and I quickly agreed. Jess and I loved Billy Goats because they were the most adaptable of animals. Maybe they weren't as mysterious as black panthers or as strong as dragons, but they were

tough and nimble. Billy Goats lived in the mountains in small groups and could kill anything that attacked them, including trolls that lived under bridges. They had long beards and yellow eyes and curving horns that they used as battering rams. Jess and I were Mountain Goats, the best type of Billy Goat, with long soft fur and sharp pointed black horns.

We typed up the rules for the club on 3x5-inch index cards, then stapled them together to make a book. Members started out as Kids, and in order to become Billy Goats, they had to know by heart all of the club songs: "Be Kind to Your Four-Footed Friends," "The Billy Goat Song" (sung to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"), "If I had a Hammer," and "Tapestry." Kids also had to be able to eat grass without getting sick, walk down a dirt road on a sunny day in their bare feet, and know how to escape from pursuit—running in zig zags to shake off a pursuer. To prove agility, they had to do cartwheels, dive rolls and round-offs, which Jess had learned in gymnastics and taught me. Then there was climbing in a doorway by pressing your hands and feet against the sides, tying a square knot, folding your tongue into a tube, and making a sound in the back of your throat like a frog.

With all the songs and regulations typed, Jess and I took the rulebook to the Schaefer's and showed it to Brad and John while they sprawled on the floor of their rec room. Jess read the instructions and I demonstrated the hardest moves. Then we made them sing the club song to initiate them as Kids. Jess and I thought we were good singers because we always practiced with the radio. I especially liked it

when we held a note together, our voices blending and warbling, making a weird vibration that throbbed in my ears until our parents begged us to stop.

Brad and John stood grinning while we went through the Billy Goat song, only mumbling the chorus until I threatened them, saying they'd never become Kids and earn their horns. Finally, blushing, they worked through the song and collapsed in a beanbag chair. John flopped about like he was dead, pitching Brad onto the floor. Brad got up, staggered to the door, and called up the stairs to the living room where his parents had guests.

"How was that?" he yelled.

"Just fine," Mr. Schaefer said, and the people upstairs laughed.

For weeks, Jess and I thought of ways to make the Billy Goat Club better, planning out all its details. We drew designs for special merit badges and pins and uniforms with curved, gold horns on the sleeves. We made up new songs and invented a writing system so that we could leave messages for each other without anyone else knowing what we were saying. We decided that we wouldn't teach our language to Brad and John until they had earned enough points to become Billy Goats, and tried to think of tests they could pass to get promoted.

"Maybe we can have them run through the pasture where the pigs are," I said. "To practice evasion techniques."

Jess nodded. "That's a good idea, I'll make a note." She opened the rulebook. "They need another 190 points to become Billy Goats. How many for running through the pasture?"

I thought about that. "Five," I said.

We were walking down the dirt road, heading for the Schaefer's house. Redwing black birds sang on the fence posts, heads tilted back and tails balancing in the breeze. I wanted to sing too, to put back my head and let the wind ruffle my feathers. The sky was so achingly blue that it seemed solid, like I could dig my fingers in and climb up, never coming down.

"Maybe they could walk through nettles," I said.

"Or do ariels."

"Or eat paper."

"Who do you think is nicer?" Jess asked. "Brad or John?"

"I guess John," I said. "He'll try new stuff."

"I think he's got a nice smile," Jess said.

Something in her voice made me look at her, surprised. She was staring at the ground, searching for agates, her black hair hanging in front of her face. She was dressed just like me, in pink flip flops, cut off shorts, and a white T-shirt. Her legs were brown, longer than mine, and her arms were dark. She stooped to pick up a stone, not looking at me, and suddenly I knew she liked John.

"I guess he does," I said slowly. "His teeth are pretty white."

"Um-hmm." Jess turned the agate over in her fingers, not looking at me, as if she were embarrassed for having said anything.

I knew what it was like to be interested in someone, since I often thought about Tracy Million, the girl who sat in front of me at school. Tracy dressed

nicely, wearing plaid skirts and knee socks, and she had light brown hair. Sometimes I imagined that I was the captain of a spaceship, injured from a fight, my shirt ripped open, and Tracy would come to take care of me in sickbay. But I didn't want to tell Jess about that, to let her know how Tracy's face would go blurry in the light, the way she'd lean over to dab at my forehead.

"Let's see who can find the most agates!" I said. We ran along the road, searching for stones.

Brad and John were playing at the end of their driveway when Jess and I got to their house.

"Hi, Jess," John said.

"Hi, John." Jess smiled back.

Brad grinned at me and wiggled his eyebrows, like he thought something was funny.

"Did you learn all the songs yet?" I asked.

Brad rolled his eyes. "Is that all we do in this club?"

"You have to sing or you can't get promoted," I said.

"All right, all right," Brad muttered. "But not by the house."

Jess suggested that we go to the woods, so we went back up the road and turned off into the pine trees. Jess ran in front with me, keeping away from John, showing how Billy Goats could dodge through trees without making noise. The air smelled of resin and the interlacing fingers of branches closed all around us. After a few minutes we came to a grassy clearing and checked our legs for ticks.

"We can practice singing here," I said.

Brad and John groaned, but Jess made them line up and we went through all the songs in the book. John sang softly, but Brad put his head back and shouted the words, missing most of the rhythm, so we didn't give him full points. After that we did dive rolls and cartwheels and then I got on all fours with Brad and John on my back, showing how strong Mountain Goats could be. If you pushed the third vertebra on my neck, I'd go crazy, tearing up the grass, no one able to stop me from running. Brad and John laughed, fell on the ground, and started wrestling. Jess and I got on top of them and we practiced grappling techniques until finally we all lay panting in the grass.

"Let's play Doctor," Brad said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's where we learn about each other's bodies."

Jess sat up. "We've got books at home," she said.

I nodded my head slowly, thinking about how much more we knew than they did. It was too bad we hadn't brought any of the books with us, and I wondered how much we could recite from memory.

"You don't need books," Brad said. "You just take off your clothes."

"What good's that?" I asked, not liking it when Brad told us what to do.

Brad ignored me. "Do you wanna try?" he asked.

"We should finish up with the exercises," I said, and looked at Jess, expecting her to agree with me.

Jess started to pluck clover out of the grass.

"Maybe," she said, her hair hanging down around her face as she searched for a shamrock. The clearing was quiet except for the wind sighing through the needles of the pine trees. I got up and stamped my feet, making noise so that Jess had to look at me.

"That's going to be boring," I said. "Let's do another test."

"What kind?" she asked.

"Hide and Seek? We'll do it for points."

John sat up and brushed off his arms, wiping the grass blades from his elbows, the skin red and wrinkled. "How many points do I need?" he asked.

The rulebook was lying in the grass, and I looked through it to see what we'd marked. "Another eighty to become Goats. Then another hundred after that to be Billy Goats."

"This'll take forever!" John said.

"Don't worry," I said. "Jess and I'll hide, and you'll get forty points for each of us you find."

Brad grumbled, but he agreed as well, and Jess and I made them cover their eyes and count slowly to one hundred. Jess and I slipped into the woods together, the pine needles barely rustling as we ran.

"I'll go this way," Jess whispered, and I nodded, watching her dart through the trees, moving like a shadow, heading away from the clearing. I ran the other direction, pausing only to pick up a branch and drag it behind me to cover my

tracks. On television, I'd watched the heroes escape by wading through streams to throw the posse off the scent, and I looked for a gully or a puddle that I could cross, but couldn't find one. A jay called above me and I glanced up, worried that it might give away my position. The branches were thick overhead, and it occurred to me that no one ever looked up in the woods. What a good hiding spot a tree would be. I grabbed a branch and tugged, pretending it was a rope. It seemed to hold, so I put my feet against the trunk and pulled myself up, like I was Batman scaling a building. Pine needles fell around me and the branch was covered in sap, turning my hands black and sticky. When I was close enough, I grabbed the limb where it joined the trunk, wrapped my legs around the tree, and shinnied up, bark biting into my skin.

The tree swayed in the wind, rocking me back and forth as though I were on a tightrope. I closed my eyes. One day, I thought, Jess and I would live in the woods together, taking books on how to find food and shelter and clothing. We'd gather arrowroot from the swamps and acorns and blackberries and chanterelles. I'd show her how to climb trees to get away from danger, and we'd make fire by rubbing sticks together. For fresh meat, we'd trap deer with deadfall traps and set snares for rabbits. Eventually we'd find a high cliff and climb up to the top where there were falcon nests. We'd take an egg back with us, and when it hatched, we'd teach the falcon how to hunt for grouse and pheasant, feeding it the livers to keep it tame.

My fingers began to cramp and I opened my eyes, wondering how much time had passed. A little bit of sky showed through the branches and it seemed like the sun had gotten lower. Little shocks trembled up my legs and arms and tingled in my hands from sitting still for so long. No one had found me, and the woods seemed dark and cold, the trees brooding like strangers in a crowd, mumbling and shifting from foot to foot. I lowered myself to the ground and moved slowly back the way I'd come.

"No! No!" A voice came through the trees, drifting on the air. I froze and cocked my head. It sounded like Jess. But then a laugh came, high and shrill, as if she were only playing.

"No!" she said again. "Stop!" Her voice rose up, almost a shriek, then trailed off into another laugh.

I glided through the woods, not making a sound, a ghost dodging branches and jumping over roots. At the edge of the clearing, I sank behind a tree to watch, pushing aside long stalks of dried grass.

Brad and John were holding Jess down on the ground, dressed only in their underwear. Jess was in her underwear, too, and Brad was tickling her stomach, sitting on her knees, while John held her arms above her head. Jess laughed and arched her back, trying to wiggle away, her face red. She flopped like a fish, twisting and turning.

"No!" she gasped, spluttering for air.

I saw Brad's hands reach out again, his head bending forward, and then I wasn't crouched behind the tree anymore. A wind rose up and seemed to carry me across the clearing, my feet a blur over the grass, my arms opening wide, diving. I caught Brad around the shoulders and didn't even feel the shock. He fell backward and the ground rushed up toward me as we tumbled, my knees coming up between us, a flash of sun and blue sky, and then the darkness of the ground. Fingers scrabbled at my back. Something crunched and stung—maybe a thistle. We rolled one more time and I twisted to bring him under me, joining my hands together in a Billy Goat lock the way Jess and I had practiced. But Brad shifted his weight and pushed against me. My fingers slowly came apart.

"What the fuck're you doing?" Brad said. He held me down against the ground. My breath came in short gasps. I turned my head painfully to one side. Grass and trees, the world oddly sideways. John and Jess were standing a little distance away, looking down at me, side by side.

"We were playing Doctor," Jess said.

Brad's knee was against my neck, a crushing weight that seemed to carry me down. My legs flailed somewhere far off.

"Look at him," Brad said. "This is what professional wrestlers do." He pulled my arms up behind me, raising me off the ground and forcing my head down. "Kiss the dirt," he said.

The grass seemed so black, the blades twisted and shadowed by my body, a cave that loomed up as I tried to turn my head away. Pain was in my arms, but it

seemed far away, only a distant ache, an echo somewhere below me. I closed my eyes and was enveloped in a cool blackness.

"Stop it!" Jess said.

Brad froze. Air blew around me. I hung, slightly swinging.

"Stop it!" Jess said. "Don't be such a baby."

"I'm not a baby," Brad said. "He's the one who jumped on me." He let go of my arms, and suddenly I felt myself back on the ground, as if I had just fallen back into my body from a great height. My hands tingled, the skin scraped raw. My left shoulder hurt where I'd rolled over something.

"Are you all right?" Jess asked.

I stared down at my hands, the ground, the mud on my knees, as if trying to place myself. She touched my shirt, brushing off blades of grass, and her hand felt like an electric shock, reconnecting me to what had happened. I jerked away from her.

"I'm fine," I said, surprised I could talk, wishing that no one would look at me. The clearing was so bright that I had to squint to see. Brad and John and Jess were staring at me, silhouettes against the glaring whiteness. I looked away, blinking.

The others got dressed and we walked back to the road. Normal colors were returning, and I was surprised to see that the sky was not bright at all, but actually starting to grow dark, the sun edging toward the horizon, shadows stretching across the ground. Brad and John turned off toward their house, and Jess

and I walked back home. There didn't seem to be anything to say to her. At the crest of the hill, I looked out over the slough, the sun setting on its far edge, going down in a purplish glow, the color of a bruise.

"Maybe next time we can all play together," Jess said.

I shivered without answering, then started running down the hill, anxious to get home. My flip flops clicked on my feet, cold sand gritting between my toes. The sun was disappearing and I wanted to be inside before all the light was gone, before the night and darkness came, before I was left all alone in the cold.

KILLINGS

My father dreamed of being self-sufficient. Before we moved to the farm, when we still lived in the city not far from the university where my mother took classes, he used to wander through cemeteries and collect mushrooms to bring home and eat. He dug for roots and tubers at the edge of the city reservoir and set snares for rabbits in the wood lot behind our apartment, waking me up early one morning to show me a string with a knot drawn tight, a tuft of brown fur caught inside.

"Got away," he said, and smiled.

My father wanted to know that he could take care of himself, that he was just as smart as or smarter than anyone who had ever lived before. He wanted to be able to make a fire with nothing but sticks and build a house and catch his own food. And of course I believed everything that he said, accepted all of his explanations, not knowing that there was any difference between knowledge and enthusiasm.

On the farm, my father was free to explore the wilderness the way he'd always wanted. We were renting one hundred acres of land, mostly covered in pine trees, and he tramped through the woods, gathering sticky-capped mushrooms, shooting squirrels with his pellet gun, blazing trails with his little hunting hatchet. In the fall, he tapped the maples alongside the road for syrup, taking me from tree to tree to collect the sap. I imagined sweet, golden brown syrup flowing out of the trees, just as good as what came from the bottle, and was disappointed to find the

buckets filled with nothing but water that tasted green and unpleasant, like leaves or grass that had soaked overnight in a puddle.

"Of course, it needs to be boiled down," my father said. "It takes five gallons of sap just to make one bottle of syrup."

I licked my lips, tasting the last grassy residue, and was relieved to hear his explanation, to know that I had simply misunderstood. Bark and black specks of dirt clung to the edges of the bucket, riding up and down like small boats on ocean waves, and I was careful not to worry about them getting into the syrup, taking assurance from my father's indifference.

When winter came, we huddled inside the house and tried to keep warm as wind whistled around the window sills and door frames. We didn't use gas or oil to heat the house, relying instead on two wood stoves, one in the kitchen, another in the living room, that my father stoked every morning.

"One match," he'd say as he built the fire, although sometimes he used two or even three, making Jess and me laugh because we knew that it proved how difficult it was.

Some nights it got so cold that the pipes nearly froze and the water came out in explosive dribbles and spurts. Then my father would fill a pan with hot embers and balance it on the edge of the crawl space in the bathroom, blowing a fan down into the house to keep the pipes warm. The first time it happened, he explained to Jess and me how warm air rose and cold air sank and the concept of convection and

induction. The pan teetered as he spoke, and I tried not to think about what would happen if it tipped, of red sparks spilling into the foundations like a waterfall.

"Jesus, be careful," my mother said at the doorway, dressed in her flannel nightgown, feet in thick wool socks. "If you kids knock that over, the entire place will burn down."

"It'll be fine," my father said. "You kids are careful, right?"

Perched on the cold rim of the bathtub, I nodded, reassured that my father trusted me, but not sure if I trusted myself. It seemed better not to put it to a test, and so I avoided going to the bathroom on the coldest nights, waiting until morning when the stoves were lit, the pan put away, the house safe from my clumsiness.

In February and March, when the days lengthened, my parents sat at the kitchen table and pored over pamphlets with titles like "The Whole Hog" and "Mulch, How Much?" My father wanted to raise animals to eat, but my mother talked about getting a horse.

"Horse, ugh," my father said. "I hate riding anything I can't steer. I don't even like buses."

"They've got reins, you dope," my mother said.

"Never trust anything dumber than yourself," my father said.

They looked through seed catalogues and talked about what to grow in their garden and filled out long lists that seemed irresistible and tantalizing, like bags packed for a trip. I read the names of the vegetables they selected, imagining our garden growing like a jungle, the plants twisting together, blanketing the ground:

zucchini and acorn squash and corn and tomatoes and bush beans and lettuce and snow peas and cauliflower and butternut squash.

The rains came in April, and the weather was cloudy and cold all the time. My parents took Jess and me to auctions where the grass was trampled flat and our feet sank in mud. There was always a table under the eaves of a barn where a man sold hot chocolate, coffee, and cheese sandwiches made of white bread and wrapped in wax paper. An auctioneer chanted over a bullhorn or into a microphone, his words a torrent of sound, rising and falling, his voice solidifying, now and then, into a single pure word.

"Whool-gimme-ONE-now-stata-ONE-now-gimme-ONE-now—thank you, sir." The auctioneer stood on the back of a rusted pickup, an old man with a John Deere cap, his skin brown and rough as burlap. He tapped his foot up and down, keeping time to the music of his words.

The other farmers stood in muddy overalls and boots, listening carefully, nodding their heads, occasionally lifting a hand.

"Why does he talk like that?" I asked my father.

"It makes people want to buy," he said, and squinted, concentrating on the sounds, interpreting the mysterious babble. A farmer to my right nodded, marking a bid. Then my father raised his own hand.

"Seven dollars!" the auctioneer shouted, pointing to my father. "Whool gimme eight—eight now—going once, twice. Sold!"

My father grinned at me, and a woman pushed his purchase through the crowd: a wheelbarrow with a wide green bucket. She parked it at my father's feet and he counted out the money as people looked enviously on. For nearly an hour my father stood in the crowd, steam rising around him from his breath and body heat, buying rakes and hoes and two shovels and a corn planter, and a set of metric wrenches. No one could outbid him. When he saw something he wanted, he threw himself into the fray, meeting every price, until it seemed that the auctioneer always looked to him first before closing a deal, waiting for my father's hand to shoot up for one last bid.

"Again, the gentleman in the back," the auctioneer said, shaking his head in wonder at my father's persistence. "The man knows a bargain."

Finally my father nodded to me, loaded our things in the wheelbarrow, then pushed it away, heading for the car. His last purchase had been a box of Bob Dylan tapes, and he explained how we could listen to them as we drove, using the tape player which had come with the car.

"My father never listened to the radio when I was a kid," he said to me. "Couldn't stand modern music."

I hurried after him, skittering on the wet grass, and imagined going down the highway with him, singing along to the tapes, proud that we had made so many good bargains.

My mother and Jess met us at the edge of the pasture where all the cars were parked, each of them carrying a stack of quilts. My mother dropped her pile on top of the wheelbarrow.

"Looks like you got everything," she said. "What's that?" She pointed to the tapes.

"Bob Dylan," my father said.

My mother frowned and pushed her hair back from her face, her normal gesture of irritation.

"What do we need tapes for? We don't even have a player."

"We do in the car."

"How much?"

"Five bucks," he said, shrugging, although I remembered that he had actually paid a little more.

"Jesus." My mother picked up a cassette and turned it over. "It's not like either of our fellowships are going to last forever."

"Come on, you *like* Dylan."

"I'm not talking about Dylan. I'm talking about five dollars." My mother dropped the cassette back into the box. "Forget it, let's go." She gathered up the quilts and walked away.

"Maybe we could find some classical music," my father persisted, wheelbarrow bouncing up and down in front of him. "Something more intellectual."

He turned his head and winked over his shoulder at Jess and me. I laughed, but my mother kept trudging through the mud.

"Don't drop those quilts," she said to Jess. "I don't want to have to wash those fucking things."

Back at the car, my father loaded our purchases into the hatch. My mother sat in front not saying anything, checking her hair for split ends. I got in the backseat with Jess and we breathed on the windows, steaming them up, then pressed our mouths against the glass to make giant lip prints.

My father shut the hatch and got in the car, box of tapes in his lap. "Beethoven's Concerto for Strings?" he asked as he picked through the box, addressing no one in particular. "Mahler's Kindertotenlieder?"

My mother sniffed and looked out the window.

"Mahler, Mahler!" I shouted.

"Beethoven!" Jess said.

"How about Highway 61?" my father said. "That'll be a classic one day."

He pushed the tape into the machine, and as he did, I saw that something was wrong. The cassette was much smaller than the slot in the tape player, and I knew it wouldn't fit correctly. With a click, the plastic door over the slot shut, swallowing the cassette whole. Nothing happened. My father frowned, stuck his fingers into the slot, twisted his hand around, then scrunched down in his seat to look. My mother watched him expressionlessly, head tilted to one side, as if he

were a stranger who had locked himself out of his car. I shifted nervously, holding on to the hope that he had already figured out the problem and was about to fix it.

"Jesus Christ," my mother said. "The machine's Eight-Track. It's not a cassette."

"What's Eight-Track?" my father asked, puzzled.

"Eight-Track's Eight-Track. Didn't you even look before you bought it?"

My father muttered something and I felt a wave of embarrassment, a hot flash that prickled my skin. But then he straightened up and smiled, not embarrassed in the least.

"Oh well," he said. "Nothing's obvious. Not even a toilet's obvious the first time you see it."

He waved a hand dismissively in the air, as if fanning away smoke or lingering doubts, and I found myself nodding, suddenly relieved by the logic of what he had said. Of course. It seemed so reasonable. How could he have recognized an Eight-Track player if he had never seen one before?

My mother was quiet for a moment, then she turned away. "Maybe a toilet's not obvious to you," she said. "But it is to everyone else."

My father started the car and the speakers crackled and hummed. As we drove bumping over the field to the main road, he adjusted the knobs of the tape player, trying to turn it off. Static rose and fell. Finally my mother reached out, brushed his hand aside, and turned off the machine herself.

With warmer weather, my parents began planting a garden where the land sloped gradually down to the slough. My father rented a tiller from town and broke up the dark soil, then he and my mother chopped in manure and set out stakes to mark the locations of rows. Jess and I squatted in the dirt and planted seeds the way my father explained, using wooden rulers to measure the depths. I liked the thought of raising all our own food, of not having to rely on anyone else. At school, I never understood anything, not the rules of grammar or the multiplication tables or how to kick a soccer ball straight through the goal posts. I always felt dizzy during spelling bees, forgetting the words, and was the last one picked when we went out to play softball. But none of that really mattered if I knew how to take care of myself—if I knew what mushrooms to eat or how to find shelter or how to can vegetables and turn cucumbers into pickles.

After the garden was planted, my father bought two pigs and a sheep and then a flock of baby chicks that came in three large cardboard boxes with holes punched in the tops and sides. As soon as he unloaded the boxes from the car, my father set up heat lamps in the garage. The chicks huddled in the red pools of light, not needing any walls to keep them in, trying to stay warm. One by one, I picked up each chick and dipped its beak into water to teach it how to drink. In a few months, my father told me, when the chicks got big enough, we would kill them for meat and have roast chicken all winter long without ever going to the grocery store.

The chicks squirmed in my hands, feeling like cotton balls, and it didn't bother me at all that I would eventually kill them. I knew that everything had two

different meanings, two different ways of being seen. A drumstick was food, and yet it was also a leg with bones and tendons and veins inside. Anything that you looked at long enough could seem strange and foreign—sometimes I stared at my face in the mirror, looking at my lips, my nose, memorizing the arc of my eyebrows until it seemed like I was someone else, a complete stranger that I didn't know. Or I would repeat a word, over and over again, until it didn't seem to mean anything, and I had to laugh every time I said it.

The chicks grew quickly. Within a week, they no longer huddled under the heat lamps, and we put them inside a chicken wire pen that my father built behind the garage. The birds had turned awkward and ugly, with mangy white feathers and long necks and legs, looking more like miniature ostriches than chickens. They pecked at each other and scrabbled over my feet when I brought fresh water and grain in the mornings, not having the sense to wait for me to put the food down, but swarming in one spot so that I had to kick them away to make space. It didn't take me long to realize that chickens were smelly and stupid. They spent their lives running back and forth in the pen, looking for ways to get out. And if they did manage to escape, they ran back and forth, trying to get back in.

"Don't forget to feed the chickens," my mother said every morning, before I'd even had a chance to get dressed.

I grumbled and stamped around the house, all the pleasure of doing my chores taken away. In truth, even though I wanted to be self-sufficient, it was more fun playing with my cat, Tiger, teaching him how to roll over, or shake hands, or

burying him in blankets, watching the mound twitch and jump as he burrowed his way back out. The only time chores were fun was when my father helped me. Then he would squat next to me in the garden as I weeded, his brown cowboy hat pushed back on his head, shoulders white and bare, and explain how much mulch to put between the rows, or the number of growing days in Minnesota, or why the climate wouldn't support kiwis or pineapples.

One morning when I went outside to feed the chickens, something white and crumpled was lying in the dirt in front of the garage. At first I thought it was a T-shirt that had blown off the clothes line at the back of the house, somehow carried by a freak wind all the way to the front yard. Two chickens were pecking at it, and I shooed them away. It was a dead chicken, its chest torn open, white feathers splattered with blood. One of the chickens strutted cautiously past me, cocked its head, and began pecking at the body again.

I dropped my bucket of grain, took a mesmerized step backward, then ran inside the house to tell my parents the terrible news.

"The chickens are eating each other!" I shouted.

My father followed me outside, and I was proud to show him the scene—the blood, the feathers, the chickens pecking at the body, convinced that I had discovered something important and hitherto unknown. He turned the body over, examining the marks, then went around the garage to the chicken pen where he found another dead bird. Tom, a big gray barn cat that lived on the farm, was eating

the carcass, while Tiger and my sister's cat, Annie, watched. My father swore and chased the cats away.

"They've been killing chickens," he said. "They must have attacked the strays last night." He paced around the pen and found where the chickens had scratched away the dirt to get under the wire.

"Can I help you fix the pen?" I asked.

"Sure," my father said. "And we'll have to destroy the cats."

I stared at my father, suddenly speechless. He didn't seem to notice my surprise and kept talking, muttering a bit, the way he always did when he was planning. "We'll lure the cats into the garage. Maybe I can put food under a box and trap them. Have you ever seen that? You prop the box up on a stick, then tie a string to it."

"Do we have to kill them?" I asked.

"You can't have chicken killers on a farm," he said, and gave the chicken wire a shake. "If we bury the wire, I don't think the chickens will be able to get out. Let's get the shovel."

I nodded, and followed him to the tool shed, but wasn't thinking of repairing the pen anymore. How could we just kill the cats because of a few chickens? We were going to kill the chickens anyway, and there were still dozens them, which seemed like more than enough to feed us through the winter.

"If we fix the pen," I said, tentatively, "I guess then the cats won't be able to get back in."

"Oh, they'll get in," my father said, sorting through the tools. We had a flat- and a round-nosed shovel, as well as a little camping spade, and my father inspecting each one carefully. "Cats can squeeze through the smallest spaces. They flatten out their ribs."

"But if we keep the cats inside at night, then they won't get any more of the chickens."

My father selected the round-nosed shovel, then turned toward me, propping his foot up on the blade. "I'm sorry, Daniel," he said. "But you know we can't let the cats kill the chickens. No one keeps chicken killers."

The point of the shovel bit into the ground as he spoke, the blade glinting a dull gray, and I stared at it, watching the metal dig into the dusty soil. Chicken killers. It made sense. The cats weren't pets anymore, but chicken killers. My father leaned the shovel against the shed and began rummaging for more tools. I walked back to the house, suddenly uninterested in the chickens. My mother and Jess were sitting at the kitchen table, eating scrambled eggs and toast. My mother glanced at me, but I didn't say anything, mechanically taking my seat.

"Where's your father?" she said.

"Fixing the chicken pen. He's going to kill the cats," I said.

"What?" My mother got out of her chair. "What are you talking about?"

"They killed the chickens," I said, and stole a glance at her, wondering what she would do. She went to the window and stared out, holding aside the curtain as if looking for my father.

"What cats?" Jess said. She'd stopped eating and was staring at me. "Which ones? All the cats?"

"Shush," my mother said, coming back to the table. "No one's killing any cats. Be quiet and eat breakfast."

Jess kept twisting in her chair, but I wouldn't look at her or answer her questions. The cats already felt far away from me, distant and forgotten. When my father came in, my mother pushed her hair back out of her face and demanded to know what he was doing. Jess started to cry.

"Are you crazy?" my mother said to my father. "How do you even know the cats killed the chickens?"

"Julia, they were eating the bodies."

"But they always eat things," Jess said.

"Hush, honey, don't cry," my father said.

"What are you going to do, just shoot them?" my mother said, and my father sighed and nodded.

I couldn't swallow my breakfast and pushed my eggs around the plate, chopping them into small crumbs. Chicken killers. The words were so clear, concrete. The other day the chickens had been alive, the cats harmless. Jess and I had played with Annie and Tiger, drawing pictures and teaching them how to roll over. And now, already, so soon, they were gone. I forced myself to swallow, my stomach full of acid, a burning ache like I'd drunk too much apple juice.

My father finally went into the living room to work on his thesis. My mother told Jess and me to go outside and play, then started vacuuming loudly, going from room to room. I slipped out of the house, the vacuum screaming wordlessly behind me, escaping into the bright sunlight and sudden silence, blinking to find the world so normal.

In the end, my father agreed that we could lock the cats in the garage at night to see if the killings continued. Jess and I went to the garage that evening with a can of food and called all the cats. I crouched down on the damp concrete, watching the cats wind around Jess's legs.

"Don't worry, Annie," Jess said. "We'll hide you. We'll put you in the closet so Dad won't find you."

Tiger rubbed against me, soft orange fur on my knees. He was a dumb cat, with nothing on his mind but food and naps and lying in the sun, as if it all could go on and on forever.

"If the cats killed the chickens, we have to kill them," I reminded Jess.

"Annie didn't kill anything."

"Didn't we find her with the bodies?"

"That doesn't mean she killed anything."

"Dad says it does."

"Dad's wrong all the time," Jess said.

"Not all the time," I said, uneasily.

"He likes to kill things. Remember the snapping turtle?" Jess insisted.

And I had to agree, since the week before he had killed a giant snapping turtle we'd found in the road, cutting its head off with an ax. He had said we could make soup out of it, but he'd put in too much water, and the broth had been tasteless, the meat too tough to eat.

"Almost anything could have killed the chickens," Jess said, and I stared at her, not sure what to believe.

No chickens died that night, and my father went about the house in a good mood the next day, humming, satisfied that he had been right. Jess glowered and my mother wouldn't speak to him. I watched uncertainly, looking for some sign of his weaknesses, something that would help me decide how I felt. But everything seemed normal, and I had to admit that nothing had been killed. While we weeded the garden, Jess explained that whatever had attacked the chickens had probably eaten all that it needed, that it might never come back.

"Keeping the cats locked up doesn't prove anything," Jess said.

A weed came up in my hand, its root long and pink, covered in small hairs, almost like a rat's tail. I threw it away in disgust and tried to think of a logical solution, something that would settle the matter once and for all, but couldn't find an answer.

"Stop talking about the damn cats," my mother said. She was weeding a few yards away, squatting in the bush beans, long green tendrils snaking up her arms. "It makes me sick. I'll kill the damn things myself if you don't stop whining about it."

In my heart, I wanted to believe Jess, wanted to believe that the cats hadn't killed the chickens. "Starlight, star bright . . ." I chanted to myself every night as I went to the garage, staring up at the first stars, pale and white, glowing in the sky. Let something kill the chickens tonight, I whispered under my breath, and then looked away, focusing on the ground, the trees, not letting myself look at the stars again so that my wish would come true. But every morning when I went out to do my chores, the chickens were fine, piled up against the wire, flapping, eager for me to feed them. I flung the grain over the fence, feeling the crushing disappointment, the bitterness of false hope. Chicken killers, I reminded myself. You don't keep chicken killers on a farm. I had to steel myself not to pat Tiger when he brushed against my legs, not to cry as he ate, head buried in his bowl, blind to the danger he was in.

On the fourth evening, after dinner, my father sighed and sat back in his chair.

"I'm sorry, kids," he said. "We can't keep the cats locked up forever. It's obvious that they've been killing the chickens."

My mother sniffed, but didn't say anything. Instead, she rose from the table and started clearing the plates, gathering the silverware up into a noisy bundle. Jess whimpered and looked at her, then at me, but I couldn't find anything to say, either.

"We can send them someplace else," Jess said, desperately.

My father shook his head, and I looked away, out the kitchen window. The sun was already sinking, the sky a darkening silver. Jess started to cry, and I got up

and went outside to sit on the fence in front of the house. The crickets were singing and the evening air felt cool. It was a perfect night, and I looked forward to the next night, and the night after that, when everything would seem familiar again and I wouldn't feel the pain in my throat or eyes anymore.

After a few minutes, my father came out of the house carrying his shotgun and a tin of cat food. My mother came out as well and stood beside me. My father squatted down in the dirt in front of the garage and started opening the cat food, rattling the opener against the can. From all around the farmyard, the cats began to appear, slinking along the walls. Tom trotted toward my father, followed by black Ishi and Myah and Annie and finally Tiger, who was always the slowest.

"Jesus," my mother said, bitterly, and I knew she was right. It wasn't fair that the cats were going to be killed, and the most awful thing was that it was also right. That fact made me want to cry the most, and so I repeated it, wallowing in the horrible truth.

"It's the only thing we could do," I said.

My mother looked at me and scowled. "You're just like your father," she said, and went back up to the house.

In the middle of the farmyard, just twenty-five yards away from me, my father scraped the cat food out of the tin, using his fingers. Tom pushed his big square head into the bowl, blocking out all the other cats, which swarmed around him. My father eyed Tom for a few seconds, as if trying to estimate his weight, then stooped and grabbed the scruff of his neck. Tom yowled and slashed with his claws.

My father jerked his hand away. The big cat dashed across the yard and vanished into the grass. The other cats rushed to the bowl, climbing over each other to get at the food.

My father sucked the back of his hand thoughtfully. He had carried several burlap sacks outside with him, and he stooped, picked one up off the ground, and wrapped it around his wrist. I shifted on the fence, unable to take my eyes off the scene. The railing creaked underneath me, paint and splinters rough under my legs. The wood was rotting, and I wondered why no one had ever repainted it, how long it would take for it to disintegrate, to disappear into the ground. My father tiptoed back to the cats, paused, and then grabbed Ishi. She twisted and howled, clawing, but he held on, stuffed her into a bag, and tied the neck. He dropped the sack to the ground and it rolled back and forth.

The other cats seemed nervous now, alarmed by Ishi's cries. Annie had drifted away from the bowl and was sitting in the middle of the farmyard, silent and watchful. My father crouched and patted the ground, calling to her, but she ignored him and started washing her face. When he edged forward, she dropped her paw and trotted away.

This only left two cats, Myah and Tiger, and I silently urged them to run as well, to disappear. Myah seemed to hear me, because when my father circled back to the bowl, she slunk away from him, keeping low to the ground, and escaped into the long grass. Tiger, however, kept eating, not paying any attention. He arched his back when my father patted him, his face still in the bowl. Gently, my father

scooped his arms under the cat and dropped him into a bag. Tiger didn't even struggle, but hung motionless, swinging gently back and forth like so much dead weight. My father picked up the other bag, then his shotgun, and walked quickly toward the back of the house, holding the sacks a little out from his body.

The night was very dark now, and there was no sound except for crickets in the grass and the hum and buzz of the fluorescent light across from me, set on a telephone pole near the garage. Two chickens had escaped from their pen, and they pecked around in the dirt under the lamp, drawn to the light that shone pale and unnatural, a cold sun that gave everything a single, dark shadow. A gunshot came from behind the house, making the chickens flap and ruffle their feathers. Then there was another. The chickens rushed to the edge of the light, then stopped. They cocked their heads. Nothing else happened. After a moment of listening, they started pecking again.

My father walked back into the farmyard, carrying his shotgun. He came up to where I was sitting, leaned the gun against a fence post, then sat on the rail. The wood shifted beneath me. He looked up at the sky, seemingly counting the stars that had emerged.

"I'm sorry, Daniel," he finally said. "I don't know what else I could have done."

I didn't answer, but stared at him in the flat light of the fluorescent lamp. His nose cast a dark shadow across his face, and his eyes and cheeks seemed sunken, like black pits. I knew he was my father, but he also had a name, Samuel,

and it seemed strange that he could be both at the same time. He sighed and rubbed my back. Calluses rasped and snagged in my shirt, feeling like a scouring pad against my skin. He chopped wood every day, the ax handle giving him tough leathery pads. I was proud of my own calluses from hoeing the garden, signs of my hard work, that I wasn't a city slicker.

"You going to stay out here a little longer?" he asked. And when I nodded, he said, "Okay. I love you, kiddo. Come in when you feel like it."

He picked up his gun and went inside the house. From where I sat, I could hear my mother say something to him but couldn't make out the words, only the tone: her voice sharp and critical, and then his, low and measured and a little sad. Their voices rose and fell in a murmur behind me.

It was night now, long past dusk, and mosquitoes began to whine around my ears. I didn't move, waiting for something to change, for things to start feeling right again. A shape flew over the trees and settled on top of the light post, something dark and hard to see in the glare from the lamp. It ducked its tufted head and adjusted its wings, and I could just make out the form of a Great Horned Owl. It swiveled its head slowly from side to side, watching the chickens that scrabbled in the dirt beneath it, oblivious to its presence. For a moment, I thought that it looked at me, its large round eyes turned fully on mine, and then it lifted back into the air, its wings flapping like a muffled breeze, heavy and ponderous, leaving the chickens and the farm and me far behind, searching for someplace else to hunt.

BURIAL

"So fine, fuck it," my mother said one night. "Fuck you. I never wanted any of this." It was the spring and my parents had been arguing for days, although I didn't know why. The door slammed, making the house shudder, the dishes rattle in the cupboard, the window pane crack. Then a rumble as the car started. Maybe her tires spun in the dirt before gripping, I can't remember everything so clearly. I was nearly asleep, or thought I was, buried in my blankets with my eyes closed, dreaming that I hadn't heard anything at all.

The next morning, Jess ran out of her room to look out the living room window into the yard. She stared for a long time, sitting on the couch with her forehead against the glass, then went into the kitchen to talk to my father. I played with a rubber ball in the living room, throwing it against the wall beside the wood stove, near the door to Jess's room. Throw it right, and it bounced against the metal sheeting that the stove sat on, then the wall, then once off the floor, then back. It made a noise: ku-thunk, thunk, catch. No matter how I threw the ball, it always followed the same path, my hand plucking it out of the air as if a line connected the ball to me. I wasn't there at all. My body ran on and on perfectly, getting it right each time.

Every now and then I went by the door to the kitchen and looked in, and yes, Jess was in my father's lap, still crying. I threw the ball against the wall again. Ku-thunk, thunk, catch. It was easy; a steady rhythm.

When you hit your thumb with a hammer, the pain would surge up your arm and into your head, and then travel back down, exploding in pain where you'd hurt yourself. But if you caught it on its way up, didn't let it back down, the pain stopped.

Ku-thunk, thunk, catch. I practiced catching the pain, stopping it before it left my head. Okay, Mom's gone, I said to myself, timing it with the ball. Okay, thunk, catch. Run, slide, throw. It wasn't too bad, it seemed to me: the rhythm, the motion, the slide. It all fit together and helped me realize how pointless it all was. Ku-thunk, Mom's, catch. It was like crying in front of a mirror, or listening to yourself laugh. Ku-thunk, thunk, gone. Each moment was only a moment with no meaning by itself, just a puckered mouth, a tear sliding down the cheek.

Seen from the ceiling, the boy ran across the room with the ball. It was red and skittered off the sheet metal, against the wall, back onto the metal, and to the hand in an arc. Score. He raised his hand and ran in a circle, passed the kitchen door where he took a brief look before running back to the wall. Outside, it wasn't a bad day at all: flat light coming from the white sky, the mud on the ground, a little green beginning to show on the trees. Not the sort of day to play outside, but soon. Ku-thunk, thunk, catch.

After a while, tired of playing, a little hungry, I began to wish that my father and Jess would come out of the kitchen. Maybe we could drive to the state park by the river and look for mushrooms. It was cool and wet and giant puffballs might be out, like round white watermelons, heavy and soft, as large around as my arms

could reach. When it rained, they swelled, bursting with water. We could slice them thin, put them in batter, and fry them till they were crispy on the outside, translucent and rubbery inside.

I went into the kitchen to see if Jess and my father wanted to go. She was in his lap, and he had his face in her hair, his eyes closed, facing me, pale light all around them from the kitchen window.

"Okay," I said, "what's going on?" I tried to say it like I was tired, like I was sighing, to show that it didn't matter, that I already knew.

My father opened his eyes and looked at me. "Your mom and I are getting a divorce," he said softly.

I nodded and looked down at the table, suddenly wanting to cry. It seemed funny how quickly my mood changed, and I laughed a little. The things from last night's dinner were still out. Plates and knives and forks, all streaked with black grease from hamburgers.

"This mustard sure is hot," I said, and picked the jar up off the table. The label was yellow. "Dijon," it said. That was a place in France, where mustard was invented. *Moutarde*, my father used to say.

"What's French for 'hot'?" I asked.

"I don't know, Daniel," he said. He put his arm around me, but I shook it off. I was trying to cheer Jess up and he just made me want to cry. The rubber ball I had been playing with was still in my hand, hard and solid, and I stared at it. A ridge ran around the middle of the ball, reminding me of the equator on a globe,

and I was surprised because I'd never noticed it before. The ball must have been made in a mold, the two halves coming together, and a little bit of rubber had leaked out at the seam, leaving a thin flap that hung like dead skin. I picked at it for a second, pulling it away, then went back to the living room to throw the ball against the wall some more.

I played in the living room all morning. Finally, around lunch, my father made tomato soup and buttered slices of toast. Since she only wanted to cry, Jess went into her room. My father sighed and looked at me across the table, his face pale, mouth tired and sad. The soup was thick and red and salty, reminding me of blood, stinging the back of my throat. Jess and I used to pretend we were cannibals when we ate tomato soup, giants crunching crackers like bones, slurping blood from someone's skull.

"Hey, Jess! Blood for lunch!" I shouted, knowing it would cheer her up. "Get up lazy bones!"

"Daniel, no," my father said.

I glared at him and ate my soup. It was incredible how stupid people could be, the way they made everything worse for themselves.

"A penny for your thoughts?" my father said.

"They're my thoughts!" I said. "I hate that. I don't know what I'm thinking. Do you think I just go around memorizing what I'm thinking all the time? I can't do that—it all comes at once. You can't separate it like that."

"Okay, don't shout. I'm just curious." My father got up from the table and carried his bowl of soup to the sink. He poured it down the drain, then wandered back and forth, going to the stove, then the refrigerator, then the window to stare outside, circling around me like a dog, always at the edge of my vision no matter which way I turned. He came up behind my chair, hovering to see what I was doing.

"It'll be all right, kiddo," he said.

"I'm done now," I said, and stood up.

In my room, I buried my face in my favorite blanket, crocheted in brown and green yarn, smelling like my mother's lotion, something sweet and warm and deep, something I could lose myself inside, the yarn soft on my face, a scent of warm skin and flowers and almonds.

The next day I lay in bed, blinking at the light outside my bedroom window. The sky was flat and white, cold as ice, like a vast snow field. The trees were gray and naked, not enough leaves to keep them warm. It felt like Sunday, but then I remembered it was Monday, and I must have missed the school bus. No school. I got out of bed, feeling a little dizzy, thinking the house must be deserted, everyone suddenly vanished. I imagined going from room to room and finding no one there, of going into town and seeing the shops empty, no cars on the street, the swing sets swaying behind the school. Everything had stopped.

I went into the kitchen and found my father at the stove. Jess was sitting at the table by the window, her hair down around her face.

"I'll drive you guys to school," my father said, and shuffled around the kitchen making pancakes, which he burned. Blue smoke hung in the air, smelling so sweet and heavy I couldn't eat. Jess picked at her food. I moved slowly, shivering, my hands numb from cold. Nothing seemed to get me warm, even my clothes seemed made of ice. I didn't want to move but stay in one spot, huddling in my blankets, the world outside too big, too cold.

In the car, my father backed down the driveway and into a ditch beside the road. The world tilted as the trunk pointed up to the empty sky.

"Shit," my father said, and moved the shift lever back and forth. Reverse. Forward. Reverse. Jess sniffled. The shift lever was mounted between the two front seats, and I watched the orange needle move up and down in the little window, jumping to R then N then D as my father moved the lever. It seemed to me that the needle was lost and trapped in the ditch just like we were, jumping around trying to get out. That seemed funny, so I laughed.

"Stop it, Daniel," my father said. He spun the wheel so the car lurched sideways, then moved up onto the road, coming level again.

I scowled and settled back in the seat, kicking the back of the chair, wondering why no one understood what was happening.

At school, my father walked us to our classrooms. The halls were deserted, all the students already inside their rooms. Finger paintings hung on the walls,

pictures of red tulips on green stalks, trees with apples and rainbows overhead. My father put his hand on my back, squeezed my shoulder, then opened the door to my homeroom. It was dark inside, all the students watching a film. A strip of light fell across the rows of desks, the students bent shapes, quiet and meditating as the film projector clicked. I turned to look at my father, who was just a silhouette against the hall lights. He raised his hand to me, then closed the door. I fumbled my way to my seat. The film was about school bus safety. On screen, some big kids played in back of the bus, snatching a book from a girl and holding it up in the air. The girl shrieked and reached for it back. "Hey!" the woman driver looked in the rearview mirror, then turned around in her seat. I put my head on the desk. The plastic was cold and smelled like soap and paper towels and pencil leads.

"Daniel, are you feeling ill?" Mrs. Anderson stood over me. The movie glowed in her glasses, the only bright spot I could see in her face.

"My parents are getting a divorce," I whispered. It was the only thing I could think of, the worst thing I could say, since I wanted her to go away and leave me alone.

She was silent, staring down at me, then put a hand on my shoulder.

"Okay, just stay like that," she said. "You don't have to do any work today."

I kept my head down after she walked away, amazed that she had left, just like that, exactly as I'd wanted. I peeked out of the corners of my eyes at the other students, each one watching the film, but no one said anything to me. When the

lights came on, Mrs. Anderson passed out a sheet of paper and told everyone write down the most important things to remember while riding the school bus. I answered a few of the questions, then glanced around. No one was watching me. I turned the sheet over and started to doodle on the back, making a squiggle and then adding feet and fins and teeth, so that I finally had a shark standing in sneakers with a briefcase. I didn't pass the sheet in with the other students, and no one said anything.

When Mrs. Anderson told us to work on math, I took out my English book and started reading stories. Everyone always complained about having to read, but stories were my favorite. I read about a girl who was the fastest runner in her school and won all the races. She loved getting new sneakers because they made her think of stepping into soft loam, of standing in the middle of a green forest, the air hot and moist, vines hanging down, of hearing birds call and a stream trickling somewhere far off in the distance.

"Mrs. Anderson, Daniel's not doing his assignment," Tracy Million said, swiveling around to look at what I was doing.

"That's enough, Tracy," Mrs. Anderson said. "Just mind your own business. Daniel's doing some work for me."

I smiled as Tracy slumped in her seat, and started reading another story.

It was the same in all of my classes that day. The teachers seemed to know I wasn't supposed to work, and no one called on me or asked me to do any assignments. I made clay dinosaurs during Social Studies, and during Music, I

stared out the window, daydreaming as Miss Gunderson talked about the power of God and how evil sometimes crept into gardens. From what she said, evil sounded like some kind of insect, but I didn't pay enough attention to find out what kind, imagining instead that I had found enough money to build an airplane and fly it up higher and higher into the sky, speeding away until the land disappeared below me, an arc of blue and brown and green as I hurtled into blackness, infinite stars stretching in front of me.

During gym class, Mrs. Anderson let me sit at my desk while she graded assignments.

"You like to read, don't you, Daniel? Why don't you stay here."

She sat at the front of the class while I paged through my scholastic reader. In one story, two orphans lived in an art museum with no one knowing, sleeping in the canopy beds at night and trying on suits of armor. Every now and then I stopped reading and watched Mrs. Anderson. I had never seen her when she wasn't teaching. She had a Tupperware container on her desk with apples and carrots inside. Her shoes were off, her feet bare while she graded, rubbing her toes together, a dry rasping sound. Sometimes she looked out the window, just like I did, her mouth slightly open, staring. The room seemed quiet, peaceful and strange, like some place I had never been before. I felt like I was finally seeing how things really worked, the true side of life that had always been hidden from me.

"Jesus," Mr. Peterson said as he stuck his head in the room. "Did you know what the little bastards—"

"Shh," Mrs. Anderson said, gesturing to me.

Mr. Peterson clapped his hand over his mouth and backed away.

That night after dinner, Jess cried in the kitchen while my father talked to her. I lay on my bed and read my book of stories. I'd taken the textbook from school, slipping it into my bag when no one was watching, taking comfort in its weight, the smell of old glue and chalk, the shiny pages with story after story, each one unfolding perfectly in front of me.

"Why do you have to get divorced?" Jess said. "If you, maybe if you talked and then said you were sorry."

"I *am* sorry, Jess, but not in that way," my father said. He was muttering, talking more to the walls and windows, it seemed to me, than anyone else. "This is what has to be done. I've considered it and considered it, and even though it's not an easy thing, I know it's right. Sometimes, when the pain of a relationship starts to outweigh any of the benefits—"

"But if you said you were sorry, then it would get better."

"No. It's not that simple. Life is infinitely more complex than that, and being sorry, the unmitigated guilt, just doesn't make anything better."

"But I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I always get so—so . . ." Jess couldn't talk, she was crying too hard. I heard water running and knew my father had taken her to the bathroom.

"I don't like that. I don't like that," Jess wailed.

"Shh. Let me wash your face. It'll make you feel better."

"No. I want you to be sorry. I want you to be."

"It's all right, Jess. Things will be all right."

"But why aren't you crying? I hate crying, why am I the only one?"

"Come on, I'll get you some juice."

I turned the page to another story, about a man driving a dog team through the snow. I didn't know why Jess tried to make herself so unhappy, dwelling on things that weren't important. Crying didn't change anything, and it made you look so bad: the snot running out of your nose, your face crumpled up so that everyone stared at you on the playground. You looked so small and closed in on yourself, only thinking about your own problems so that everyone knew exactly who you were and what you were feeling.

Jess sobbed in the kitchen, a dry sound. I swore I'd never let that happen to me.

My mother came back on Saturday. Jess shouted and I looked out the window and saw her leaning against the side of her car, legs crossed at the ankle, her hands in her pockets as she waited for us to come out of the house. Jess ran to

her right away, then my father walked outside. I followed them slowly. My parents hugged in the driveway and kissed.

"Here, kids, look what I brought you." My mother turned away from my father and took two packages out of her purse. She smiled at me, looking me in the face, then she and my father walked back to the house together, holding hands. The package was flat and thin, wrapped in red shiny paper. Inside was a wooden cup on a handle, a ball attached to it by a string. You were supposed to toss the ball up and catch it in the cup. Jess had a little brown bear. My parents hugged on the porch, kissing again, and I watched them from the driveway, the toy swinging in my hand.

"I knew it was going to be okay!" Jess said, seeing them, too.

"Let's go look for asparagus!" I said, suddenly wanting to run, to tear through the woods and bring something home for my parents. The day felt electric, like just after a rainstorm when everything smelled wet and clean and clear. My father had once found a patch of wild asparagus, green spears coming up out of the ground, and he'd told me that it came back year after year in the same spot. Now that the weather was clearing, I imagined the asparagus growing out of the damp ground like little horns, the buds of tiny goats.

Jess and I put our presents on the porch, then ran across the horse pasture to the woods. The ground was brown and dead, white patches of snow still clinging in the hollows and forming a rim around each tree. The asparagus patch lay at the edge of the forest, where the pine trees stopped and a brown field began. The year

before, my father had cooked the shoots he'd found in butter and explained that kings used to eat asparagus on golden plates in stone castles. "Only a dish for royalty," he'd said.

Brushing aside branches and dead grass, I peered down at the ground along the fence line. Yellow stalks stuck up through the dead grass and pine needles, the feather remnants of last year's crop of asparagus, still standing after a long winter.

"It's too early," said Jess. "We have all summer."

I stared down at the asparagus, at the dried stems which curled and twisted like antlers, feeling an emptiness inside, a hole I could never fill or describe no matter how many words I used.

My parents took Jess and me to town that night for pizza. They didn't hold hands anymore, and sat in the car without talking, my father staring straight ahead as he drove, my mother looking out the window. After the pizza came, red pepperoni floating in a puddle of oil and melted cheese, my father told Jess and me that we would be staying with some friends in the city for a few days.

"Why?" Jess asked.

"We need to get things organized here. On the farm," my father said.

My mother lit a cigarette. I stared at her. She had never smoked before. The cigarettes were long and brown and thin. Smoke curled up and around her lips. I hated cigarettes, but just then I wanted nothing better than to smell smoke, to breath it in, to feel it tickle the back of my throat and rise up into my eyes. It seemed like a million years since I'd smelled smoke, sweet and stinging and with a

hint of cherries and tar. My mother tipped her head back and shook out her hair, letting the smoke drift up and out of her mouth.

"It'll only be a week," my father said.

My mother kept blowing out smoke while Jess cried and I kept my eyes fixed on the dark circle of her mouth. She pursed her lips, making small rings that drifted away, toward the ceiling, white in the light, pale, stretching farther and farther apart, growing thinner, until they vanished into nothing.

The last day on the farm I woke up early, the way Jess and I used to do when we walked along the dirt roads in the mornings, looking for snakes and dead insects to bury. No one else was up yet. In a few hours, my mother would drive us to the city.

Gray light came through my window and fog clung to the ground, making the distance nothing but shapes and shadows. I put my clothes on over my pajamas and slipped my mother's Chinese necklace over my head. I'd taken it the night before, while my parents had sat in the kitchen, sharing a cigarette. My mother always kept the necklace in the top drawer of her dresser, buried in her underwear and nylons, her silk scarves and round cakes of sweet soap, heavy and gold, a dragon in the center of the medallion. Jess and I used to take the necklace for treasure hunts, hiding it and then leaving clues for each other to follow. "I am a closed book, none can read me, on the highest shelf you will C." And there the necklace would be, closed inside the dictionary at the top of the bookshelves, at the

start of the section for the letter C. Once, in the middle of a treasure hunt, my father had called Jess and me to go to town, and we'd run out, forgetting the game. A week later, looking for fish hooks, I'd found the necklace in the tool chest in the cold room, under the crescent wrenches. "A handy thing for a handy man: don't twist this riddle up to make it fit, just hold tight and I'll soon be in sight."

That last morning on the farm, I walked through the wet grass behind the house, counting my steps. Dew soaked my shoes and jeans, but my pajamas stayed dry underneath. I was carrying a plastic bag and it bumped against my legs. Before going outside, I'd taken my father's mushroom book and put it in the bag so it wouldn't get wet. My father always collected mushrooms in the woods. He took off the caps and placed them on paper, the gills down. After a day, the mushrooms left a brown sunburst of spores on the sheets, and he'd peer at the pattern, holding the paper up, comparing the prints to the illustrations in the book.

"Amanita nervosa," he had said once, whistling, holding the typing paper for me to see. "The destroying angel. It only takes a sliver to kill you. Just a wedge stuck between your teeth."

"Have you ever eaten anything poisonous?" I asked.

"Almost. One time. But I caught it, figured it out. Sometimes, when you nearly make a mistake, you have to shake your head. Wonder what would have happened." My father tilted the paper in the light and shook his head at the danger.

The land dropped sharply behind the house, sloping down to the slough, which was lost in fog. The clouds lay just a few feet about the grass, a little gap of

empty air in between, a black space between the silver gray above, and the darker gray below. I put down the plastic bag. The house was two hundred yards behind me in the fog.

I had taken a shovel from the cold room and now pushed the blade into the dead grass, driving it in with my foot. The soil was soft, no roots. A few small stones scraped against the metal. Black earth stuck to the shovel, and I knocked it off with my shoe.

The best land to build on was flat, but where I was digging sloped. No one would disturb it for a long time. Maybe never.

The black soil ended three feet down, the earth turning pale, colorless in the flat morning light, gritty on my fingers, like sand. Glacial till. My father had told me that the glaciers had churned up rocks and boulders and then pulverized them, turning them to dust and sand. When the ice melted, the sand spread out across the land, covering the bare soil. I kept digging, and after a few feet, the soil changed again, becoming even lighter, almost pure white. Undisturbed soil. The land the glaciers had crossed over. Untouched.

The fog had begun to rise, lifting into the brightening sky. The slough, or part of it, stretched in front of me: a flat silver curve edged by brown reeds and the black trunks of trees, the rest disappearing into the mist.

I dropped to my knees in the wet grass and took off the necklace. It clattered as I dropped it into the bag, sliding across the mushroom book and a clear plastic box I had taken from Jess's room. A luna moth rested inside on a bed of

white cotton: the wings spread, pale green, with silvery half moons. I gathered the bag together and squeezed out the air, patting it down around the objects, then tied a knot. I swung it into the hole.

When we got to the city, I would watch everyone search for their things. My mother would swear and stamp around the house while Jess and I played in our rooms, staying out of her way. My father would frown and search through his boxes of books, arranging them in alphabetical order. Jess would cry and ask me to help her, and I would empty my own boxes, sneak into my mother's room to look through her things, run down to the car to check under the seats. But we'd never find what was missing. The things would be gone, disappeared, lost forever. Only I would know that they still existed, that they were wrapped up together, safe in the ground, five hundred big strides through the grass from the house, overlooking the slough where cattails grew and loons called. Buried on the hill where I had sledded during winter, where I had hunted for butterflies during summer. Only a few yards from where I'd slept every night, listening to the floorboards groan and the whisper of things in the walls, my mother and father's laughter in the kitchen as they drank wine and talked about the animals, the farm, about all of us being together.

All of that was underground now, buried under the dirt I dropped into the hole, heavy and sticky, falling in clumps like rain on my father's book and my mother's necklace and Jess's moth and an agate I'd once found in the road—a Lake Superior agate, rough and gray and dull and shaped like an egg. One end had broken off, and inside it was smooth and glossy with hundreds of thin bands, all

different colors—red and blue and orange and white. The only gemstone in Minnesota, and that was me. That was me.

When I had filled the hole, I tamped it down, the dirt sliding beneath my feet, dark against the grass. The sun was rising, gleaming dully red through the haze, casting my shadow down the hill toward the slough. Everything would stay in the hole, and no matter where I was, no matter what happened, I'd know it was still there, even in ten years, or a hundred, or a thousand. Even after the glaciers came back and swept away the house and covered the land and scoured away the soil, our things would still be there, safe below ground, under miles and miles of blue ice, until the seasons changed, and the sun came back, and melted it all away.