

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Lucinda S. Van Handel for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented March 20, 2003.

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Tracy Daugherty

Set in the dryland farming country of Eastern Oregon in the late 1950's, this novel follows a year and a half in the life of a young girl as she comes of age. A water rights dispute, the plight of nearby ranchers, disappointments in her own family and a harrowing encounter with a neighbor all contribute to her perception that, contrary to what her father has taught her, what matters most isn't owning the oldest water rights. She comes to recognize that the world is much larger and more complex than it had appeared from her remote mountain valley home.

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The Dry Country

by
Lucinda S. Van Handel

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APPROVED:

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Major Professor, Representing Creative Writing

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

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Lucinda S. Van Handel, Author

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Headwaters	2
Dog Days 1959	3
Indian Summer	19
Christmas	33
A New Season	48
Almost Spring	76
Spring Gatherings.....	91
Drought	121
Early Winter	144
Ice-melt	166
Confluence	187

The Dry Country

Headwaters

I remember coolness touching my face. I remember a wet smell. And I remember my feet wheeling in the air, reaching for something solid, feeling nothing but air. I must have been three or four at the time, because I was still small enough for my father's arms, and he was holding me out over the water of our creek.

I might have squirmed a little, since I remember Dad shook me, then he said, "See that there?" I held very still, and he pulled me in close. I could feel his heartbeat as I looked down into the water, safe and sure. "That's our creek, and that's our water," he told me. "It comes all the way down the canyon from up high, where the snow is. Runs by a lot of places before it gets here. But when it does, it's ours." He put his hand under my chin, and looked right into my eyes. "You can't get by in the dry country without water," he said. "Remember that."

Like a coat too large that's put away and is forgotten until it's needed, my father's lesson disappeared from my life for a while, hidden under the myriad other things a child learns as she grows. Did he teach it only that one time? What parent ever teaches a lesson only once?

The year I turned ten, and the Carson family came to High Valley, it resurfaced. Until then, I had never questioned my father. And I never imagined that what came out of our creek might be as important to me as water.

Dog Days 1959

In late-summer mornings then, when the ground was warm enough for barefoot, the path from house to garden to barn was packed hard and smooth as a swept floor. That particular August morning, I had followed that path to the garden, to stand on the mound that the large overhead sprinkler occupied, and look out over our farm, doing what my father always called *taking stock*. That meant turning in a circle and looking at all that was there, that day's work to do, what you'd done already, and what you owned. I've always felt glad Dad didn't take stock of me. Since I was the only child he had, and a girl, I might not count for much. But I meant to.

Rain hadn't come for months, and there was no dew on the grass that day, or haze on the foothills, even though I had been up before the stars had disappeared. The snowcaps on the Wallawas topped only the highest peaks, and the mountains looked like the storybook Chinese brothers with their small white hats, standing guard over High Valley.

"Christine?" my mother's voice floated out over the garden, calling me back.

Some days, those snowcaps were the only coolness anywhere. I liked to look up at them when I was working in the fields with Dad, when waves of heat rippled across the canyon floor, making you feel even hotter. But looking at snow miles away never compared with cold creek water washing over your feet and up your legs. The creek was where I wanted to be that next minute, just as soon as I figured out how to get past Mother.

Everyone, and everything, had slowed down in the heat. Buck, our old cocker spaniel, was just a faded russet bump in another cool spot, under the apple trees. They called these dog days, but Buck was almost invisible in the shade. The apple trees near

our long, winding driveway didn't bear much fruit any more, but they had been there since pioneer days, so there they stayed. Buck wandered out under them right after breakfast, and only returned at sunset. Broad stone steps, as old as the trees, lay half-buried in the dirt. They provided his hideout.

Our farm was divided from the road by those old trees, and the leaves on some of the branches always looked dusty, unlike the willows near the creek, which were fresh and green. The front of our house looked out on the apple trees and the road, the back on the creek and the willows.

"Christine!" Mother's voice had taken on an edge. I couldn't ignore her for long, but I wasn't ready to give up.

Jonathan Creek was down to a lazy trickle and seemed to be barely moving, like Buck. Only the wind was still active. Every afternoon, in the hottest hours, it stirred up dust devils in the fields. Later in the day, when it came around the barn and the house, it had a sadder sound, as if it were grieving about summer coming to an end. I was beginning to grieve, too, in my worry about school starting up.

Mother slammed the back porch door. If she looked out the kitchen window, she could see the end of the garden, but her view of the sprinkler's small hill was blocked by two large lilacs, so I was safe for the moment.

On the other side of the creek, past the smokehouse and sheds, were the fields: Grass hay fields. The last of the bales had been stacked days ago into yellow and green buildings of curing grass and straw. The bales had strong orange twine, unchewed by mice, because I had walked through the fields every day in the hot sun and turned each bale, so that mice would have no time to bite through a single strand. I had stomped the unlucky ones I found underneath, and had my ankles bitten twice. When I turned my foot, several little white scars showed where their sharp teeth had reached through my

socks. I remembered feeling their small bones crunching beneath my foot, and hearing their final squeaks get quieter as I pushed down. Dad would never lift a bale of hay only to have the string break and the feed wasted. Every bale was secure. I had made sure of that.

Mother might have gone to the other window by now, to look out at the barn and watch for Dad. Well, I was watching for him, too. He could come through the big double gate and up the driveway. Then I'd see him at the same time she did. The double gate was made of metal poles half as big around as our sprinkler pipe, and instead of shiny silver, the gate was dark blue, and stood out in an irritating way against the log corrals. It looked new all the time, and was always padlocked. Our barn, however, had faded to a red almost the same color as Buck, a kind of friendly red. Alfalfa and timothy were piled in the barn's loft, in fluffy piles. I had helped pitch hay until my shoulders ached, and when the mounds were too high for me to reach, I had scrambled to the top, above the haying crew, and shaped and rounded until the haymow was as beautiful as the mountains around us. The shady barn smelled of hay and animals and dust floated peacefully in sunlight coming through its cracks. It was one of my favorite spots, and a good place to hide. Last year, I had spent the early morning hours of the first day of school there, until Mother heard me throwing up in the hay and led me out to the waiting bus in shame. Since I had helped with harvest, I was sure things would be different. That wouldn't happen this year.

But harvest was over and the hands had gone home. The last of our grain had run down into the red and silver silo days ago and the combines and trucks had headed down the road. The whole farm was very quiet.

Across the big wooden bridge at the edge of the barnyard was the blacksmith shop, where Dad welded broken machinery, and patched irrigation pipe. But silver pipe no

longer marked out the fields. Instead, pipes were piled on wooden flatbed trailers, and stacked here and there in the fields. For months, our lives had been paced by the changing of that pipe. In the evening, I had watched Dad balance a long section over his shoulders until it was perfectly aligned with the pipe on the ground, then set it down gently, and push the two together. Once they were latched, they became one pipe.

I loved waking up in the earliest morning hours, when the sky was still soft and pale, and hearing Dad start the sprinklers. At first, there was just a spurting noise, as if the sprinklers weren't completely awake yet, and were unhappy about working. Then they would start to turn, and the water would hit the dry field. A smell would rise, of ground becoming damp, and water in dry air, and the sprinklers would hit their rhythm. I would always fall back asleep again, listening. A whole year would have to pass before I could hear the music of sprinklers watering the fields again. I stopped turning. I hadn't really thought about it that way before. Something was over that I couldn't bring back. Just like if you stood in a particular place and tried to think the sprinklers from coming back round and getting you wet. It never worked. There were some things that didn't stop. And summer ending was one of them.

I looked down at my feet, and at what spread around me. The big spider sprinkler that reached the whole garden was still hooked up to its pipe, and when the handle was turned, water still pumped from the creek to flow through it. But it was the last one. Only the garden needed watering now: Rows of corn, beans, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, more. Parsnips and kohlrabi, mysterious white bulbs that could be mashed, disguised to look like potatoes but when you put a spoonful in your mouth, turned to sweetened dirt on your tongue. This year, Mother's garden was enormous. All winter, she had been bent over seed catalogs, and the big dining table had been covered with plans on grid paper. Now all those vegetables and fruits which looked so harmless in the catalog pages

were lifesize in our garden, and waiting to be picked, pickled, canned or jammed. The fruit room downstairs was filling with jars: apricots, peaches, plums and pears, floating in syrup, and looking out at me through their glass every time I went down there. Even my favorites, the blue pears Mother had invented, stared at me, waiting. The root cellar was piled with sawdust already, and by fall would have potatoes and squash, apples and onions and who knew what else. The pantry was stocked, and Mother was still canning. The frightening thing was, all this had be eaten eventually.

“We’ll have plenty this year,” she said several times a day.

Plenty! I couldn’t imagine us eating all that food. What had gotten into her? Even if there were three more kids just like me, we still couldn’t eat everything she had been harvesting and canning all summer.

Hot as it was, she was canning stewed tomatoes. I moved to the forest of corn stalks, where I could hear her clanking jars behind the fogged kitchen windows, but where she couldn’t see me. All morning we had pulled ripe tomatoes from the vine or picked them, split and oozing, out of the dirt underneath. Baskets of them. Boxes of tomatoes leaking red. Juice had soaked through my pants leg and run down my ankle. The smell of the vines made my head feel fidgety and now my skin burned. Since breakfast, we had been in the garden. The sun moved higher in the sky, and even the corn stalks weren’t shade enough. It might have been different if today was the first time. But it wasn’t. Harvest had been an adventure, but gardening was still pure chore, and the day was fast disappearing. I had to get to the creek.

My earlier escape hadn’t worked. I had just started up the porch steps as my mother hefted the last full basket of tomatoes against her hip, and came past the lilacs toward me. There were streaks of mud on her tanned arms, and her face was pink. Her auburn hair had slipped out of its barrette, and into loose curls all around her head. She was almost

crackling with the urge to get things done, and never seemed to get tired. Just watching her made me want a nap.

“Where are you going?” she had asked.

“To take a bath. I itch.”

“Not now, Christine. You’ve got weeding to do, and you’ll itch then, too. So just use the wash basin.” She stood there holding those tomatoes, and watched me. I delayed as long as possible, putting one foot on a step, then the other. “Go on,” she insisted, and nodded her head in the direction of the bench.

“I’m going,” I had said. But, of course, I hadn’t.

Silk like the softest hair, baby hair, blonde baby hair, hanging from green ears, and the long, tough leaves on the stalk, like knives that could cut your fingers: I liked to touch both of these. Weaving in and out of the corn stalks, I leaned so the silk would just brush my cheek as I walked by, then on the next turn, grabbed a long leaf, and ran it through my fingers. I was almost to the end of the rows, when water splashed into metal, and there was a clank as Dad set the enameled pitcher back down. He had come from behind the house, by the old summer porch, then up the hill to the bench with the wash basins. There he stood, pouring cold water over his head, and scrubbing with a green bar of Lava soap, all in full view of the road. His face and arms were red when he finished and the ground around him white with soap suds. I never would understand. We had a lovely indoor bathroom, with a nice deep bathtub, and a homemade shower in the basement. Why couldn’t we use it, just like people in town did? The only way I ever washed myself outside was in the creek, clothes and all, and that was where I was headed.

The kitchen windows were now thoroughly steamed, and Dad had gone inside, too. Now that there wasn't pipe to be changed, it was hard to tell where he would be any certain time of the day. But he was much less of a danger than Mother was. She hated the creek, and me going anywhere near it; Dad seemed to understand its attraction. Even if it turned out that I looked just like the rest of Mother's family, there would still be something of him inside me. Before sleep sometimes, I could feel pounding in my ears, and swore that their two bloodlines were fighting inside me, Mother's all uneven and skittery, Dad's steady and persistent.

Dad's blood must have been flowing through my legs then, because I marched right on by the wash bench, and was at the creek in nothing flat.

Only a couple of pools remained downstream that were deep enough to swim in. One, however, Dad had taken over this year for the pump, and I was forbidden to go near it. The other was shallower and had steeper banks. Once it had been a fishing hole, but the trout had moved farther up the canyon, into the deep, dark pools created by downed cottonwoods. They were a good twenty-minute walk through chokecherry thickets. I wished Dad hadn't moved the pump this year, but even this pool was better than a stingy wash basin by the porch.

White foam and green scum floated at the edge, but I rolled my overalls past my knees and got in anyway. The water felt oily and a bit like soup, but looking up, there was a world much different from the garden. A green, magical world, full of secrets. The creek was the highway to that world, and its center. Muskrats dug their dens in the banks in spring. Tiny frogs moved up and downstream, and kingfishers, in a flash of blue, dove for them. Deer drank at the small ford a few yards upstream. Water dipper birds

danced on the rocks, up and down, up and down. Even this close to the barn, it was still wild -- and wonderful.

Buried in the silt at the bottom of the creek were perfect rocks for building: flat and hand-sized. On the ledge on the other side were sticks and pieces of bark for boats. In the spring, the water had swirled up past the ledge. Branches and trees had been carried along, and piles of tangled wood had covered the banks. The creek had been higher than Dad. All that water rushing along, carrying logs as big as I was, had been frightening. But it had also been exciting. All that movement, changing things, going somewhere. Was it wrong to love a place or a thing, like a creek?

In the stream there was little movement now, and barely enough water to wet my calves. And it was almost warm. Where had all that water gone? Harvest had kept me away from the creek for the first long stretch of time that I could remember. Most of the summer I'd only had time to dangle my feet from the bank behind the house. But it was hardly worth building boats for this amount of water, or dams either. Had it been like this last year? Could it be I just hadn't noticed the creek getting shallower because I had played there day after day? I'd been smaller, too. Maybe that was it.

Waterskippers danced away from my legs, and downstream a few yards, bees lifted off from a muddy bank I was sure hadn't been there before. A dragonfly flew upstream, its wings like sun on the water. Where were the houses and villages I'd built? Where were the waterways and dams I'd spent hours constructing? Everything seemed to have disappeared. There were rocks lining both sides of the creek, coated with drying silt and algae from the creek. And were those tractor tracks? Dad had come up here, without even telling me, and dug out the creek. He had moved the tractor in, and with the scoop, ruined everything I'd built. Wasn't it my creek, too? Now the enclosed pond felt like a

dirty bowl, with me just a leftover at the bottom, ready to be scraped into the swill bucket.

My fingernails were packed with mud and my overall knees were filthy, but there was nothing else to do but start back to the house and accept my fate at the wash basin. At least no one was driving by. An Indian tobacco plant stood in my way, and I trampled it. There were hours of weeding yet to do. Maybe I could find a nice, cool burrow where Mother wouldn't find me. Even the musty old basement. No. She'd find me there in a second. And if she didn't, I'd end up hiding out, like Buck. If only I had somebody to visit instead, somewhere to go and play. From the distance came a yell. As I got closer, the yell became my name. Mother? It repeated, louder. But it wasn't Mother calling me back to the garden, or to the wash basin. It was Dad.

"Chris! Christina!" He motioned for me to come quickly, and I hurried through the dry grass, swinging my shoes, one pant leg slowly creeping damply down.

"Want to ride to town?" he asked from the corral.

Town! I didn't care that I wouldn't be allowed out of the truck, or that Dad would most likely stop at the feed mill or the post office or the bank; town was full of life and color. People I never saw except on the streets of our little town were always hurrying about on some mysterious business, often dressed in suits, the women in heels and hats. Old Mrs. Stitzel drove her enormous Cadillac while wearing long pink gloves. There were people in uniforms: the butcher with bloody stains on his front; the druggist, who handled intriguing bottles of bright blue and yellow liquid; and the postman, who walked house to house, delivering mail directly inside, or to a mailbox right outside. Once we had driven by Mrs. Edvalson's house at night, and I had seen her sitting at her cluttered table, reading her mail, a multi-colored lamp casting shadows on her face and arms. What would it be like to have someone deliver your mail daily, while you waited snug inside?

Or to have neighbors close enough to talk to over the fence? What might it be like to have someone my own age living down the street, someone who might call my name from the gate? Come play, come play? Christine, Christine.

“Yes,” I shouted to Dad, “oh, yes, please!”

I often daydreamed that my parents had sold the ranch and we moved to town. Those thoughts sometimes gave me pangs of guilt, for I suspected my parents would never be happy in town. But it was this town that I recreated over and over again in my rock and stick villages in the creek. The creamery, the post office, Dr. Stanfield’s office, the saddle shop, everything. I knew them by heart, up one side of the street, and down the other. What the buildings looked like. What was in their windows. I yearned to know all the side streets, too, and to recite them house by house, Millers and Wildes and Edvalsons and Levys and Erwins, all the way through town. So I continued to hope that someday, perhaps, Jonathan Creek Farm would belong to someone else, and we would live on one of those streets. Elm or Cherry, even Cemetery Drive. I wouldn’t be particular, as long as it was town. But as I came in view of Dad, and saw his sturdy frame and his hat set just so, I suspected it wasn’t probable.

“You’re a ragamuffin,” he said. “Where’ve you been? Chasing mud puppies?”

Did he know that I’d been up the canyon and seen his tractor tracks? “No, Dad. I’ve been helping Mother with tomatoes. I’m not too raggedy, am I?”

“Get in the truck. Come on, don’t dilly-dally. Your mother’ll have a fit if she sees you.” Dad hummed the worm song, and rolled one of his Bull Durhams while I climbed in. I liked to watch him carefully hold the thin white paper, fill it, then wet and seal it with a twist of each end. He did it just like he did everything, quickly, and without spilling a crumb. He always said if you’re going to do something, get it done. He reached across

and brushed my dirty overalls, then indicated for me to tie my shoes. “Mom’s canning up a storm in there. She doesn’t need any interruptions.”

My mother loved the large front windows of our house because she could see the road, watch who traveled up and down, maybe see inside their vehicle, see what they wore, who went, and who stayed home. That’s how she learned the news. Dad preferred to drive by. Sometimes we went the long way around, into our closest city, La Grande, making the twisting loop up through the high granite canyons and forests, then down into fields and orchards. But most of the time, it was just to Union, our closest community, some seven miles away: That was town.

We took our time driving there, not just because our mountain roads were treacherous, but because it took a while to check out a new baler, to see that the vet was treating a favorite horse or that the family car was now gone every weekday until dark.

Several times that summer, Brownie Miller’s rig had been missing from its usual spot alongside his shed. It was gone again. The Millers’ pasture bordered ours, and they were our closest neighbors downstream, but I had never been in their house, or seen either of them visit my folks. Carmela Miller spent most of her days confined to an upholstered chair in her living room. She didn’t do much socializing.

“He’s working at the big mill,” Dad said. “I’ll bet you anything, he’s driving fifty miles a day and working at Boise Cascade.” He clucked his tongue. “Can’t make it farming part-time.”

A few months back, Dad had come into the house fuming. Brownie had cut back the banks on a quarter-mile of creek on his land, hoping to keep them from collapsing into the streambed. He’d lost two pumps by that time, and had been ready to try anything. But all he’d achieved was a temporary dam, rerouting part of the creek, and backing it up into Dad’s barley. Right after the annual water board meeting, Dad and two water board

members bulldozed the creek banks back where they were supposed to be. Brownie had disappeared for a while. You could see Carmela on the porch late into the evening, waiting for him to come home. It was a week before he returned.

“There’s Carmela,” I said to Dad. She appeared in the doorway in her bathrobe, her dark hair down around her shoulders, staring at us from her walker, a large shapeless woman who looked as if she never saw the sun. She seemed to be shaking a bit with the effort of holding herself up, but continued to look directly into the cab of the truck, unwaveringly. Dad sped up. “Wave at her,” I suggested, but he was in a hurry. I waved out the back window. She didn’t wave back.

The old Teeter Place had stood empty for five years, after Les Teeter had gone broke trying to raise Angus. Dad had a particular dislike for purebred cattle, especially purebred Black Angus. He believed they belonged back in Scotland or Ireland or England, or wherever they’d come from. They didn’t belong in Eastern Oregon, that was for sure. And they certainly didn’t belong on a farm with no decent feed and too little water. Teeter had water rights but too little irrigation equipment, and little money to buy more. But Dad was certain it had been those black purebred cattle that bankrupted Teeter. If he’d raised normal cattle, he’d have been fine.

Since the place hadn’t been farmed for so many years, Dad thought the water rights were gone. The new owners of the Teeter place would be the last to use Jonathan Creek. I couldn’t imagine living in a place without irrigation water. No ditches full of water, or sprinklers chattering on a hot summer day.

Dust blew up from Teeter’s bare fields, and the wind rattled the few leaves in the cottonwoods. A smell came with the wind, old, metallic, like the inside of a rusty tobacco

tin. Maybe there was a good spring. My throat began to ache, and the dust stung my eyes. What if there wasn't a spring at all? Dad said it was an awful sound, cattle lowing in a drought. I could almost hear them now, their tongues swollen from thirst. I tried not to think about it any more. Wasn't I lucky to be in the truck with Dad? And lucky to go home to a place where we could water garden all night if we felt like it? Then I remembered the weeding waiting for me.

Another thing that made the Teeter place different was that it wasn't actually on High Valley Road. It was on a short road all of its own, a road that connected the two routes into town. It was the only farm on that road. That always had made it kind of special. Even Jonathan Creek Farm was on High Valley Road, surrounded by other farms like the Millers'. Teeter's farm sat back from the road, behind the cottonwoods, and no one could see it unless they parked directly at the end of the lane, and looked straight up through the gap in the trees. That was what Dad was doing, on the pretext of examining their old mailbox. He pulled onto the wrong side of the road, rolled forward slowly, stuck his hand out the window and began straightening the mailbox post.

"Ought to get that fixed," he said.

"No one uses it."

He banged it a couple of times anyway, then stopped, "Well, what do you know! Looks like someone's going to be using it. Take a look down there, Christine."

I climbed halfway into his lap for a better look.

A rusting blue truck had parked near the unpainted house. Furniture and household paraphernalia bulged out its racks and rose above the truck cab in a rickety stack, like a toddler's block tower. Everything they owned must have been in that one truckload. I watched for someone to come and take out the wrong box or chair. The whole thing

would collapse like pickup-sticks. Clothing and dishes would sail every which way. Dad seemed to be breathing slowly, like he did when he fell asleep after Sunday dinner.

Carrying an overstuffed chair, a stocky, lopsided man shuffled from behind the truck. When he saw us, he stopped, put the chair down and watched. In a moment, a tall woman joined him, then a girl. The girl was small, and dressed in pale pink, a color I found babyish. It was the woman who kept my attention. She wore a blue and white patterned house dress that blew limply against her legs, and she seemed to glide from place to place as if she were always about to move, like the dress. I couldn't tell what color her hair was, because somehow it didn't blow around like my mother's would have, but stayed against her head, perhaps under some invisible scarf. The girl stood between this woman and the crooked man, but didn't touch either one, and placed herself so exactly in the middle, it was as if she'd carefully judged the distance. They seemed posed for a family portrait and we were the camera. Their neighbors, curious, spying. I wanted to get out of the truck, and run up the lane toward them, somehow close the space. They were waiting for me, and I could have gone to them. But I didn't. I've wondered ever since if that wasn't why things happened as they did.

A dust devil rolled across the road, halfway between our truck and the rusty one, then disappeared, leaving a couple tumbleweeds in the fence at the edge of the property. When I looked back, several older children, teenage boys and girls, began moving in the background, taking boxes from the far side of the truck, and placing them on the ground. They ignored us completely, continuing to work rhythmically, unloading box after box, jumping onto the truck, then down. Nothing on the truck shifted or toppled. It was obvious they were in a hurry, and Dad surely would approve of the way they were working. No dilly-dallying. Still they didn't seem very important. It was the three

standing together who were so obviously the new residents of the Teeter Place. They were the new family in High Valley.

“Looks like a bunch of damned Okies,” Dad said, putting the truck in gear noisily.

The three continued to stand still as if they were expecting Dad to drive on in their lane. When we were well past, and turning onto the highway, the man picked up the chair again, and the girl ran behind the truck. Only the woman continued to watch us.

“Quit staring at them, Chris. We did enough looking.”

“Did you see the little girl? Didn’t she look just my age?” There was no sense in mentioning the woman. Or the man. Dad would have seen his bent legs already. If I were a bird, or a bee, I could fly back and watch them as long as I wanted and then I’d see if his arms were crooked, too. See if there were big white buttons on the front of the woman’s dress, if there was a triangle-hemmed pocket with a scented handkerchief inside. See if her hands were soft.

“Hard to tell. Littler than you. Might be younger.”

“I’ll bet she’s not. I’ll bet she’s in my grade.”

“Well, you’ll see in a couple weeks.”

I wondered if they all loved one another.

Outside the post office, Dad stopped Les Busik, the town’s only lawyer and part-time realtor, to ask about our new neighbors.

Mr. Busik, holding his mail in front of him, kept backing up, saying, “Now, Joe, you had plenty of opportunity to buy the old Teeter Place. You knew eventually it would sell. The Carsons made a fair offer, given the circumstances. Farm has been idle too long anyway. Good to get someone working it.”

“I’m not saying nothing about the sale. It’s just they don’t look very prosperous.”

“Don’t have to be. Veteran’s Loan.”

“And they sure as hell don’t look like farmers.”

“Well, give them a chance, Joe. Not everybody who farms this country has to be born and raised here.”

“It sure don’t hurt though, does it?” Dad slammed the truck door. He sat there a moment, then rolled another cigarette. “It sure as hell don’t,” he said to the blue smoke in the air.

I started humming *Glow Little Glow-Worm* like he had before, but he didn’t hear.

Even the Rexall didn’t seem nearly as interesting to me that day. And Dad was awfully quiet. But then he surprised me. He drove to the other end of town and took the old road near the Rodeo Grounds. There were no farms, no neighbors, no new families to watch move in on that road, just hills covered with dried bunch grass, and a few cattle lazing under a dying apple tree. Dad hit the bumps so hard, by the time we got to our road, I had a headache. As we passed the willow grove, the creek flashed and I remembered the tractor tracks I’d found upstream earlier that day. Only the thought of the new family down the road made the pain ease a little.

Indian Summer

After seeing the new people, I couldn't wait for school to begin again. But on the first day, it seemed nothing could wait for me. Usually Mother was up and fully dressed, but that morning she had walked around in her nightgown, rosy-faced, and left my lunch half-finished to drift back to the sinkful of dirty dishes. She seemed to daydream her way around the kitchen. Watching her, I had trouble eating my cereal, and felt as if I were swimming in honey. I couldn't seem to hurry. It took too much effort to pretend to ignore Mother while keeping an eye on her at the same time. So I was still in my undershirt and pajama bottoms when a horn sounded. I ran to the window just in time to see the school bus pull away.

"Mother! The bus just left!"

"Already? Nothing we can do about it now, I guess." She yawned and stretched slightly. "I can take you in."

"Where's Dad?"

"He's been up the canyon since dawn. Awake half the night, and then out first thing it got light. Get dressed. I'll drive you."

"Well hurry up then!"

Of course she didn't. And when she was ready, she still looked half asleep, her hair untied and curling everywhere, an old shirt tied at her waist, half unbuttoned. Her jeans were rolled up and she didn't even have socks on. She could be one of the high-schoolers. She definitely didn't look like a parent of a fourth-grader.

"Mama!"

"Well, what?"

"You look a sight!"

She laughed and laughed. "I look how?"

"Never mind. Let's just go!"

I hadn't had time to appraise my own appearance. Somehow the morning had been spoiled, and the new clothes I'd carefully laid out nights before weren't suitable any longer, so I had settled on a plaid jumper from last year, hoping it would bring things back to the way they were. It was somewhat too small, I was surprised to find, and the blouse underneath made it even snugger. It was hard to breathe. I would have to be cautious, take little sips of air. That just made me dizzy. But I'd made my choice, and I had to stick with it.

Adults never understand that what happens in the classroom isn't important. Maybe they've forgotten that recess or before school are the critical times. Judgments are made, bonds formed, banishments determined. If you're late, you miss out.

The minute I got out of the car that day, I knew I was doomed. First of all, Mother got out, too. I heard one of the sixth-grade boys wolf-whistle, and my face grew hot. Everyone stared. Not just at her, but at me, too. There was no chance for me to enter the schoolyard unnoticed. The year before, blending in had been easy. Now, I had been picked out from the start.

All the girls from my grade were gathered together. None of them was wearing a plaid jumper like they'd worn last year. In fact, they all seemed to be wearing exactly the same clothes, just in slightly different colors, as if they had called one another and planned it that way. In their midst was the new girl, dressed as they were, in a full skirt, a blouse with the collar turned up, and penny loafers. They looked like the older girls, and I looked like the little kids. Even the new girl knew better. Maybe I would never grow

up, but just keep getting younger and younger, until I was a baby again. Mama would probably like that. The new girl even had jewelry, a necklace of multi-colored round beads. How could she know so much?

Somehow she had put me in her place. She should be where I am, everyone staring at her, a stranger not dressed like the rest, and I should have been where she was, in the midst of all my classmates, with a knowing grin spreading across my face, just like it was on my former friend Jeanine.

“Well, go on,” Mother said. “Go see all your friends. They’re waiting for you.”

I shrugged off her hand. Mr. J.F. Hutchison, the principal, waved, and Mother smiled and waved back, her key ring sparkling and tinkling. Why did she have to be so conspicuous? I didn’t want to go on, but there I was, trapped. What would Dad do? Grandma always said Dad acted like he owned the place, wherever he was. He just marched on through, paying no mind to anyone around. With Mother at my back, and the girls in front, I didn’t see where I had any other choice, either, so I breathed in and held it, and walked toward them.

If I’d taken a deeper breath, I might have floated over them, but I let it out when I was right in front of the group. My friends. The first grade had been all right, we had all been little girls together, and the experience of going to school was so new. But over the next three years, things changed. It was as if the newness never wore off me like it did them. They spread out and got comfortable, played together after school. I got lumped in with the Smith kids: last picked for everything. Were any of these girls my friends?

“How come you’re all just standing around? Let’s play four-square.” My voice was weak and high, but I stood my ground, and looked pleadingly at Jeanine. Say yes.

“Four-square,” she jeered. “Or maybe tetherball?”

“I’ll play you a game.” I was shorter than Jeanine, and she seemed to have grown even more since last spring. I knew I would lose as usual, but that was the important thing. Usual. At least I would know where I was again. I wanted to look over to see if Mama was still there, but I couldn’t, because I had to keep looking Jeanine in the eye.

Leah and Kay, two sisters who played violin and never wanted to be included in playground games, headed for the side steps. The older girls always sat there in small groups, gossiping, trying on makeup, and watching the boys play ball. It was foreign country for the younger girls. Surprisingly, however, the sisters were allowed to sit on the bottom steps this time, near where the concrete curved round into the shadows, where damp spots remained all day. They settled in, and the younger girls watched them, even Jeanine, with what I thought were longing expressions. Why choose this over playing in the sunshine?

“I don’t want to,” Jeanine finally replied, her head still turned toward the steps.

“Well, why’d you suggest it, then?” I asked.

“Don’t you understand anything?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I made sure my mother had gone.

“Go play with the boys,” Jeanine said.

Neither of my parents had ever talked about anything like this. They’d never offered me advice about school, except to tell me to work hard and turn my assignments in on time. Here, I was on my own. “I don’t want to,” I said, attempting to mimic Jeanine. I could hit her, but I didn’t see the point.

“Well, you act like one, you should play with them.”

“What’s wrong with you, Jeanine? I don’t act any different than I ever did.”

“I saw you.”

I tried to remember when Jeanine might have been by our house, and what she might have seen me doing. Since she and her mother drove up and down the canyon several times a day all summer long, it could be anything. Looking at the group of girls, I realized at home I wasn't at all like them. And neither was Mother. I had seen their mothers outside the Pine Tree Cafe, laughing and talking, with their daughters close by, giggling, all buddy-buddy. I had heard their mothers clicking down the school hallway in their shiny heels. They were the room mothers, the school fair organizers, the PTA officers. My mother had never done anything like that. Maybe we were different. It wasn't right that people like Jeanine could drive by and see how we were.

"You were haying," Jeanine accused.

Kelley joined in, "Queens don't hay, do they, Queen Christine?"

Jeanine, tall and red-haired as she was, always got angry quickly and just as quickly forgot it. I wasn't really afraid of her, having tangled with her at least once a year. Kelley was another story. She was the only girl in a household of older brothers, and wasn't afraid of anybody. Last year she had ignored me. Why had that suddenly changed? I began backing away.

Jeanine put in, "Some folks didn't hay at all this year."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Whatever I might think of would probably just make them madder.

Then Kelley continued, "Stuck up. Just like your mom and dad. Think you're better than everyone else."

"We do not." The answer popped out, but my voice cracked. In a moment I would be whining, and then I would cry. That would be the end. They'd never leave me alone. Someone had to be teased, it was always that way. Why was it me this year? Tears

burned my eyelids, and I tried not to blink. They'd always be trying to make me cry if I did it once.

"Not even one good cutting," Jeanine finished quietly.

What did that have to do with me? I knew that I had done important things over the summer: I had helped with harvest. Suddenly, I could see our house and barn, and they seemed very close. The bridge, the cattle guard, the spring and ford. The sun sparkling on the creek. Everything there right now, including the row of parsnips in the garden, was beautiful. Our farm was the best in the canyon. It had always been the best. That should count for something.

"Let's make her play with the boys. Come on," Jeanine said and reached for my arm.

I jerked my arm away, and tried to imagine my fist hitting Jeanine's stomach. It didn't work, because there was Kelley, waiting to take over when we had finished. My heart began to climb into my throat, fluttering, and I felt my stomach follow it. If I had been in the barn at that moment, I would have thrown it all up, but I swallowed instead. It had been easy in the creek, building my own town. The people in that town got along, and never surprised one another with accusations or called one another names. Why couldn't it work that way here? It was as if something had gotten in the creek way upstream and moved down without us ever knowing it, and it had contaminated everything it touched along the way. I had no idea how to fight whatever this was, but I was willing to try.

Then the bell rang. Girls I hadn't noticed earlier began to walk toward the doors of the school. In the middle of the group was the new girl. She continued to stare at me as she was swept along. Her eyes crinkled slightly, and I thought she was about to smile, but instead, she turned her head, and went inside. I followed.

Her name was Sara, and the way she said it, the four letters sounded like more. Say-ra Carson. She wore a yellow blouse with daisy buttons down the front, and her sweater was on a chain and draped her shoulders. Her nails were painted coral, and I knew she must have older sisters, maybe one of the teenagers unloading the truck, who knew about things like nail polish, to find that color. You wouldn't find Coral Dawn on the shelves at the Rexall, only in its magazines. Everything about Sara seemed slightly foreign, slightly different, even her smell. When she brushed by me on the way to her seat, she gave off a faint powdery scent, mysteriously feminine.

Going home on the bus after school, I wanted to sit with her, but in the scramble for seats that always happened the first day, I ended up directly behind her. One of the Smith kids sat next to her, and I knew I wouldn't have a chance to make friends that day. Once they latched onto you, Smith kids kept a hold. You couldn't blame them, the way they lived at home. I still wouldn't want one of them sitting with me, since once you did, it was like you were one of them. Everybody knew that. But she was new, and therefore it didn't matter. Sara let the Smith kid do all the talking; she just sat there, playing with her pop bead necklace. The gentle pop-pop made me smile inside.

When she stood up at her stop, I took my chance, looked straight at her and said, "Bye, Sara. See you tomorrow."

She nodded, and a smile touched her lips for a second before she carefully descended the steps. She didn't turn and wave, even though I watched until I couldn't see her any more. But she had smiled. A very small smile, but it was a beginning. Things could be better. Once Sara and I were friends, everything at school would improve. If she liked me, the others would at least tolerate me. No more eating lunch alone. No being picked on. No more sick stomach every morning. I would have a friend on the bus, who would

walk with me to the playground, past Kelley and Jeanine, and we would laugh together, and after school, play together every day.

Days floated by, beautiful and warm, the nights crisp and cold. It seemed as if Indian summer would never end, as if everything were suspended in pale amber syrup, like figs in a jar. The house smelled of apples and cinnamon, the air outside of smoke and curing leaves. Usually, these smells meant Halloween and excitement. This year, I didn't care.

Nothing I had hoped for had happened. Sara rode the bus in her dark red sweater with its brick design, and smiled politely, and spoke no more than two words to me. It seemed as if months must have passed since the first day of school, but it was only weeks.

I began to spend the few hours of daylight after school by the creek in back of the house. The water was so low now that new islands had appeared throughout it, and even though I thought I'd explored every nook under the bank and every deep spot, this terrain seemed new and worthy of further investigation. The rich autumn light and the turning leaves tinted the creek gold. It looked like a road to magical places, to wealth and fame -- and happiness. Dipping myself in this golden stream would surely make me precious, too. When I waggled my fingers in the water, they seemed changed, shiny and new.

I no longer felt precious to my parents. They didn't even seem very aware that I was there. Oh, Mother gave me cookies and milk after school, as always, and Dad said, "How's school?" but they didn't mean it, not really. They were just waiting for me to leave so they could get on with what they were doing. They spent most of their time talking in very low voices, Dad's tanned hand gripping Mother's hand and both of them watching the phone, as if it had suddenly changed into their child. If I was in the house, I

crept up quietly to watch them. I couldn't stop, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. Something was going on, but they weren't going to tell me about it.

In the creek, I didn't have to watch them, or think about school. It was a challenge to build boats small enough to float downstream in the stingy flow that remained. Bark ships beached themselves quickly in the narrow channels. Tiny islands now were littered with shipwreck. I could imagine the survivors, like Robinson Crusoe, alone and surrounded by sea, scrounging the shore for coconuts. Determined to have one success, one real voyage, I spent valuable minutes of sunlight one afternoon searching for a perfectly cupped leaf. Several sank immediately, even the most beautiful. Finally, a masterpiece of cottonwood and apple leaves, boasting two willow twig masts and a cobweb flag, set sail for Zanzibar. Unwilling to let the best ship I'd built all summer and fall run aground before it reached truly swift waters, I followed it downstream.

Jonathan Creek seemed more like a gully. It was easy to walk from rock to rock, and not get your shoes wet. As I passed the willows, I looked up at the kitchen window. No one was there. The ship gathered speed, and I concentrated on rock hopping to keep up. Further downstream, the gully deepened, and by the time I was near Brownie and Carmela's, the bank was several feet above my head. I was in the world of the creek, and no one on the ground above could see me, unless they happened to look down as I passed. It was as if I were invisible, like the moles in the ground.

Everything was very quiet, and the birds had begun to talk about sleep. The breeze carried a tantalizing smell -- frying potatoes. My stomach growled. The banks were beginning to get lower now, and I had to crouch to stay hidden. There were no other sounds, no kids yelling from Smiths, no wood being cut at Lambert's mill, no horses' hooves pounding in the Porter brothers' field. I knew I couldn't really get lost, as long as I stayed in the creek. It was like a road, and all I had to do was turn around and go back

the way I'd come. But walking the creek was much different from driving with Dad down the road. The map in my head was fuzzy. Was I almost to the bridge? Did the creek turn up ahead? How far had I come? It must be dinnertime.

The creek widened and flattened out completely into a ford, where my ship had stopped between two large rocks. In the lengthening shadows, a rickety barn with open doors loomed nearby. Inside, there were piles of scrap wood and rope, but no hay, not even any straw. The last of the light shone through gaps in the walls and roof.

It was a long walk home, and soon it would be dark. Coyotes would come to the creek to drink, perhaps to hunt as well. Bats would fly over it, catching mosquitoes and gnats, and maybe tangling in my hair as I walked along. My scalp crawled. If there had been hay, even scratchy straw, in that old barn, I would have crawled into it, pulled it over my head, and stayed there until morning. Then my parents would miss me. They would worry and think about where I might have gone, what might have happened to me. They might regret how they'd treated me lately. After they finally found me, safe in the hay loft, things at home would change. Tears came to my eyes. Everything would be like it was.

From the darkest side of the barn, a figure emerged, dragging something. It was hunched over, clumsy and as big as a bear. Could it be a bear? My foot slipped, my ankle turned, and water seeped into my shoe, cold. I couldn't run. Soon it would see me, and I would be dragged back into the darkness of that old, empty barn. I never should have come this far.

From the opposite direction, another figure appeared, and ran right up to the bear and threw arms around him. Then, the smaller form grabbed the burlap bag the bear had been dragging and began tugging, laughing. Sara! I promptly fell backwards into the water,

with a pretty good splash. They both stopped, stared, and came toward me. I couldn't see their faces to tell if they were mad or glad.

"Chris?" Sara asked. "Is that you, Christine?"

"Stay here, now," her father said. "Let me see what it is first."

"It's Christine, Daddy."

I couldn't get up. My jeans were soaked and heavy, and my shoes full of water. Even though I was only sitting in about a foot of creek, it was very cold. I began to shiver.

"Just wait a minute," he said, and came to the edge of the water. "Is that right? Are you Christine?"

"Yes," I was finally able to reply with a sob. "I'm Christine Beale, Mr. Carson, one of Sara's friends." Oh please, Sara, don't say I'm not, not right now anyway.

"Yes, Daddy, she's in my grade at school."

"Well, what is she doing in the creek! Come on out of there."

Although Mr. Carson seemed bent and twisted, even down to his shriveled left hand, his voice was lively and gentle. He actually seemed to think this was funny. But he also seemed to be balancing with some difficulty on the largest rock near me, and I realized he might fall before he reached me. Even if he did extend his hand, I wasn't sure I wanted to take it. I began to struggle to my feet, but my legs were numb and I just wasn't able to stand. Then Sara clomped into the stream with both feet, not even taking off her shoes, grabbed my hands in hers and began to pull, much as she had a few moments earlier with the burlap bag.

"Come on, Chris," she said, "We'll get you out of there. Hang on."

The familiar creek stones seemed to have become bars of soap, and I slipped backward before I was able to stand. Sara was wet now, too. But she was grinning.

“What are you doing in our creek, Christine Beale?” Mr. Carson asked.

“I was...” I began, then saw my ship, crushed and in several pieces, lying near his heavy boot. “... coming to see you,” I finished.

Mrs. Carson, in a plaid housedress with a sweater draped across her shoulders, was standing uphill from us a yard or so, watching quietly. I hadn't noticed their house until that moment, but it looked warm and snug, its lights yellow in the cold darkness. Mrs. Carson's head was held so erect, she could have been royalty, the way she stood there. I had a feeling I was about to be put in my place. She looked me over slowly, and then handed me one of the bath towels she had draped over one arm. “The next time you come to visit, Christine, have your mother bring you.”

I would have liked to wrap up in that soft yellow terrycloth, warm from her arm, but I was afraid to actually touch it to anything except my cheek, which I hoped was clean. The rest of me I wasn't sure about, especially in the fading light. I couldn't face staining that plush fabric. It would have been like throwing mud at Mrs. Carson. So when Sara's father suddenly bundled me into his work coat, I was startled, but grateful. The coat was already covered with dark blotches, and my little bit of creek mud wouldn't matter. It didn't fit strangely, not at all, in fact, it felt just like one of Dad's barn jackets. But Mr. Carson without his bulky covering, looked stranger. One side of his body was smaller than the other, and he kept his shrunken arm close to his body when he was still. But he didn't hesitate to use that left arm when he needed to, just as he must have done when he pulled the coat around me. As I watched, he picked up the sack left uphill, and managed to move it to the shed by himself. I could feel Sara watching me staring at her father, and I turned to see a question in her face: Was it okay?

I snuggled into his coat, and smiled at her. I didn't mind watching her father, or wearing clothes he'd worn, but I didn't think I could touch him like she had done, or let him touch me.

"Come on, you girls," Mrs. Carson called. "Warm drinks all around."

I was no longer cold, in fact I felt as if I glowed. But it was Mrs. Carson, standing in the doorway of the house, with the yellow light outlining her, who actually glowed. I pinched myself. And then Sara took my hand, and we walked up the hill, and into the house.

Mr. Carson drove me home later, Sara sitting between us, and my eyes barely open. Mrs. Carson must have called my parents even before she came down to the creek, because the first thing Dad said when he came up to the truck was, "About time. I was about to drive on down there myself."

Dad immediately opened the door, and helped me out. The back of my pants were damp, as if I were a toddler who'd had an accident. I had my shoes in my hands, and an old pair of Mrs. Carson's slippers on my feet, carpet slippers, sloppy but warm.

"Daddy, this is Sara and her dad," I was saying, when Dad slammed the truck door.

"Thanks for fishing her out," Dad said. He put his hand on my shoulder and began pulling me away from the pickup, almost knocking me off balance in Mrs. Carson's oversized slippers.

"They're the neighbors we saw --" I began.

"In the house, Christine," he said.

"Dad. They're the people who moved in --" I tried again.

"Ron Carson, Mr. Beale. We bought the old Teeter Place."

“I know who you are.”

Sara sunk down into the seat, and as her dad leaned over her, she slipped down even further.

Mr. Carson persisted, “Been meaning to come down and talk to you all along, but you know how it is, moving in and all.”

“You don’t have much luck picking times, do you?” Dad replied.

“Beg pardon?” Mr. Carson said.

“I’ve got a wet daughter here about to catch cold.” Dad seemed to have just noticed my shoes in my hands. He picked me up, swept the slippers off my feet, stuck them in the open window of the truck, smack into Sara’s lap, and propelled me toward the porch.

The last thing I saw before starting up the steps was Sara waving good-bye with one of her mother’s slippers.

Christmas

“We’re not going to have snow for Christmas this year, that’s for sure,” Mother said for the second time that week. She had been studying the calendar, looking at the moons and half-moons all morning.

“It’s a long time until Christmas,” I argued.

“Less than a month,” she said.

I had noticed her studying the calendar for months now, even when there was no reason to check the moons for changes in the weather. She seemed to spend a lot of time counting and recounting days, then making strange marks on one or two and counting them again.

“I think it’ll snow. It does every year,” I said, hoping that would settle it.

“Better get some,” Dad said.

“I don’t know, Joe,” Mother continued, “It doesn’t look so good. Creek’s not even froze yet.”

She looked at the sky. “Not one snow cloud. It doesn’t feel right.”

Dad didn’t say anything. I knew he was thinking that Mama was almost always right about the weather. She could look at the sky and the little moons on the calendar, and tell you when it was going to rain or when to cover your plants of a night. It was eerie, but she just seemed to know. Old people sometimes had an ache or a pain in their bones and knew, but Mama didn’t even need that. She could tell by nothing at all. So if she said we weren’t having a white Christmas, I figured I better not count on it. Even Dad looked worried. I hadn’t realized snow meant so much to him. He’d always complained about it before, saying how he wished he could grain cattle for once without cleaning snow out of their feeders. And he hated putting chains on the truck, crawling underneath in the cold,

getting snow down his neck, then cursing vigorously. Mother and I would hide in the kitchen until he came onto the porch, stomping his feet over and over, letting us know he was done chaining for that day. He never had been fond of snow.

It was Mother, however, who really hated winter. She hated everything about it: The cold winds, and the bare trees. The creek freezing. Everything covered with white. What she hated most, though, was being inside all the time. She acted like a bird caged up for the first time, flitting from one window to the other. But this year, she seemed to have forgotten about winter. All week, she'd been outside, digging in the still-unfrozen ground. There were still greens and squash in the garden for her to tend. She wouldn't care if snow and ice never came. We could have spring and summer all year around, and Mother would be perfectly happy.

But it felt strange. November was almost gone and it was warm yet.

The phone rang, and Mother crossed the kitchen floor quickly and picked up the receiver. She seemed to like waiting for the phone to ring, but hated its noise when it finally did. She always jumped on it right away. Three short bursts and no more, that was what she wanted. If we were outside or in the basement, or even somewhere upstairs, she let it ring and ring, never even trying to answer it. There was something very lonely about a phone ringing over and over again, like calling out in the night and having no one reply. Was that why she didn't try to answer after the first ring, just in case she'd get there too late and no one would be on the line? All you'd hear was silence, a deeper silence from someone having been there once.

“Christine, it's Sara.”

My own personal phone call. I'd waited so long to get one, now I wasn't quite sure how to act. I pulled the tall stool over, and climbed up. High Valley was the last to get telephone service in the county, and we had an old-fashioned phone with a three-party line. I'd seen normal phones, in the school and the bank, and none of them were up on the wall like ours, with a funny bell-like device connected to a cord to listen in, and the speaking part still on the wall. I'd used it before to talk to my grandmothers, but our conversations had been very short and often confusing. What they had been saying hadn't been important, so it didn't matter if I only heard half of it. I didn't want to miss anything Sara said.

This was my first invited visit to the Carsons' house. After my creek-walk, Mother and I had stopped by once when we saw Mrs. Carson at the mailbox, and Sara and I had a few minutes to talk. Dad never seemed to have time to take me anywhere. He was often gone when I got home from school, and if he was around, he spent most of his time with Mother, talking. Trips to town in his truck were few and far between. And we never went by the Carsons, let alone to their house. In fact, Dad looked across the fields as we came down the road, and if he saw someone at their place, he'd take the cut-off.

Mother had done much more talking on the phone than I'd ever thought she would, and not just to Grandma, but to other women in town. She'd joined the Junior Women's Club, and spent one afternoon a week at the Grange Hall. The Junior Women were the young marrieds, absorbed with babies and toddlers and school-age kids. A few of them were farm wives, mostly from the dairies west of town. Mother was the only High Valley rancher's wife. She was also probably the only one with just one child, and no more on the way. Several of the women were pregnant, and because I suspected their

conversations centered on this, I yearned to attend one of their meetings and listen. Mother always found something else for me to do. And since it often included Dad, I didn't mind.

Something special was happening this Saturday, however. Mother had been nervous and excited all morning, and was wearing her lucky red and white dress. It had a yellow burn mark on the front, but she always wore her big goldfish pin over it. I thought she looked particularly colorful that day. I wasn't absolutely sure, however, that she should have worn her pale blue espadrilles. Red shoes would have been nicer. And although I liked the way the strings laced up around her ankles, and then tied in a bow at the back, I had a feeling that she should have worn plain old heels.

Whatever was going on, the important thing was that she was agreeable to taking me to see Sara. She had even arranged for my visit with Mrs. Carson. There was something slightly suspicious about that, but I didn't want to waste the opportunity, especially since it might not be soon repeated.

"Run up the lane," she said when we arrived, "and I'll wait until I see you wave before I leave."

"Can't you drive in?"

"Not this time. I don't like turning around in someone's driveway without stopping to visit. Just run."

"Why don't you just say hello? Maybe Mrs. Carson would like Junior Women, too?"

"Chris, if you don't get out of the car right now, you'll have to go with me into town. Is that what you want?"

It wasn't really so far up the lane, but it did seem like a waste of time to walk, when driving up there would have taken only a minute. And besides, there was Mrs. Carson,

her apron on, hanging clothes on the line, watching us. But Mother was gone, quick as anything.

Watching Mrs. Carson hang clothes on the line was like watching other people dance. She would dip into the basket, and up would come a towel in her hand, easy, graceful. Music could be playing somewhere that only she could hear. It was beautiful. Even walking up the lane seemed important to do well. I tried to lift my knees high and arch my feet, but it was hard. My body always seemed just there, as if I never really saw it or felt it. Mrs. Carson seemed to know things about hers, things that let her move with music, as if she were in love with the whole world. Would Sara be like that, too?

Sara ran from behind a sheet, and hollered, "Come on, you have to see!"

No. She wasn't like her mother at all. Maybe she was more like her dad, or maybe the combination just left gracefulness out. I wondered what the combination of my parents left out of me. And whatever was missing, could I find it somewhere else, and somehow make up for it?

Sara headed toward the old shed. A dead cottonwood hung over the building, and seemed about to fall on it. Several of its branches were piled nearby. One side of the shed was an old blacksmith shop, with horseshoes nailed on the door. The other side was a lean-to, which looked as if a good wind would blow it down. I followed Sara, but I hadn't come here to spend time in her shed. I wanted to be in the house, watching her mother fold clothes, or anything else she might do. Sara pulled on the handle and rusty metal hinges creaked. Finally, the door opened. Whatever this was going to be, it couldn't take more than a minute or two. Then we could go in the house.

"They're mine," she said, spreading her arms.

Once my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I saw cages with wire fronts. Moving closer, I made out shapes. Five of them. Three in one large cage, and two in smaller cages.

“Rabbits,” I said. “You brought me here to show me rabbits?”

“Papa got them for me. Aren’t they beautiful?”

We never had rabbits at home, only cattle and chickens. And pigs in a pen. Nothing in cages. Nothing with fur that had to be skinned off. It was bad enough when Dad took a chicken out to the chopping block. At least that was over with a little squawking, and a quick whack. I was trying to imagine how rabbits were turned into fryers, when I saw Sara’s smile beginning to fade. Maybe it was a 4-H project. Some of the kids had rabbits for 4-H. Were they meat, too?

“They’re pretty nice,” I managed.

“This one is Snow White,” she pointed to a fat, white rabbit with red eyes. “And this one is Prince,” then to a large, reddish one with yellowed nails, and one tooth slightly visible. He looked mean. Their names were stupid, but I smiled as she went to the biggest cage. “And these are Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail.” Not one of them had a white tail. They were plain, dusty brown rabbits, and they looked alike. In fact, I was pretty sure they might be exactly alike, all males. Brothers probably, all from the same litter.

Rabbits were more interesting than chickens because they seemed more like pets, and with all their fur skinned off, they looked pitiful, yet somehow fascinating. Chickens just looked like a bag of old feathers. And rabbits had strange habits. Grandma said if you scared a mother rabbit, she’d kill her young. She’d just grab each one by the neck, and bite it until it was dead. And they screamed like people do. When they were butchered,

they screamed, and one other time, too. I couldn't remember what Grandma had said, because she'd said it very fast and then clipped it off, like she was taking it back.

And then there were the secrets rabbits kept. Mother had been talking to Aunt Bonnie one day, saying pretty soon the rabbit would tell her the truth. I imagined Mother creeping up to the white rabbit, and whispering in her ear, then listening carefully as she spoke, whiskers twitching. Perhaps when I was a grown-up, I'd understand this. You told the bees when someone died. Maybe rabbits told you something just as important.

Sara was stroking the shyest brown rabbit through the wire.

"Why don't you take it out of the cage?" I asked.

"Oh, no. We're not supposed to get them out. Daddy said they were to stay in their houses, and we're not to hold them."

I had also remembered something my father had said. He always said the Smiths had to take in so many kids because someone had been *at it like rabbits*. Even these rabbits must hold some mysterious power. Maybe that's why Mr. Carson didn't want Sara touching them. Did they make you pregnant? Was that what Mama had suspected? I was even more intrigued than before.

"I want to see," I told Sara.

"Come closer, then."

"No, I mean I want to see if they're boys or girls."

"How would you do that?"

"Well, you could pick one up, and I could look." I lifted the hook on the cage door, and Sara backed away. She continued to stare, but didn't move. "Or I could get one and you could look." When Sara didn't offer, I opened the door, and slipped a hand inside. The rabbits began anxiously hopping over one another, and scrambling into the back corners.

“Don’t!” Sara said. “They’ll get out.”

And at that moment, as I turned to watch her, the rabbit Sara had been petting earlier, the one I’d thought was shy, dodged for the narrow opening. I shut the door quickly, just before he squeezed through. He scurried a few steps backward, then stopped, his right ear still in the door. He began to squeal, then to scream in pain. I looked down and saw a line of blood forming in the soft fur. The ear looked so delicate, like a leaf, that it could tear any second, leaving me holding one shred in the door. I threw the door open, and the rabbit shuffled backward again, its ear wilted and hanging over one eye. Little tufts of fur clung to the wire. I tried not to think of Dad’s axe coming down, but I could see the tiny fluffs on the blade, see fur being matted dark red.

“Oh, no!” Sara cried. “Look at him. He’s hurt! Help him.”

That was the one thing I was not going to do, put my hand back into that cage. Hadn’t I done enough? So, keeping an eye on the three brown forms huddled together in the corner, I latched the door again. The rabbit on the left began drumming with his foot, while the other uninjured rabbit began to sniff the wounded ear. Then Snow White began to thump on her wooden feeding platform, shaking her whole cage. Sara and I both looked over at her, and noticed Prince shivering in the middle of his hutch, pulling out mouthful after mouthful of his red fur. Sara began to laugh.

“Look at him,” she said, “he’s scared, and she’s protecting him.”

The white rabbit continued to drum, and finally Prince stopped his hair-pulling and looked at us. He didn’t seem very mean any more. With his mouth full of hair, he looked ridiculous, like an old man with a very bushy beard. We laughed until he moved away, and hid in the back corner.

“Maybe we better check him,” Sara continued, “he might not be a boy after all.”

I wondered if he really was, and why his name was Prince if no one was sure. What was under the fur, hidden and secret? Part the hair between his legs, and what would we see? Something so different than we were that we would know immediately? Was this the secret?

“Better leave them alone,” I said instead. I’d come too close to ruining things first crack out of the box. So when Sara suggested we run to the house and play dress-up, I was happy to go. Everything seemed all right again.

Dad had said the Carsons didn’t know anything about farming, and as we walked around, I began to suspect he was right. The five rabbits were the only animals I’d seen so far. There wasn’t even a milk cow in the rickety old barn. None of the fences had been repaired: the wire was broken and rusty, and posts leaned this way and that. It seemed obvious they weren’t expecting cattle or sheep soon. All the outbuildings were empty. But their house was full of interesting things ours didn’t have. There were framed pictures everywhere, on the tables and on the walls. Some of them were very old, and showed serious people posed stiffly. Grandmother had one such picture, that she kept in a leather case, but I’d never seen such a variety of photos on display. Several of them showed Mr. Carson in his Army uniform, and later in another kind of uniform, with a group of burly men at a railroad yard. Then there were newer photos, some in color, of Sara’s brother and sisters. These were obviously taken in a city because there were large buildings in the background, and buses. These were the ones I would have liked to look at for a long time, and to try to see down the streets and in the store windows. Why weren’t her brother and sisters all here with them? I bit my lip to keep from actually asking. After everything that had almost happened that day, that could wait, too. If I was around long enough, I’d find out.

Sara passed by the pictures quickly, showing me one after another, and pulled at me to look at the rest of their house. The furniture was old but covered with colorful striped throws, and there were plump needlepoint pillows in each corner of the sofa. Braided rugs covered the scarred wooden floors, and soft curtains were at the windows. I wanted to sit down and just look around for a minute, but Sara was eager for me to see her room next.

They hadn't lived in the house very long, but it looked as if they'd always lived there, as if everything belonged just as it was. I thought about our living room, with its plain upholstered furniture and heavy drapes. It was the kind of a room you passed through, on your way to somewhere else. No one sat in there. It was meant for visitors, only we never had any. Or maybe it just needed a larger family. Like Sara's. Maybe that's why their house seemed so full of . . . everything -- and ours seemed so empty.

Sara and I played the rest of that afternoon, and later, we had tea with Mrs. Carson. She actually made tea in a teapot, one with poppies on it, and the handle like a green stem curling around. We drank from flowered tea cups, each different. I chose the one with violets, and felt very grown up. At home, it would have been tea bags in the same old brown mugs, cookies from a bag and crumbs on the table.

"Have a shortbread," Mrs. Carson said, offering one of the cookies I'd smelled baking moments before. "Sara, sit up straight. And tuck your hair."

Sara immediately looked taller, and somewhat less awkward, and with her dark brown hair out of her face, almost pretty, too. Mrs. Carson smiled at her. I braced against the ladder-back of the chair, and lifted my chin, just like Mrs. Carson had. Strands of hair tickled my forehead and cheek. I blew carefully upward, hoping they would stay where they belonged, but knowing they wouldn't. My hair was just like Mother's, too curly, too flyaway, too colorful. I felt like pulling it out, like Prince had. And if I did, or cut it

short, would anyone at all be able to tell I was a girl? Or would they have to look between my legs like a rabbit?

A couple of days later, I came home from school and quietly entered the house. Sometimes I could catch Mother in a Christmas secret if I was sneaky enough. Nothing was suspiciously out of place. No packages anywhere. Nothing on the couch, or on the upstairs steps. I had almost given up, when right underfoot, I found a small yellow bootie. On the dining room table, there was a large paper bag with a strand of the same yellow yarn dangling out of its top. Mother wasn't known for her knitting, and never could have made something like this. I held it to my cheek; it was very soft. By skiing across the floor in my shoes, without a sound, I reached the bag. Then I saw Mama. She sat, head down, at the table in the kitchen, but not in her chair, in the extra chair, so her back was to me. She hadn't even heard me come in.

Soft flannel and tissue paper filled the top of the bag, but as I dug deeper, a tiny hand, fingers outstretched, appeared. It was perfectly formed, even to the tiny fingernails and the plump crease around the wrist. What was Mother doing with a baby in a bag? The hair on my neck stood up. You didn't keep babies in bags. They'd suffocate. And you'd never pile all this stuff on top of them. Not unless they were dead. Then it wouldn't matter, except they'd be hidden where no one could see. The tiny hand seemed to come closer, and I was suddenly very afraid that the fabric might slip, and show what I dreaded, the staring eyes of a tiny corpse. Something did move. Shifting backward rapidly, I knocked the dining room chair to the floor with a loud bang.

“Get out of there! This minute!” Mama yelled.

I ran. By the time I'd reached the first steps, I'd realized it couldn't be a real baby. But that wasn't what kept me going up the stairs and into my room. It was Mother. Her face was all tear-stained, and she had made a funny choked sound. She wasn't one to cry over just any old thing. And, even if I'd looked into a bag of Christmas presents, she wouldn't have yelled like that. She would have grabbed the sack and run like mad, probably laughing all the way. The tiny slipper was in my hand, still soft and warm. I threw it as hard as I could, and it landed near the door. Over there, it seemed harmless enough, but what it meant might not be.

We hadn't had anything to do with babies in this house for a long time. Once, they'd been one of our favorite topics: how the one we'd seen in the post office had the silliest grin, or Dad might have said how Meehan's latest had the longest black hair he'd ever seen on a baby boy. And we would argue, of course he didn't, the Reith's baby had. When had they stopped talking about them? And they had ignored my comments, too, just as if I'd never said anything. So I had stopped, too. When had that been? Babies had suddenly become one more thing we just didn't mention. Like Brownie and Carmela, who wouldn't even wave to us any more. We never talked about them, even though they lived one field over and we saw them almost every day. And so it had gone with babies. What had they done?

And now this small yellow bootie. If it were blue, or pink, Mother could have been making it for someone she knew who'd had a boy or girl. But yellow meant you didn't know. And that meant it wasn't born yet. Maybe it was going to be ours.

The door opened, and the moment I saw her, I knew it wasn't. She looked like all the starch had gone out of her, and left her barely standing. Her usually pink face was white and tear-stained. She had been crying for a long time, and was all washed out. Something terrible must have happened.

“Mama? I’m sorry I looked in the bag.”

She stooped and picked up the bit of yarn and ribbon. “I know, Chrissy. It doesn’t matter.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Oh, I wasn’t really. I’m just kind of tired of everything today.”

“Are you sick?”

“Not that kind of tired. Come on down, and we’ll take a look.”

“I thought it was Christmas . . . you know.” I never wanted to see what was in that bag.

“It is,” she said, sighing, “sort of. Come see.”

“Do I have to?”

She didn’t answer. By the time I got downstairs, she had lifted the baby doll out of the bag and was placing the yellow bootie on its bare foot. There was fabric and tissue paper patterns all over the dining room table. It was perfectly obvious what it was. Every year, the Junior Women’s Club held a drawing. It was the major event of the school Christmas pageant. Tickets were sold all over town for weeks before, and many parents bought five or six. Every little girl waited impatiently for that drawing. They waited anxiously because the object of that drawing was a doll. And not just any doll, but the very best doll the Junior Women could find anywhere. Like the Betsy McCall doll, or the Dinah Shore doll. From one store window to another, the town’s girls followed the doll display, knowing their parents could never buy them such an expensive toy. And it wasn’t just the doll. The main attraction was the case full of doll clothes. Every member of the club was responsible for sewing one outfit. Maybe a cocktail dress, complete with fur stole. Or a cowgirl costume, with fringed leather jacket. And each year, a wedding gown with lots of lace and seed pearls. The doll had become more and more stylish with

each passing year. The Junior Women became caught up in outdoing one another, sewing one fancy outfit after another. Friendships ended because of the doll. Cribbage teams were broken up. There was an absolute furor of sewing for weeks. But, as a result, the lucky winner got a doll with a wardrobe even a movie star would envy.

“This is the doll for the drawing?” I asked.

“What else would it be?” Mother cradled the doll, and looked down at it.

“It’s all wrong.”

“Christine. What’s wrong with it?” She turned the doll over and then held it upside down by its heel, as if looking for a broken arm, or a hole in the head.

“Don’t do that!”

She set the doll down, and began looking through the envelopes of patterns. “Look at all this. There’s jumpers and sleepers, and even a bunny-suit. There’ll be plenty to dress it up in.”

“It’s not a dress-up doll,” I argued. “And it’s not an it. It should be a he or a she.” Bunny-suit. The tiny hand, reaching up to me. Sara’s bunnies skinned, their naked bodies, headless. Something was born, but something else was always dying. “It should not be an it,” I finished.

“We can make it whatever we want. Boy or girl. You can help me.”

“Look at it. It’s just the size of a baby. You don’t need doll clothes. Just make some baby clothes.”

We both looked at the doll, its arms extended, tiny hands reaching out, its frozen blue eyes watching us.

Mother finally said, “Let’s think about it.” And put the baby back into the bag.

Next day, the bag was gone. No doll clothes ever were sewn that Christmas, nor baby clothes neither. Mother didn’t go to the Grange any more, or talk to the Junior

Women on the phone. At the Christmas pageant, I was a bell, dressed in red. I sat with all the other bells in the auditorium bleachers, across from my parents, and sang *round yon Virgin, mother and child*. Some little girl from town, whose parents probably could have afforded to buy her one anyway, won the baby doll in the drawing. Sara looked disappointed. I was relieved. It would have been truly awful if either of us had won.

Dad said that was the mildest winter in over a decade, since before I was born, and it never did snow. In fact, it didn't rain much either.

A New Season

Even though Mother no longer went to the Grange for Junior Women, she found ways to drop me off at the Carson place.

“I’m headed to town, Joe,” she said one Saturday. “What do you need?”

Dad made out his list, looking at her off and on, and stopping to sharpen his stub of a pencil with his pocket knife, but he didn’t say anything for several minutes. “Make sure those nails are galvanized,” he said when he handed her the list. I waited for him to tell her not to go, but all he got out was: “I can make do without them for a while.”

Mother took the list, saying, “I need to go by the Rexall anyway.”

Dad snapped his pocket knife shut, and nodded. When Mother headed to the Rexall, it was for something she would put in her secret cupboard in the bathroom.

November to March that year was like a new season, not Fall and not Winter. Some days were gray and windy, and some days, our cheeks were numb and red from the cold, but to me, it felt warmer than Indian summer. Things were so different, it seemed only natural that the weather would be, too. And now that I had a friend, everything looked brighter. Never mind that there was no snow, or that Spring was weeks away.

When the cold kept us inside, Sara and I arranged chairs in a row, and rode buses into faraway cities, like Portland or Rome. Wearing Mrs. Carson’s cast-off hats, we were young career women on our way to work in offices downtown. We would eat lunch at a counter and smoke elegantly afterward, blowing rings toward our own reflections. More and more, we featured in exciting worlds outside Union. Sara had visited Portland, and often played one of her sisters who lived there. I didn’t find it hard to imagine that I had a

sister there, too. And it had begun to seem highly probable that Sara and I would have our own place nearby, our own small apartment with a miniature stove and sink, and a table just for two. When we returned to Union, we would all be sophisticated and beautiful, and our parents would be very glad to see us. In my imaginings, however, my parents had ceased to be. We came home to Mr. and Mrs. Carson.

“I’m Elaine now, don’t forget,” Sara said. “And when I type, I hold my hands up very high like this . . .” she arched her hands, “so you can see my nails.” I had been told several times about Elaine’s beautifully manicured nails, her ever-changing nail polish colors and the satisfying clicking noise her nails made on the typewriter keys. But I was never Elaine. I was always some anonymous friend in the typing pool; occasionally, I was the admiring boss. This day, however, I was playing Sara, the younger sister, who Elaine would guide through the mysteries of office work, and into city social life. This was the play I preferred. Dolls were not particularly interesting to me, and unfortunately, Sara adored them. Some days we played with the small plastic bodies for hours. The strain of putting tiny shoes on tiny feet often gave me a headache. I was always afraid I’d break something. So far, I hadn’t, but each time, it was a trial. And the dolls never had any adventures. They lived a boring life of parties and costume changes. Today, they were all in the blue trunk, shut away. I imagined them straining at the lid, angry at being ignored, their sharp plastic hands scratching and clawing.

“Mr. Smith wants to have a meeting,” I countered, “to talk over my plans.” A roll of butcher paper contained my latest drawings of streets and buildings.

“No,” Sara said. “You can’t do that. You’re the secretary. Mr. Smith draws the plans and you write what he says about them on the pad. That’s called taking dictation.” She handed me a small spiral notebook. “Find a pencil.”

“I’d rather color. I’ll be the builder’s helper, and color in the grass and trees. And, look here can be a pool or a fountain.” I pointed to the city square where I’d imagined a round concrete pond where the workers would gather. Couldn’t she see this would be wonderful?

“Not if you’re me,” Sara insisted. “Elaine works with the boss in his office, and you just sit at your desk and write and type, and like that.”

Did I not want to be Sara? Maybe it was hard to be the little sister, having to do what the older ones said, always being taught something, told you were doing it wrong, or being laughed at. That’s what it had been like for me at school until Sara came. What if it was like that for her at home? Was she glad her sisters were gone? Was that why she wanted to play this game? I’d always thought she missed them, and this was a way of being closer. Now I wasn’t so sure.

The wind was coming up outside, and made me feel jumpy and restless. It wasn’t that cold, in fact, it was warmer than it had been all week. I didn’t want to stay inside any more. I wanted to run in the wind, and not have anyone tell me what I couldn’t do, and run and run wherever I wanted.

“I have an idea,” I said, looking around anxiously. What idea? Anything would do. And then, I actually did get an idea.

There in the corner, next to the dress-up clothes box, was another box, full of old curtains, tablecloths and colorful scarves that weren’t considered suitable for dress-up. But they were perfect for this! One old curtain panel I tied around my neck, and added a scarf at each wrist. The curtain reached almost to the floor, and the filmy scarves, one green and one blue, billowed. I flapped. It was splendid.

“Come on!” I invited Sara. “We can fly!”

Sara finally looked interested. “We can be fairies,” she said. “Or, princesses on flying carpets.”

She pulled a lace curtain onto her head, and tied a long scarf round to hold it snug. She did look somewhat like the princess from Arabian Nights, if you ignored the tufts of brown hair sticking out. But if we were to fly, she needed wings. Scarves on her wrists, and a green lace tablecloth as cape helped. Even with our coats on, we looked sky-worthy.

We ran under the bare branches, screaming and laughing, around and in between trees, ducking limbs and jumping snags. The wind blew strong and steady, yet seemed to have little blasts that came suddenly from every direction. It felt so good to have something pushing against me that I could break right through. Gusts caught our scarves, and they fluttered madly. At times, words were taken right out of our mouths and carried away. We could barely breathe. Stopping to catch our breath, we laughed even harder, and our fabrics entangled, and caught on twigs. Bits of bright thread were left behind, but we kept gasping and running, apart, then together, until I felt as if I really could fly, that I was lighter than air. Above the ground, you would travel so quickly, and see so far, zoom anywhere in a wink, like to the edge of the ocean, the edge of the world. I couldn't wait to see it, to get there. “I can't wait,” I yelled. The wind pushed us, and we went with it uphill, almost to the top. We stood for a moment on the slope, and I felt perfectly happy.

The promise of rain is the most exciting perfume in the world. Even to this day, I have to catch my breath when I smell moisture on the wind. A change in the weather, a storm to wash other things away, that's what's needed. That day there was the undeniable scent of rain coming from the mountains, from very far away. As I stood there with Sara, with the future foretold on the wind, the world seemed so full of

possibility that I couldn't conceivably get sick in the barn ever again. What did I have to fear? Rain was the only thing that came down from the mountains, and even it gave us warning. From the distance came a honking sound that made us look up. The sky was gray and empty, and it was too early for Canadian geese to return. Spring was several weeks away. Sara looked at me questioningly. It definitely sounded like geese. But geese on the ground, not flying. The noise got louder until it became a baying chorus, accompanied by engine noise and gears shifting. It could have been a calliope. We turned toward the road just in time to see the top rack of Mr. Carson's old truck sway as he turned the corner into the lane.

Starting downhill slowly, we saw Mr. Carson park near the barnyard, and open the back panels of the truck. Cages full of white half-filled the truck. You could tell Mr. Carson was excited, since he almost bounced from the cab to open the first cage. A sweep of white wings moved across the yard, and toward the creek. Sara and I began to trot downhill. The next cage was opened, and more geese raised their large wings and raced, as if on tiptoe, toward the others. The third cage produced smaller birds, still white, moving almost in unison, wagging on their shorter legs. Ducks.

By the time we reached flat land, there was one cage left. This one was taller than the others, and held only two large birds. Their feet were dark orange, almost red, and even though they must have been frightened in their strange quarters, their heads were held high. A knob on their beaks gave them an exotic appearance. Even their low chirring rumble made them unlike the other geese and ducks. They walked from their cage slowly, and looked around. The larger one caressed the neck of the other with his beak, and, as if by a signal, they floated gracefully to the ground together, their outspread wings not making a sound.

Mrs. Carson had come out to watch. The pair of geese, at first hissing when Mr. Carson attempted to direct them with his hooked pole, stopped a few feet from her, and bowed, lowering their heads, then raising them and lowering them again. When she crouched down, they began making the soothing whir again, and advanced on her.

“I’d be careful of those two,” Mr. Carson said.

“They’re beautiful, Ron,” she replied, “Nothing like the others, are they?”

Sara stopped near her father, and said, “They’re swans like in the story we read, aren’t they, Daddy?”

“Nope. These ones are geese, too. Chinese, Mrs. Cadwell said,” he replied.

The other ducks and geese were wandering about, and investigating the creekbed. The pair, however, stayed near Mrs. Carson. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crackers, which she crumbled and tossed toward them.

“They’re not pets, Marie,” Mr. Carson said.

“Of course not.” She continued to draw the geese toward her with a trail of crumbs. The larger of the pair stopped the other by putting his beak under her neck. They would go no further than four or five feet from Mrs. Carson. Finally, she stood and brushed off her hands. The geese stayed very close together and seemed to be exchanging confidences. “They are a couple, though,” she said, somewhat sadly.

Mrs. Hyatt, the widow up the canyon, kept ducks and geese in flocks, and drove them over the hills in waves of brown and white. In the spring, there were yellow bobs of ducklings on her pond. But the week before Christmas, her yard was white with feathers, and soft brown down drifted near her front fence. A truck would come down the canyon later, filled with the dressed carcasses of her geese and ducks. All winter, she made pillows and featherbeds to sell. Was that what Mr. Carson was planning? Mrs. Carson looked directly at me at that moment, and I was afraid she might see my thought

pictures in her mind. I quickly turned my eyes away. She already cared about the two geese. It would be hard for her, come next Christmas, to put their feathers in a bag, and see their lovely heads on the ground by the chopping block. Tears touched my eyelids. Mr. Carson's plan was not a good one, but I didn't say so. In all the excitement, the novelty of their venture, and all the life in feathers around us, I couldn't tell Sara that day. Dad wouldn't have waited. But I was sure next week would be soon enough. Things were nice as they were. Couldn't they stay that way, just for a moment or two?

Next Saturday morning, very early, a sound brought me out of sleep. For several seconds, it was just noise, a stubborn rhythm beating against my drowsiness. Burrowing into my pillow was no help, because the sound broke through the feathers, nagged me to turn over and listen to it. Was I dreaming? What was that noise? Finally, a smell defined it. Rain. On the roof, pounding rain. This was good. This was great! Rain was what we needed, Dad had said. At least the ducks and geese would have plenty of water to swim in now. We could make them a pond, and Mrs. Carson could sit on a bench at the edge, and the white geese would swim at her feet. There they would be safe, and with all that extra water, Mr. Carson could grow other crops besides ducks and geese. He could farm like everyone else, and Mrs. Carson could keep her geese. Later that day, I would tell them about the pond. We wouldn't even need a bulldozer like Dad's. We could dig. We could go to the creek, and start the water flowing downhill. The water would help push the dirt aside, just like in the creek villages I had built. It seemed a very good plan. When it was light, we could begin. We would go to the creek first. I closed my eyes, and slept again.

By mid-morning, the creek had come to us. Rain still drummed on the roof of the house, and poured off the barn in sheets. Cattle in the fields milled about as if chased by flies, and some gathered under the bare cottonwoods, lowing. The calves' small legs were mud to their knees. In the barnyard and fields spread a patchwork of puddles and muck, pelted by more rain. Brown water surrounded the willows, and filled the furrows in the garden, while rivulets ran down the driveway, and into a pool under the apple trees. And the creek. Oh, the creek! From the stairway, I could see that it had spread beyond its banks already, and was almost to the back yard where the mint grew. Several feet of water had moved up the heavy wooden door of the smokehouse, and the old building looked shorter. The creek was coming closer.

I went straight to the basement. Dad's slicker and tall boots were gone. He would think first of his cattle, just as he'd always taught me. Cows were stupid, and would drown if you didn't force them to safety. That's where he had to be. Driving the herd to higher ground, into pasture that was designated for summer feed. But that couldn't be helped. He was where he thought he had to be. But where was Mama? I scrambled back upstairs, thinking all the while I might be alone, that I should pull on my boots quickly and head outside, too, when I saw her. She was standing in the center of the big back window, with a full ashtray on one side of the sill, and a coffee cup on the other. Like driving in snow made you hypnotized sometimes, she seemed to be unable to look away from the creek.

"Mother?" I tried. "Mother? Is Dad okay?"

"I'm sure he's fine, honey," she said.

"But have you seen him?"

She shook her head, but didn't turn, so I rubbed a spot clear of steam in the side window. Nowhere was that tawny patch of palomino that should be there if Dad were riding Fox up the hillside. Fox had a mean streak: you wouldn't want to turn your back on him, but he was steady and could find his way to the barn in any weather. Scanning the hillsides, I looked harder and harder. I tried to remember routes he had taken before, and I checked each hummock and gully. It was as if my father and his horse had melted into the sheets of gray rain. I kept watching, trying to believe he was there, and safe, but eventually one foot fell asleep, and then hunger finally drove me to the kitchen.

I felt groggy and quiet. I didn't want to bother Mother any more. I didn't want to hear the voice that came out of her while she was watching the creek so intently. I fixed my own breakfast, and although I was careful, milk poured too quickly from the big jug, splashing the counter and floor, and somehow, now there was jam on the towel. She always knew when I made a mess, and until that moment, I had been sure she saw everything, everywhere. This time, her eyes seemed to turn my way, but then looked through me. She just rubbed her arms and kept watching the creek. I felt goosebumps rise on my own arms.

Then an icy realization rolled over me. I would not be going to the Carsons today. There would be no pond, no place for geese and ducks to swim, no project I could help build, and I would have no cups of tea afterward with Sara and her mother. Instead, I would spend my time going from one window to the other, watching my father climb wet shale behind steaming cattle in one, and see my motionless mother framed in the other. I wrung the soggy cloth into the sink, and milky water ran down. The lights in the kitchen, flickered, dimmed and went out. When I looked back into the dining room, Mother was gone. There might have been someone descending the basement steps, but the noise of the rain made it hard to tell, and its constant rhythm began to frighten me. When the rain

had been but a smell in the air, it was easy not to be afraid. Now that it was here, I didn't want to go out into it, not even for Sara. She would never know I hadn't forgotten our Saturday plans.

Old Buck was curled in the back corner of the porch, on his rug, and although he didn't seem to want my company either, I joined him. While the rain pounded down, I rested my head on Buck's flank, and breathed in his familiar smell. We would wait for Dad together. I pulled my boots close. And, if he didn't come soon, I would go find him.

"Chrissy," Mother said, shaking me, "I've been looking everywhere for you. Come out of there."

"Where's Dad?"

Her hair was plastered to her forehead, and her pants dripped little puddles next to me. "The creek is cresting," she said, pulling me to my feet and putting my coat round my shoulders with a brief, hard hug.

My legs wobbled and for a second I couldn't stand. "Mama, where's Dad? Is he all right?" From the porch to the gate, water covered the pathways, as if the creek were suddenly everywhere. But there was Fox, too, tied to the truck. He was mud-splattered, and rain was sluicing off the saddle, but he looked fine.

"He's taking the Cat to the fork to clear a logjam. Get your boots on. We've got to get Fox in the barn. And the milk cows."

I pictured the creek where it forked, and the boulders alongside. I remembered the marker from the last high water, above my head. There would be lots of cottonwoods down in the creek this time: those trees that had been undercut once before, now would fall. Dad would be there all day while the trees were coming down.

"Can't we drive up the road to see him?" I pulled one boot on my prickling foot.

"Dad can take care of himself. The animals can't. Now come on!"

By the time we got Fox in the barn, and rubbed down and fed Pansy and Ginger, the two milk cows, Dad was slogging down from the road. He hailed us, and yelled, “I couldn’t even get close. Left the dozer high and dry.”

“Come home, Joe,” Mother yelled back.

“Yes, Daddy, please come home now.”

He shook his head, “Have to clear the bridge, or it’ll take it,” and pointed downstream where our bridge now looked like pickup sticks, with branches and logs jammed in and across it every which way. “Warm the truck up for me.”

It took Dad almost until dark to get the bridge cleared. Twice the truck got stuck, and he and Mother had to dig it out, using old railroad ties for traction. Finally, by hauling rocks in burlap bags from the old stone boat and anchoring the ties, and then burying hay bales in between, they built a track above the mud. Though all I had done was watch from a distance, I was shivering madly. The sickening smell of mud clung to everything, and didn’t seem to go away no matter how many times I rubbed my nose. Rain ran down my hair and into my collar. Everything I had on was wet and cold, and sticking to me. My boots would leave my feet with a sucking sound each time I took a step, and blisters rubbed my heels. I longed for a hot bath, for soup and crackers, for my warm, dry blankets. I could hear Buck barking from the porch. Daylight was fading, and he wanted to be fed. My stomach growled in response. But I knew it would be worse inside, just watching from a window. At least I was outside and almost working with them. Someday, I would do things like this with someone -- instead of just watching.

The timbers on the bridge creaked, and nails began to pull loose on the railing with metallic squeals. Dad pulled at the chain with his mud-covered gloves, but each time he raised it up to throw it, it slipped, and he would have to drag it back through the muck, wipe it off, and try again. He lassoed the largest log, and fastened the chain end to a hook

on the truck. Then he quick as anything jumped inside, gunned the motor, and began backing up, spinning clumps of muddy hay into the air. The tires dug in, and slowly the log swam up the incline. Smaller branches and sticks were immediately grabbed by the force of the creek and pulled downstream.

“Hallelujah!” Mother shouted.

Dad grinned with muddy lips, and although his eyes didn’t sparkle as they usually did when he smiled, he still yelled, “Saved that bridge. Yes, we did!”

He and Mother wrapped arms around one another, him half in and half out of the truck, her feet sliding as she tried to stay upright. They kissed and kissed, and when they finally looked at me, they called, “Chris, Chris,” and I ran right into their arms.

Surrounded by the smell of Dad’s tobacco and Mama’s Juicy Fruit, I wasn’t as wet, or cold, or hungry any longer. We had won more than the bridge; it seemed we had also won one another, somehow defeating the creek at the same time it was helping us.

“Gonna be a helluva mess downstream,” Dad said.

Downstream. I had forgotten downstream, and that everything that came by us, went to them. The logs and rushing brown water that were at our bridge minutes ago were hurtling down the canyon, gathering speed as they descended on Sara and her family. The trapped power that we had just released was on its way to their farm, and there wasn’t a thing we could do to stop it.

“Save them,” I mouthed to the creek from my parents’ arms, “if you can help us, help them, too.”

Dad stepped away and looked up and down several times, seeming to wilt a little. Then he set his shoulders, and before he put his arms back around us, he shook himself a little, like Buck did after a swim.

“What a country,” he said. “You never know what it’s gonna do.”

The next day, on our way to town in the still-muddy truck, we found out what had been done to our neighbors. Miller's fields were submerged almost to the tops of their stubble, and the fence between our two properties had most of the posts missing, but otherwise, everything seemed normal. A lantern burned in the window of the house and another one moved in the barn. Brownie's truck was parked in the driveway. I was glad Carmela wouldn't be alone. Could she have gotten away if the water had come up faster, with her weak legs and her walker? Dad blew out a disgusted puff of air when he saw the fence, but he didn't say anything.

The graying house at the Smith place stood like an island in a sea of dark brown water, which lapped at their porch. Their small valley would take a week or more to drain. The Smith kids would miss more school, and I dreaded the teacher trying to help the Smith kid in our class do his problems on the board once they had all returned. It never turned out well. Sometimes the littlest ones even cried. Sometimes they ran and hid, and we had more than one recess on those days. But none of the Smith kids were to be seen on their farm that day. Everything was locked up tight, and nothing was stirring.

"Wonder if they need anything," Mother said as we passed.

"Water's not that deep," Dad replied. "They can get out of there if they need to. Besides, County checks on them regular."

Lambert's sawmill looked even rustier than usual, and several stacks of lumber had darkened around the bottoms, but their drive was free of water. One of the trucks was parked on the main road, and when we came alongside, it appeared to have been recently washed. The "Lambert Timber" logo was fresh yellow and green. The flatbed truck was

missing, as was one of their large bulldozers. Maybe it, too, was stuck somewhere in the woods, just like Dad's Cat. We would all have to wait for summer for them to be freed.

Both Porter brothers were out with their Morgans, a whole string of beautiful chestnut horses, walking down the lane. The younger brother turned to watch us pass, while patting one of the mares, soothing her. Most of the horses had leggings, and several had colorful wool blankets over their backs and shoulders. Not one speck of mud showed on any of them. In the barnyard, however, their small herd of cows was milling about the fence, lowing constantly, their voices hoarse. They would rub one direction on the logs of the fence, then turn and head back again, always heading toward the metal gate. Outside the gate, close enough for them to smell, but not reach, were several dead calves. Their small bodies were thrown on the flatbed truck. They were as wet and slick as seals and the white of their faces looked so bright against the truck's muddy floor. So very bright.

"Oh, Joe," Mother said.

"Don't start, Jenna Beale," Dad replied.

"All those calves," she continued.

"Shouldn't have a cow on the place. Always put them damned horses first."

"Those poor mother cows," I said. "Crying and crying."

"They'll have another one next year, and forget all about it," Dad said. "They always do."

Mama looked away from the Porters and up the empty hillside, and it seemed as if she moved away a little bit, too. No matter what Dad said about next year, it was sad now. He looked over at her and when he reached for the gear shift next to my legs, he leaned over and put his hand on her knee for a second. The gears ground, the truck lurched and he grasped the knob again.

Mother smiled and said, "Road could be washed out. You better watch your driving."

"Dad, go by the old Teeter place," I said, "Please?"

As we came down the small hill that marked the end of High Valley, and the fork to town appeared, we all looked out over the fields toward Carson's farm. Even from this distance, the damage was evident. The creek, blocked by debris, some of it from our bridge, had formed another channel, and then several smaller channels, cutting its way through their fields, garden and yard. Clumps of brush, and even some fairly large logs, piled up against the fences. The fields Mr. Carson had cleared last Fall were now strewn with branches, and in some gray-white patches, washed free of topsoil.

As we came closer, and Dad slowed to check out the two roads, it got worse. A coyote ran across the road with a set of flapping white wings in his mouth.

"Mother, look!" I said.

"What was that?" she asked.

"It's their ducks, their geese!" I replied. "Please, Daddy, drive down the road. We have to help!"

Here and there you could see a fencepost, perhaps those from Miller's fence, or perhaps one that was still standing, but it was impossible to tell where the road really was. From the grove of trees on the far side, to the mailbox like a periscope on the other, dirty water, topped by a scum of oil and dead leaves, blocked our way.

"There must be another way we can go," I argued.

Dad shook his head, and turned the wheel. "Nothing we can do but go the other way."

"We can call them on the phone, Christine," Mother suggested.

"When?" I began to cry, and angrily rubbed the back of my hand across my nose.

"The phone doesn't even work."

“You’ll see her tomorrow. On the bus, at school.”

All the way to town, through the trees, we saw patches of white feathers: Caught in a fence, or in a tangle of brush. Once, by the old apple tree, we saw a pile of bloodied feathers, and a webbed foot.

“Feast for the scavengers,” Dad said.

“Joe,” Mother chastised, motioning at me with her head.

I was furious suddenly, at Dad, at Mother. Our cows were safe in the pasture, even our old wooden bridge was fine. Why were we okay, and the Carsons not? It made no sense.

“Can’t we do anything?” I asked.

“That was just plain unlucky,” Mother suggested, shaking her head. “Looks like it’s done.”

“Stupid is more like it,” Dad said. “Letting those geese roam like that. He had to know the creek was rising. He was the one who should have done something.”

I bit my lip and swallowed my tears. The creek that had seemed so good to us, that had just yesterday seemed like part of our family, was now threatening and cruel. And my folks! How could they be so mean?

“Christine,” Mother said, pulling me toward her. “In the Spring, there’ll be lots of eggs hatching. We can take them chicks or ducklings.”

I stayed as stiff as I could, and kept my head down, even though my nose had begun to drip, and front of my coat was getting wet.

“How would that be?” she asked. “It could be a surprise.”

I could see Mrs. Carson, with her handful of cracker crumbs, feeding the beautiful red-crowned geese. Maybe they hadn’t all died. I would hope for that. And, then there

was Spring, and babies. Soft ducklings to replace the ones that had gone. So I nodded, just a little bit, and let Mama cuddle me a little. It wasn't actually so bad.

For the next few days, Dad and several of the other farmers filled their own trucks with gravel and used their shovels and rakes, working until dark to repair the main road, and open some of their driveways. The school bus had to wait until they were done, until the roads were safe again. Even if our farm wasn't surrounded by brown water like the Smith place had been, it still felt as if we were on an island. No cars drove up and down the road. Phone lines were down, and our lights remained out. The old lanterns we used smoked and smelled, but their light cast interesting shadows in the evening. Shapes flickered across the walls and onto the drapes, and once in a while, they seemed about to say something that might keep us company. The evenings stayed lonely, and the days were long.

Mother kept a pretty close eye on me during daylight hours, while watching out the window for the yellow utility truck. She had one project after another for me to do: spelling words to practice, a letter to Grandma to write, and our feed order to add up. Even the privilege of checking Mr. Danzer's figures couldn't keep me from thinking for long.

"Mother, you think everything's all right, don't you? I mean even if they lost those ducks, maybe if they got more, they could stay?"

Mother didn't even look up. Maybe she'd heard me four or five times already, but I didn't feel any better. I still had to ask.

"You don't think they'll move away now, do you?" I asked.

She sighed. "Christine Ann, find something to do. Go read!"

“It’s too dark to read,” I argued.

“Do something else then. Anything!”

I went into the kitchen, and picked up the oak footstool. No matter how many times a day I moved it to check the phone, I was sure the next time I did, it would work. But it didn’t.

Finally, the roads were repaired, and the school bus came again, although it was driven by a man much younger than Mr. Arborgast, the only bus driver most of us had ever known. The new driver accelerated in spurts, and drove faster, jerking us forward and back when he had to put on the brakes on the turns. The road was narrower now, with windrows of gravel on either side. He made a corner, then speeded up soon as he was able. I was glad he was driving that day, because I was in a hurry as well.

It wasn’t long before we reached the next stop, but it seemed to take forever for all the Smith kids to get on. They climbed the bus steps one after another, with some dragging behind, delaying, including a new one, a red-faced first-grader who smelled like he had a cold. The larger Smith kids pushed him roughly into a seat near me, then they went to their places in the back, where they were soon shoving one another. He kept staring, and his lip quivered. Was he old enough for school? He looked like a toddler who should be cared for by someone. I looked away before he could sit by me, or start crying. He whimpered a little, but didn’t make a move. The whole bus began to smell of him, like the chest rub out of the little blue jar Mother used when I was sick. There was the smell of caring, anyway. I looked at him again. The sleeves of the bulky coat someone had put on him went down past his fingers, and there was a dark spot on the right sleeve where he kept wiping his nose and eyes. As the bus went faster, he held onto the bar under the seat, one hand on either side of his sturdy legs. When it slowed down, he kicked the seat in front of him, over and over. Maybe he needed more than a rubdown

with Vicks. He turned his head toward me again, but I looked away quick, kept my head straight forward, and just watched him out of the corner of my eye. He kept looking at me for a long time, even though the other Smith kids were making lots of interesting racket in the back of the bus, tussling and arguing.

Finally, we came to the fork and turned toward the Carson farm. When we stopped, the space by the crooked post was empty. A water line marked the wood pole high up and the mailbox, muddy and battered, lay at the edge of the field, circled by deep footprints. The lane was empty. The bus only paused a moment more, then went on.

I stood next to my seat, straining to see their house for a few seconds before the trees blocked my view again.

The driver yelled over the noise, "Sit down, little girl. You can't stand up like that."

The littlest Smith kid stared at me, his mouth open.

No one was coming to get on the bus. And no one seemed to be in the yard, or near the clothesline, or by the barn. Where was Sara? Where were they? I couldn't see everything quickly enough. The only way I would know was to go down there. I looked at the driver. Would he remember me tonight? Would he know where I was supposed to get off?

The news of washed-out roads and drowned milk cows kept everyone busy talking, and school went by without any trouble for me that day. The new Smith kid slipped into the crowd of first and second graders almost unnoticed. Maybe because I had important things to do afterward, the hours in class didn't seem to take that long to go by, and before I knew it, it was time to get back on the bus and ride up the canyon toward home.

The substitute bus driver stood with several of the regulars, and although those drivers kept a close eye on their kids boarding, he didn't. He just stood smoking and talking, with his back to us. When he finally got in his seat, and looked in the mirror, he didn't look at each one of us like Mr. Arborgast did, mentally checking us off. He just shut the door, put it in gear, and took off.

He drove the full route, even though some of the kids weren't there to get off. Mr. Arborgast would have known that, and skipped that stop. Then he would have taken it easy going up the hills, giving the old bus time to catch its breath. Not this driver. When a stop came up, he'd pull up, wait a few seconds, and if no one got off, he'd shut the door and drive off. Although it perfectly suited my plans, his driving made me feel lonely and almost afraid. I watched the little Smith kid weaving from side to side in his seat, his eyelids beginning to droop, and his cheeks even redder than they had been in the morning. He could get off at any stop and no one would notice. He could wander off somewhere, even fall in the creek, and maybe nobody would care. Unless his new brothers and sisters did. Their roughhousing and laughter in the back seat were proof enough. They wouldn't even know he was gone.

As the Carsons' stop came up, I gripped my lunch pail and waited. What about my parents? What would they think when I didn't come into the kitchen at the usual time? Maybe they would be so busy checking to see if the calves were all right and the bridge still standing, they wouldn't even notice. Maybe the little Smith kid would get off at my house, and they wouldn't know the difference. Maybe Dad would be glad. He'd finally have his boy. Well, the Carsons would be glad to have me. They didn't mind that Sara was a girl, and one more sister wouldn't add up to too many.

The bus stopped by the crooked post, and I took a deep breath, walked down the aisle, and stood behind the yellow line. The bus driver pushed the handle, and the door

squeaked once, then opened, just like it would if I were home. Before I could change my mind, I went down the steps fast, banging my knees on the lunch pail. As the door closed, I heard Dan Smith, one of the middle kids, say, “Hey!” The bus spun the new gravel, then drove on. The headlights turned up High Valley Road, and lit up clumps of bushes on its way to the Smiths. As I began to walk, I saw the red tail lights in the distance, climbing up into the canyon.

Without the lights from the bus, it was pretty dark, and black clouds moved across the sky. Even on the darkest of days, when I left the bus to walk down the driveway, the yellow-gold lights of home seemed to reach me. This long lane stretched out for yards, and so far, I couldn’t see a single light burning in the Carson house. There were none in the barn. Wind rattled the bare branches in the cottonwoods, and I remembered the coyote running across the road with the duck struggling in his mouth. Perhaps out there in the shadows, more were waiting. I had better hurry.

Up ahead, in the center of the lane, lay a hump. The wind blew harder, and the hump began to move slowly, rising up with a gust, then settling back down. The hair on the back of my neck began to stand up. It’s a tumbleweed, that’s all it is. Just a big old tumbleweed, and I’ll kick it. Counting my steps and breathing carefully with each one, I sneaked up on the thing. My eyes were growing used to the dusk, and even from several feet away, I could tell when to run if I needed to. Yes, it was only a tumbleweed. A big gust hoisted it out of the lane. I began to trot.

The large dark shape of Mr. Carson’s truck appeared directly ahead. It was loaded with tree branches and trash, crisscrossed with heavy, muddy rope. Some of those branches probably were the ones that had been stuck in our bridge. Look how large they are! I tripped over a snag, and the lunch bucket fell with a hollow clang against a rock.

When I picked it up, there was a dent in the side. One not easily hidden, or straightened. Mother wouldn't like that.

A scolding noise came from the other side of the truck, as if something had heard me thinking. It got louder, and somewhat familiar. The increasing darkness made me doubt what I had heard. I grabbed the handle of my lunch pail, and hefted it. With my thermos and leftovers, it was heavy and could do a little damage. Under the truck, the darkness was even deeper, and the noise seemed to be coming from there. I moved slowly forward. My heart was pounding. Two white shapes, like giant moths, wings spread wide, came slowly around the truck to meet me. They honked loudly, then raised their crowned heads, and flapped their wings. Mrs. Carson's geese! They had survived!

Inside the lunch bucket were crusts of bread and bits of gingerbread that I'd crumbled that day at the lunch table, as I'd puzzled over my plans. Now I was glad I hadn't eaten them. I opened the pail, and threw two crusts in the direction of the geese. They continued to honk, but stopped, and drew their wings in. A light went on in the front of the house. I threw some more crumbs. The geese slowly came forward, necks stretched out, the larger one leading. He delicately picked up one of the crumbs. Then, murmuring and whirring, he seemed to be telling the other one that my food was good, and that I was trustworthy. They ate the crusts as fast as I threw them. In the house, the one light burned in the living room window. No one had opened the door yet. I emptied the lunch pail quickly, and most of the scraps landed at my feet. The geese followed the crumbs, occasionally looking up and honking, but still nuzzling my shoes with their long dark-red beaks. They would remember me the next time I saw them. I would probably even be able to get close enough to pet them. Then the porch light came on.

"Who is it?" Mr. Carson asked from the doorway. "Someone out there?"

I looked back down the lane. In the few minutes I'd been feeding the geese, the path to the road had become a long hazy tunnel through the bare trees. The wind had died, and the rushing sound of the creek, still full of flood waters, came up around us. The geese honked twice, their noise carrying across the fields. They were good watchdogs. If I ran into the dark, they'd let Mr. Carson know which way. I didn't really want to run. I tried to remember why I had come.

"It's Christine, Mr. Carson," I said quietly.

"What's that?" he asked.

I hollered, "It's me, Christine!"

The geese began to honk louder, and with their wings held up, they moved back around the truck. Mr. Carson came out to the edge of the porch.

"How'd you get here?" he said and looked out toward the creek.

"Off the bus."

"Folks know you're here?"

"I don't think so," I said carefully.

"Did you tell them you were coming here?" he said, louder.

"No," I said, moving closer. "But they won't mind."

"Damn! Marie, come on out here!" he yelled.

Mrs. Carson appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a heavy shawl over her shoulders, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. In the dim porch light, she seemed hunched over, and older. She stayed in the doorway, but leaned out toward me, clutching the frame.

"Hi, Mrs. Carson," I tried.

"She's come without telling them," Mr. Carson explained.

Mrs. Carson asked, "Is that true, Christine? Your parents don't know where you are?"

"They'll probably guess."

"I'd just as soon they didn't do that," Mr. Carson said, and hobbled back toward the door. He turned and pointed to his truck. "No way to get you home this time. That thing can't climb those hills loaded down."

"You'll have to unload it, Ron," Mrs. Carson said, straightening a little.

"Oh, no," I said, "Please don't do that!"

"Christine, our telephone doesn't work. Your parents will be worried," Mrs. Carson said, stepping out onto the porch, her voice flat and tired. She wrapped the shawl around her tighter. "We have to get you home. There's no other way."

The shadows on the porch hid her face.

"I just came to see if you were all right, if Sara was okay," I explained. Mrs. Carson's hands pleated the edge of her shawl, over and over again. "And the geese," I added.

"Well, Sara isn't feeling very well right now," Mrs. Carson said. "She's upstairs in bed."

"Can I go see her?"

"No," Mr. Carson said. "She doesn't need any more upset right now."

"I wouldn't bother her," I argued.

He just shook his head.

"Can you tell her I came to see her?" I asked.

Mrs. Carson said, "Yes, we'll tell her. But we've all had some very hard days lately, and just can't have visitors right now. Will you try to understand that, Christine?"

I nodded. I wasn't sure I understood about Sara, but I did know I probably didn't belong there right then. I wished I could just get very small, and then fly, quick as anything, right home. Nobody would suspect a thing. Everything would be just as it should have been that afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Carson would think it had just been the wind they had heard, and I would be walking down our driveway, the same as every other day. What were Mother and Dad doing right at that moment? Were they worrying? Was Dad angry?

The Carsons went into the house, and after a moment Mr. Carson came back out, wearing his work coat and leather gloves. He moved toward the truck, and awkwardly clambered up the large side panels, where he began untying the ropes with one hand, while he clutched the wooden rail with his other. The panels swayed and rattled. Then the geese began honking from the other side. He hung there for a second, swearing under his breath, and climbed back down again.

"Need to get them put up," he said, motioning to me. "You stay round this side, and shoo them back toward me."

The geese whirred and clicked soothingly to one another as soon as Mr. Carson began waving at them. Walking slowly behind, I watched from a short distance as he drove them through the half-light toward the corral. Then he turned and said, "Stay there."

"Mr. Carson?" I asked.

He made clucking noises at the geese, and the three of them moved through the gate, and into the barnyard. There were no other white shapes anywhere. No other ducks and geese came to greet them. Other than Sara's rabbits in the shed, these two appeared to be the only animals left. I stopped at the corral railing. Was he listening?

“If you had a pond in the field, you could get more ducks and geese. They could all live together, these two and all the others, and they’d be safe, if you had a pond,” I finished breathlessly.

Mr. Carson stopped and putting his hands on his thighs, began to laugh. “That’s rich, now,” he said. “A pond!” He turned part-way toward me, and seemed to curl his lip, then said, “This whole place has been a pond the last several days!” Returning to the geese, he commented over his shoulder, “That’s a good one!” He wasn’t laughing any more.

Mrs. Carson appeared on the back porch, and said, “Looks like your father’s on his way,” pointing up toward the road.

It could have been the bus returning, or it could have been Lambert’s truck, or even the Porter’s big pickup and trailer, but the minute I saw the headlights, I knew she was right. It was Dad. I scrambled back to where my lunch pail still lay open, and fastened it, just as Mr. Carson returned.

“I have to go,” I said, and took off running down the lane into the tricky light, where one step might be into dusk and the next into darkness. I had to reach the crooked post before our truck’s lights could turn in toward me. The worst thing would be for Dad to drive up to the Carson house.

Mr. Carson hollered, “You’re going to break your neck, you crazy girl! Wait a minute, and I’ll fetch the light.”

“I’m fine,” I yelled back. I lifted my feet up high as I ran, and tried to avoid any sticks or tumbleweeds that might block my path. If I tripped again, I’d have to get right back up.

The truck parked at the entrance to the lane. In a moment, a wide, bright light moved toward me. It seemed far away, yet at the same time, near me. I couldn’t see a thing but that light, and I headed toward it, as fast as I could, keeping hold of my lunch pail. When

it was close enough that the area all around me was lit up, I stopped. The brightness hurt, and all I could see was a dark figure outlined by white. I raised one hand to shade my eyes.

“Dad?” I gasped.

“I ought to just leave you here,” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“When you didn’t get off the bus, your mother said this is where you’d be. I guess I knew it, too.” He lowered the flashlight. “Get in the truck, Christine.”

I moved into the light with him, and toward the passenger door. “I’m really sorry, Daddy,” I tried again.

“You’re old enough to know better, Chris. I’m not sure what’s going on with you lately, since that Sara came. But you better think about things before you do them.” He opened my door, and the cab light came on. His mouth was set in a thin line, and his forehead wrinkled, but he seemed more worried than mad. He picked me up and set me on the seat. “Did you ask anyone if you could go?”

“No.”

“You have to ask. You have to let your mother or me know where you’re going.”

I looked down at my hands, twisting on the lunch bucket handle. I was tired of carrying it. I put it on the floor where I could kick it all the way home. Maybe I’d make another dent or two.

“Look at me, Christine,” Dad continued. “No more of this. No taking off unless you check with somebody, okay?”

“Yes, Dad,” I said. “I’ll make sure.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“I don’t like you keeping secrets from us, Christine,” Dad said.

“I know,” I replied.

The heater in the big truck warmed my legs quickly, and I forgot about the lunch bucket. Just like the little Smith kid, as soon as I got warm and the truck started moving, I couldn’t keep my eyes open. And I wouldn’t wake up until we got home, and Mother began squeezing me so hard I almost couldn’t breathe.

Almost Spring

Grandma said I was born on the cusp. On the cusp of Spring. In that straddling season we held onto as almost Spring. It seemed like such a nothing time to have a birthday. It wasn't one thing or the other, just like this whole year had been. Fall hadn't been Fall, and Winter hadn't been Winter. Would it ever really be Spring? Full-tilt, everything in bloom, soft, warm breezes, absolutely, positively Spring? Or would it be almost Spring all season?

At least one thing could be counted on: I would be ten. I would have two numbers in my age, even though one was a zero. Another thing Grandma often claimed was that I was just like my mother. That I knew when things had special meaning, things that seemed just ordinary to everyone else. I tried not to believe that, and to put it out of my mind completely, but I kept thinking about that 1 and that 0 in 10. Was I the one, and there was just a zero beside me? Like almost having a friend? Or almost having a brother or sister? And would I have to wait a whole year before that changed, clear until I was eleven? Every time I turned another zero age, the calendar would turn to a zero, too. 0 to 10. 1950 to 1960. Then 1960 to 1970. What did that mean?

Even though I wasn't ten yet, it seemed like I would be ten forever, and I wished I could change the calendar, and just be nine again.

Since it was too late for seed catalogs and too early for planting, Mother usually took a trip, around the time of my birthday, to visit her mother and sisters. Dad called it her "annual pilgrimage," a phrase that he'd read in a brochure left by some traveling evangelists, and one that he thought was very funny. Mother sniffed whenever he said it, and looked the other way.

There had been no preparations upstairs this year. No suitcases had been taken from the hall closet and aired. There was no ironing of suits she seldom wore, or time in front of the mirror where she gazed over her shoulder at her kick pleats and said, “Hmmm.” Nothing. Perhaps because of the flood, it wasn’t convenient to leave. Or maybe the new way she and Dad looked at each other made her put it off. But for her not to go was unthinkable. She had given me her word over a year ago. This time we would go together, she had said. And now that we were friends again, surely she would remember.

Then, one week from my birthday, she came downstairs and announced, “Well, I guess Mother will just have to get along by herself this year.”

“Go on if you want to,” Dad said.

“She can come visit later on. Spend some time with all of us.”

Dad’s face seemed to slide downward, “Later on, we’ll all be too darned busy for any visiting.”

“Does that mean we’re not going?” I asked.

“You shouldn’t miss any more school anyway,” she replied.

“But what about my birthday trip?”

“Aunt Bonnie will probably send you something that’ll be lots of fun. Won’t that be better than a trip to see Grandma?”

Bonnie was Mother’s younger sister, and often seemed to be able to look right into my heart and locate exactly what I wanted, even before I knew it myself. Like the beautiful little box to keep treasures in she’d sent two years ago, or the leather case of colored pencils she’d sent last year. I always looked forward to her gifts, but found it discouraging that Mother was using her as a substitute.

“No,” I said. “You promised I could go this year.”

“I know I did, honey, but now that I’m not going . . .” Mother’s excuse drifted off into silence, and she turned to my father, “What do you think, Joe?”

“I said, go ahead, already, Jenna,” he replied.

“That’s not what I mean. What about taking her with you?”

Dad took Mother’s arm and steered her off into the other room. Although their heads were bent, and they were almost whispering, I got most of what they were saying.

“Up canyon?” Dad asked. “You suggesting I take her up there with me?”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s still little, Jenna. If she was a boy I might think about it.”

“You know how she loves that creek. Don’t you think she’d want to see where it comes from?”

“Sure, fine, she may want a trip. This isn’t it.”

“Joe, she’s your only child. Only one you’ll ever have, looks like.”

Dad put his hands on his hips as if he were looking for his pockets, and then leaned forward until I thought he was about to bend clear over. After a few seconds, he straightened, and said, “I guess it should all be hers someday.” He slapped his pants legs, dusting them several times. “All right,” he finally said.

“You tell her,” Mother said.

I pretended to find the embroidered Scotty-dog on my sock fascinating, and didn’t look at him until he said, “Christina? Christine.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I said.

“You think you can listen to me, and do just what I tell you to?”

“Of course, Daddy.”

“You think you could walk a long, long time. Maybe sleep on the ground at night?”

"I can do anything you ask me to," I replied, as sweetly as I could, without not being myself.

"You better be sure. There'll be nowhere else for you to stay, once we leave here. You'll have to stick it out," Dad said.

"I can do it. I know I can," I said, but began to wonder. "Where are we going?"

"We're headed up to the source. To see how our creek's doing."

"Is it far?"

He took me to the window and pointed to the end of the Wallawas, a section of smaller mountains called the tailbone, still topped by white. "See that ridge, just below the snow? See how there's trees there, but not any higher? That's where we're going. Right near the tree line."

Mother looked where he had pointed. "Up there? You have to go that high?"

"No sense in going otherwise. Snow is higher, so we have to go up to it."

"The flood didn't make a difference, maybe brought things lower down?"

"Oh, hell yeah, it made a difference. Tore up the creekbed, and washed good soil away. All that water's gone. Ground soaked up a little, the rest ran right off. Come on, Jenn, you know all this."

"I know, Joe, but I didn't realize you'd be taking her way up there," Mother pointed up to the cold purple-gray peaks. "Are you sure you want to go, Chrissy?"

"I think so," I said, shivering a little.

I was no longer at all sure. I thought about riding on the train and about shopping in stores in Grandma's town, twice as big as Union. I wished I could choose. But Dad was watching me just like when he stared down the pinto he'd been training. He'd kept his eyes locked on that pony's, until it learned to stay stock still whenever its reins were down. I'd better stand my ground.

“I really want to go,” I said, trying to sound like it. “Can’t I?”

Finally Mother nodded.

“I hope I’m not sorry about this,” she said.

For my birthday, my father gave me stars. He gave me the world curved around us like a black cup, lit by more stars than I had ever seen before.

The night I turned ten, my father woke me in pure darkness, when even the embers of our campfire had turned black. We had camped on a rock ledge, right below the ridge, a few hundred yards from the tree line. All around us, the wind blew and trees cracked in the cold. Protected and warmed by rock outcroppings, we slept easily during this first clear night. But without even an alarm clock to wake him, my father got up silently in the middle of that night, and shook me awake. Without saying a word, he guided me to the middle of the ledge with the beam of his flashlight. Then he clicked it off and pointed my chin to the sky.

For a moment, my eyes refused to adjust. The glow of the flashlight had sent everything behind a curtain. Then it parted, and the sky rushed at me. Even if I had to walk ten times as far, or have ten times as many blisters, and eat greasy pork and beans ten more times, I wouldn’t have missed those stars, not for anything in the world. The hours plodding along the trail, then clambering on slipping shale, even the sore muscles and scraped knuckles, all faded before them.

Stars are not all white, I discovered. Some are blue or yellow, some even pink. When you look up at them without the lights of home or town, or even a flashlight, around you, they are brighter than bright, and not at all cold. They are full of fire, and seem alive.

The air felt light and thin and the stars came close enough, it seemed, to warm our hands on. I stretched a little taller, wanting to be right there with them, then stood on tiptoes, reaching, reaching. A deep breath, and I could fly to them. Suddenly, my unlaced boots slipped on the shale, and I fell forward.

Dad grabbed me, pulled me back. “Careful, Chrissy,” he said. “That’s close enough.”

What was there to be afraid of? I had grown during the night, I was sure of it, and had no reason to fear things any more. The stars, big and glowing or small and glittering, all hung up there in the blackness, and seemed one thing. I was part of it, part of the world, just like they were.

The next morning, I followed Dad to the ridge. The clear weather had held, and sunshine warmed our backs as we started up the steep slope toward the treeline. Above us, frost and snow glinted in the sunlight. In the shadows, ice covered rocks and plants. Bushes and grass had become sparse; only moss and kinnick-kinnick grew beneath the evergreens. Unlike the paths of shale and loose dirt below, these narrow, winding trails were hard as a sidewalk. Stair-like treads had been cut into the rocks by run-off. I knew I didn’t really need the tie-line that stretched between Dad and me any more, but I was glad of it. We could be part of one thing, too.

“Hear that?” Dad shouted.

The constant wind had numbed my ears, but still I heard something: It could be water trickling perhaps, and then flowing and splashing. Like music, sometimes separate, sometimes together.

“I think so,” I tried to yell, but only dry whispers came out.

“Over there,” he pointed, and began to move off the trail, slowly. “Watch your footing.”

A solid rock face rose hundreds of feet in the air, and all along its length, water bled from its crevices, merging many small rivulets into streams further down. Several became small waterfalls, and cascaded down into larger currents, which ran between granite slabs and joined to form a tumbling and foaming river. Mist hung in the air like suspended rainbows. As we came closer, I could feel it gently touch my face.

“Jonathan Creek,” Dad yelled, indicating the combined streams at the widest point. “That’s its birthplace. Right there.”

I nodded, somehow unwilling to speak. I hadn’t expected all this water all at once. I had assumed, like us, the creek would be born small, and just get bigger as it flowed downhill. That it would be just one thing, our creek, all the time. Now I realized, like the separate stars making one big sky, Jonathan Creek was made up of drops and drops of water, rain and ice and snow, coming from everywhere, and apparently, some of it coming out of sheer rock.

Dad took out his compass, and made some marks in the little notebook he carried. He turned the pages and looked at one carefully. Then he scribbled something else and flipped the cover closed with a snap. After he’d stowed the notebook away in his shirt pocket, he fastened the button over it. Even though it was only mid-morning, he seemed quite tired suddenly. He pointed downstream.

“Take the lead, Christine.”

Boulders lay all along the creek, as if the rock wall had at one time let loose and they had fallen a long ways, embedding themselves in the soil as they landed. I had to leap from one to another, wait for slack in the line and Dad’s footsteps behind me, then jump carefully again. Finally we came to several stones that were as big as our kitchen table, piled one atop another, giant steps. This route led us uphill, and suddenly we were at the

top of the rise, overlooking the creek, the forest and hills we had traveled through, and beyond them, all of High Valley.

“Good place for lunch,” Dad said, and smiled. He had been waiting for me to find this spot, one that he had probably visited several times alone; now it was ours. I smiled back at him.

While unpacking the dinner pails, thermos and small, rolled tarp, Dad kept his eyes on the horizon. A red-tailed hawk circled, and landed in one of the pines below us. Several other sets of wings continued to turn in the sky.

“Look how far we can see,” I said.

“Down there on the right, you can see the road we came up, and if you look real hard, you can just catch the windshield of our truck.” He paused, then said, “See, watch now. There it is.”

The sun sparkled for an instant on something in the distance, but around that one bright spot were other twinkles that could have been glass, or a pond, or a metal snow fence. But it was comforting to know that Dad could find our truck in all those trees, all those hills and valleys that looked the same.

“Can we see our house?”

Dad rummaged in his pack again, and brought out his old black binoculars on their leather strap. “Might do,” he said, adjusting them. “Take a look.”

A hawk’s view of High Valley wasn’t possible with glasses: houses and farms were hidden by curves in the road. I could, however, see most of the creek, and if I had been the red-tail, I would have flown by its map. The gravel road disappeared, but the creek was like a blue ribbon laid out. It was a long way back home.

“Can’t see it,” I shook my head and put the binoculars down. “Did all our great-granddads follow the creek clear up here?”

“Not all of them. Old Joe brought my dad up here when he was about your age.” Dad reclaimed his glasses. “Somewhere round here there’s a marker they left. Jonathan might not have come this far.”

“Tell me the story, Dad?”

“That old rigmarole,” he laughed, “that you’ve heard time and time again?”

“Well, tell it like it was the very first time.”

“And just how would that be?”

“Once upon a time...” I prompted.

“All right. Once upon a time,” Dad began, “there was a young man named Jonathan Beale, who was a soldier in the Union Army.” He looked off at the horizon again, and pulled out his pouch of tobacco.

I settled in.

“He had been fighting the War between the States for a long, long time, and he was tired. He didn’t want to fight any more, he wanted to farm. So, he got on his horse, and he headed west. He worked awhile in different places, but he kept on riding until he came to the Oregon Territory.”

The red-tailed hawk wheeled in the sky, and Dad lit the match.

“He wandered all around, from the Willamette to the Columbia, and on up the Grande Ronde. Couldn’t find what he was looking for. So he got married.”

“Dad! Tell it right.”

He grinned. “Okay. So first he marries Great-Grandma Catherine. Then he comes up-river, and camps near Buffalo Peak with his new bride. In the morning, he gets up, and the first thing he sees is the Wallowas, all blue and white in the sunshine, and he knows what he’s come all this way for.” Dad draws on his smoke, and blows out a ring before he continues. “But he comes from a long line of farmers, from Kentucky and Tennessee,

and he knows you can't farm without water. So he starts looking for a lake or a river, or a good strong stream."

"And he finds our creek," I couldn't help supplying.

"He finds the creek," Dad echoed. "And when he comes across the perfect place for a farm, he starts clearing the land. Other folks wondered why he chose up to settle up high when there was still bottomland. But he knew High Valley was the spot for him. He saw his family's future there."

"And that's how we got Jonathan Creek," I finished.

"Well, not quite. There's a little more to this story. That's how Jonathan Creek got its name, that's right, but it wasn't until my grandfather, Joseph, that the creek really became ours."

"That's not the way you usually tell the story. Remember? Jonathan built the smokehouse first, right? Out of creek rock? And then Catherine planted apple trees on the hill?"

"All that's true, Christine."

"You're named after old Joseph, aren't you, Dad?"

"Yeah. And my dad was named after Jonathan."

"Who am I named after?"

Dad looked at me for a minute, then shook his hand free of the burning cigarette butt. "No one I know. Your mom just liked Christine, that's all. It's not a family name, unless it's your grandma's family." He finished stripping the dead smoke, and scattered the tobacco to the wind.

"If I was a boy, would I be Jon, or Joe?"

"You want to hear the rest of this story or not?" Dad asked, brushing off his pants, and reaching for the dinner pails.

“I do, I do,” I replied.

“Okay,” he said, and set the lunches on the ground. “So, Grandpa Joseph was farming the land, and he dug the first irrigation canals. He made all the old metal sluice gates in his blacksmith shop, and put his mark on them. You go look sometime, and you’ll see his curlicue J. Same as on the marker. And he started watering in the summer, opening the gates from the creek and letting the water into his fields. By that time, there were farms on either side of him, and some up and down the canyon. Everybody was settling everywhere in Oregon by then, even in High Valley. Lots of folks were trying to farm off Jonathan Creek. Some started irrigating. Come 1909, that changed.” Dad was sitting cross-legged on the tarp, looking right at me.

“Why?”

“All the water rights laws in this part of the country started then. The legislature passed them so folks would know what they owned, and who could use how much water.”

We were learning about bills and laws in school that year, and I knew they usually said something about taxes or crimes, but I had never imagined they had anything to do with water. It seemed strange to be around these big rocks and trees, looking at the water in the creek, and to think that men in the state capital, who maybe had never seen all this before, had to decide what would happen.

“Did Joseph help?” I asked.

“I doubt it. He found out about them same as everybody else. He was just lucky that his father was first. The government said that the earliest to settle on the land had claim to the water on it, and that was Jonathan. Everybody knew he was the pioneer, because they’d been calling the creek Jonathan Creek all along. So he and Granddad Joe got the oldest water rights. Same as we do now.”

Not Catherine? Not Joseph's wife? Where were the grandmothers in all this? I began to feel queasy. Dad moved down the handles on the dinner pails, and they squeaked like fingernails on a blackboard. Like the pictures of important people in our classroom, Washington and Lincoln and Jefferson, I could imagine Jonathan and Joseph, maybe not wearing powdered wigs, but the same, posed against that black background, studied and remembered. Even when they were boys, they knew they would have the creek someday. It was a sure thing. Dad was given it by his dad, Jon. Right along with the names, they got the farm and the creek. Hadn't Dad said he guessed it might be mine someday? But I wasn't my father's son, I was a girl without even a name from my family.

"You listening, Christine?" He stopped unpacking lunch, and continued, "Land and water are part of our history, just like Granddad Joseph or Jonathan is. They're passed down, like the story."

The red-tailed hawk swooped down, very fast, almost hitting the ground, and rose again, with something soft and struggling in his claws. I couldn't swallow, or move. Like the rabbit a moment earlier, I felt frozen before whatever was about to descend on me. "But someone could buy it. Like the Carsons did," I said, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Nobody's going to buy it." Dad reached across the tarp, and took my chin in his hands, and turned me toward him. "I know you love that creek like I do. You wouldn't be my child, I guess, if you didn't. When you're grown, the farm will be yours. Water rights and all."

"What about Mama?"

"She agrees."

"But what will happen to her water rights?"

“Your mother doesn’t have those now. Only my name is on the registration. If I died when you were still too young, she would inherit the farm through my will. Then she could register the water rights, and pass them on to you.”

If this was what being ten was like, I was ready to give it all back. It would be so much easier if I could just jump back a couple years, be seven or eight again, and not know about any of this. I didn’t want to think about Mama or Dad dying or wills or farming or any of those things. Except maybe the stars, the best birthday present ever. Those I would keep.

“All this is a long time off, Chrissy,” Dad said softly, “we don’t have to talk about it now. It’s time you knew about some things, but you’re too young to worry about most of it yet. “

“Today I’m ten,” I said. “I’m a year older than I was yesterday.”

“And you’re still my Sugarfoot, aren’t you?” He grabbed my toes, the way he always did. When I didn’t answer, he suggested, “Let’s eat the lunch Mom fixed us, and start down.”

What I really wanted was Mama, not a lunch she’d packed. But when I saw the rolls and cheese, and when Dad opened a container and it was bread and butter pickles, my favorite, I was happy her lunch was there. Plus, there were apples from our own tree, and graham crackers. The sweet and sour taste of the pickles brought Mother a little closer, and made the strange day, and all that Dad had told me, a little better. When I bent over to take another forkful of pickles, the charm she’d given me swung out from my neck and dangled on its green cord over the lunch pail. I pulled back quickly, and looked at it. Until this moment, I’d forgotten I was wearing it.

“Take it, for luck,” Mother had insisted, putting it around my neck at the very last moment. Dad had been honking the truck’s horn, eager to get started. The charm was the

size of a nickel and bright brass, with the carving of a wolf on one side. She had meant for me to keep it, but I suddenly knew where it really needed to be.

While Dad poured his coffee from the thermos, I started down to the creek again. The boulders were like the rocks near the fishing hole at home. I remembered last summer when I had discovered that Dad's bulldozer work had destroyed all I'd built in the creek. The charm was warm from my body, and I held onto it for a second or two, then took it off. Was there something about owning the creek that made you do things to people? Was it lucky, or unlucky? Maybe, it was just the wrong kind of luck.

"Where you off to?" he asked. "You better hurry if you want to make it to the truck by dark."

"I'll be back in a minute," I replied. It was harder than I thought to clamber over the smooth stones and get close to the creek near the rock face. A few yards short of the source, where all the small streams met, I moved through clouds of fine droplets and slipped several times, almost twisting my ankle. I could get no closer.

Just as I left the mist, the charm fell from my cold fingers and clinked its way across the rocks, as if I had skipped it. It vanished. A hundred times, I had skipped flat rocks on the creek, and watched their direction. But this was not a rock, this was the medal Mother gave me. She would understand giving it up, but not losing it. And I would not lose it! Carefully, I checked every crevice, every chunk of gravel, every stick, until I saw, finally, its warm color against the gray and brown rocks. I snagged the string, slowly reeling it in until it was wrapped safely around my fingers. Losing it for those few seconds had suddenly made it even more valuable. Could I let go of it now?

A little further downstream, I was able to balance between two rocks near where the current slowed, and untie the knot. The water was quiet and clear, and the granite on the creek bottom formed an almost perfect bowl that was empty and waiting. If only I could

hit it! Keeping my eyes on the spot I wanted the charm to land, I wished as hard as I could, then squeezed my eyes shut, and tossed it. Now there was a part of my mother at the source. Even though she might never come to this place, something that she had thought lucky would always be there.

Spring Gatherings

One morning, Dad had set on the window sill his gift of Spring to my mother, a buttercup, which every year, he dug up and carried down from the hill in a small pie pan. Later, he would hold it under her chin teasingly, and say, *Do you like butter? Shall we see?* But for now, its clean yellow light brightened the entire kitchen. Overnight, daffodils and forsythia had appeared in the valley along with the dusting of buttercups on the hill. Everything seemed to be blooming, sprouting or hatching. Pussywillow catkins had emerged, and along the creek, the willows were the pale yellow-green of unfurling leaves. Wild violets and snowdrops echoed the purple and white of the Wallowas. And birdsong was everywhere.

Mother had thrown open the windows and doors, and breezes stirred the kitchen curtains.

“Hey, Little Bear,” she said from the porch steps. “Sleepyhead. Shouldn’t waste a minute of this beautiful day.”

“Mama, can we go to Mrs. Hyatt’s today?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t want to do a thing today but sit in the sun,” she said and stretched out her legs. “Maybe later.”

“You’re not planting garden?”

“Have you seen the mud? That can wait,” she yawned. “I’m not even sure I’ve ordered all the seeds yet anyway. I can’t even remember.”

On the desk, there had been a stack of seed catalogs, which grew over the winter. But now that I thought about it, they hadn’t been disturbed for weeks. And I had seen no plans drawn in the evening, no sheets of grid paper scattered on the dining room table

with Mother and Dad stewing over each addition, each change. How could I not have noticed until now?

“We’re not going to have a garden this year,” I said in relief.

“Now, I didn’t say that. One’ll get done eventually. I’m just not in a real big hurry. Are you?”

“No, I’m not in a big hurry either.”

“Well, come sit with me for a bit, then.”

The warmth of the wooden steps came through my thin pajamas, and although at first I felt embarrassed to be on the porch while dressed for bed, waking up in the sun gave me a peaceful feeling, and I began to understand why Mother was talking like she was. It made you feel as if you had all the time in the world, and nothing else could possibly be as important as sunshine. I leaned back onto Mother, and we were still sitting that way when Dad came up the path.

“Cats in the sun,” he said, “that’s what you look like. Two lazy cats.”

“Well, we can’t be lazy for long,” Mother said, pushing me upright. “We have ducklings to buy today.”

“Mrs. Hyatt’ll be glad to see you. Last time I was up that way, she about waved her arm off. I don’t think she gets much company all winter,” Dad said.

“Been courting up the canyon, I see,” Mother said. “I didn’t think your taste ran to little gray-haired ladies, Joe.”

“Well, I like that old gal,” he replied. “She minds her own business, and makes a pretty good feather pillow while she’s at it.”

“I think she reminds you of your mama,” she said.

“Not a bit,” Dad said, and winked. “She reminds me of you.”

Mother snorted, and began to laugh. “You are the orneriest man,” she said, and headed into the kitchen. “Christine Ann, get the sleepy dogs out of your eyes, because we’re going in about ten minutes.”

Dad looked at me, “You’re mighty quiet today.”

I just nodded. What could I possibly add to their conversation? Once again, they seemed alone together even when I was in the room. But somehow, this time, I hadn’t minded that much. Like the sunshine, they had their own warmth, and I felt good just being around them.

Mrs. Hyatt had been glad to see us, and was more than glad to sell ducklings at a bargain price. Mother bought several more than she’d planned. In fact, there were more than enough for Sara’s family, too. And even though she moved stiffly, and looked brittle, as if she hadn’t quite thawed from the winter cold, Mrs. Hyatt lifted her side of the crate into the station wagon just as easily as Mama did.

“To grow on,” she said, and handed me an oatmeal cookie as big as my hand.

Grandma was old like Mrs. Hyatt, and she was constantly on the move from canasta game to hairdresser and to one apartment after another, but I was pretty sure she couldn’t lift a crateful of ducklings, and I had never seen her bake anything. Maybe Dad was just hoping Mama wouldn’t turn out like Grandma, and that was why he said she was more like Mrs. Hyatt.

During Spring Break, Sara had planned to visit her sisters in the city, but her parents were sure to be home. Mrs. Carson, definitely. In the wire fence along the lane, a few

white feathers stood out among the tumbleweeds. No living creature, not a dog or a goose, or ducks, chickens, or anything, came to greet our car. Daffodils and white narcissus bloomed in the yard, but the whole farm seemed particularly gray that day. The unpainted buildings blended in sadly with the empty, dry fields. A single dish towel hung from the clothesline and twisted in the wind.

“Poor Marie,” Mother said. “They’ve had more than their share since they bought this place.” She kept looking around, and shaking her head.

On the side porch, a bucket of dirty water rested by a still-wet scrub brush and a burlap bag of potatoes. Tiny white teethmarks spotted the dark skins of the potatoes, and the bag itself was well chewed. Getting as close to the kitchen door as possible, I peered in and knocked. A large pot had been set on the stove next to the tea kettle. A light burned over the table where I had once had tea. No one answered. I knocked again and again.

“Let’s try the other door, Christine,” Mother advised. She had not moved from near the station wagon, and continued to scan the windows of the house. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“She’s probably in the bathroom,” I suggested, and moved to the porch, walking past the darkened windows of the dining room, where Mrs. Carson often sewed. My knuckles were sore, but I tried again.

Mother called out, “Marie, it’s Jenna Beale. Are you home? Marie?”

Without Mrs. Carson, the house felt cold and hollow. Moving down the porch steps, I felt it watching me, waiting for me to leave, so I went all the way to the station wagon before I stopped.

“All right, we tried. Let’s take these babies home before they freeze,” Mother said, and slammed the car door behind her.

A brief movement caught my eye, and I looked up. There was Mrs. Carson, standing in the upstairs bedroom, looking out at me from behind the curtain. Her dark eyes were as cold as my black aggies. She didn't smile, or wave, but continued to stare as if I were some strange object she had never seen before. My mouth opened, but nothing came out. She had hypnotized me. Hairs on my neck and arms stood up, and with effort, I tore my eyes away from hers. I didn't look back. After I got in the car, I sat very still and looked only straight ahead.

"Don't be disappointed, Christine," Mother said, as we drove up the road. "They'll be home tomorrow. Or I could call her," she suggested, and reached out to touch my hair.

"Don't do that, please, Mama, don't ever call her, please," I pleaded. "Just don't, okay?"

Mother looked at me, pushing the hair out of my face and patting it into place. She glanced in the rear view mirror. "All right. But I thought this was what you wanted," she said finally.

All the way home, the ducklings murmured sleepily, and everything that had happened that day began to seem like a dream. For weeks, as I fell asleep, Mrs. Carson's eyes would come very close to me. I knew she was upstairs and I was on the ground with Mama, but I still woke up in darkness, sweating, and it was a long time before I could close my eyes and go to sleep again.

That Spring, Dad had been doing homework on the yellow table, right alongside me. After supper dishes had been cleared, thick, dark books and thin blue pamphlets would be brought out from a box he kept near the piano. Yellow lined tablets and several pencils

joined them. He would sit quietly, head bent, his hand in his hair, reading for several minutes, then suddenly leave his chair and pace angrily around the kitchen, muttering.

One night, this happened several times in succession, and I gave up my geography homework to watch Dad.

“Joe, your daughter’s trying to get her work done. Can’t you be still?” Mother said, coming in from the living room.

“No, I can’t,” he said. “You don’t know what I’m dealing with here, Jenna. All these,” he picked up the blue notebooks and shook them, “are new regulations. Everything’s changing. Now there are boards and committees. Certificates of use. They expect a man like me to understand all this.” He threw the pamphlets back on the table, and sat down, his hands between his legs. “Farmers have to be lawyers just to survive.”

“Wouldn’t Les help?”

“He’s been mighty cozy with the dairy farmers on the other side of town, and even some up here seem to have money to throw his way. I haven’t asked.”

“Is it that important?”

“Water board meeting in a few days. I don’t want to go in there like some sheep.”

“Then call someone. Why not Mother’s attorney? He’s a retired congressman. He’d know, wouldn’t he?”

“Wills and estates maybe. Not water rights. This stuff is brand-new.”

“Well, let me call Mother and see what she thinks.”

“Leave your mother out of this. We’ll manage.” Dad sat for several minutes and looked at the dark kitchen window. It was open a crack, and the sound of the creek drifted in with the cold air. Finally he said, “Have her ask him a couple of questions. Just a couple. I’ll write them down.” Then he brought the chair back smack up against his back, and bent down to work again.

The maps in my book were brown and green and blue. Some parts had mostly brown, like Africa's middle. Others were almost all gray and white, like the Poles. But the United States was a mixture of brown and green, with spots of blue everywhere. Oregon seemed to be divided: green on the ocean side, and brown on the mountain side. Where we lived, there was almost no blue at all. When the hawk flew, he saw our creek down below. These maps must have been made by something flying very, very high, almost up to the stars. It didn't even show cities or towns. It seemed what was important were the mountains, the forests and the lakes and rivers. Over and over again, no matter which map I looked at, it came down to the fact that all we had was plenty of mountains.

"Learning a lot about the world from that book?" Dad asked.

"I don't know. I like maps," I replied, carefully closing the book. "They're fun to draw and color. And I like the stories about people from other countries."

"How'd you like to learn something not in your book?"

"Joe," Mother threatened. "What are you thinking?"

"Do you good," Dad continued. "You can afford to miss one day of school."

"Okay," I said, thinking how school had been an uneasy experience lately anyway, what with me being somehow unable to talk to Sara, and her playing hula-hoop with Jeanine all the time. "Are we going on another camping trip?"

"You're not going anywhere," Mother said. "Except to school where you're supposed to."

"It's something we have to deal with," Dad said firmly, "and she's not going to learn about it unless she goes."

Five days later, I was dressed in my church coat and one of my best school dresses, and Dad was in his brown suit, and we were on our way to La Grande to the water board meeting. In one wing of the old brick courthouse building, there were doors and more doors leading to rooms. At the end of one long hallway, double doors were open, and a large meeting room stretched behind them. Walking down the aisle between two sets of chairs, we could tell we were none too early. Most of the chairs on one side, behind Les Busik's table, were filled. On the other side, several men in dark, shiny suits were talking quietly, heads together. There were plenty of seats on that side. Dad kept right on going until we had to stop because of the long rail and a little gate they kept closed. Then he turned at the first row of occupied seats, and stared at the men in them.

"We can sit over there," I suggested very quietly. "There's lots of chairs."

Dad didn't say a word, or move toward the other chairs. Men in stiff new jeans and heavy coats turned toward us. Only a couple of them were familiar, and most I had seen only at the post office, or the feed mill. Flatlanders, Dad called them. Dairy farmers mostly, but maybe one or two had orchards with the cherries and peaches that Mother often envied, soft, sweet fruit that our mountain winds frost-bit every time.

"Mr. Beale," said one.

Dad nodded, and moved back a row. Two seats on the end had appeared, as men resettled themselves. Brownie Miller sat next to Mr. Carson, whose stiff leg stuck out into the far aisle. The Porter brothers sat next to Brownie. All our neighbors except Leland Smith and Mr. Lambert, whose places weren't creekside, were there. I smiled at Mr. Carson and Brownie, but they were too busy looking at Dad to notice. Dad put his leather case down between his chair and mine.

Behind us were more farmers from upper High Valley, men who raised sheep on the steep rocky slopes above us, and several dryland cattle ranchers, who grazed their cattle

part-time on Forest Service land. The cattlemen looked worn down, as if the wind had stripped away any extra they ever had, and they were down to bones and leathery skin. Unlike the dairy farmers, they wore thin denim jackets and faded Levis, and I imagined horses tied up to the wrought iron courthouse fence, which afterward they would jump on and gallop away. On their knees, they caressed worn Stetsons, while the sheepmen held wool caps. A smell of the out-of-doors, pine maybe, and animals, drifted around them.

Two men came out of the door in the front of the room, and sat down at the long center table, facing us. For several minutes, they emptied their briefcases, arranged papers and talked quietly. Then, another man strode quickly down the aisle, opened the little gate, and joined them. He shook hands with both men, and then produced a gavel, rapped it on the table three times, and everyone grew quiet.

“Come to order,” he said. “Annual meeting Water Resources Board, Northeastern Oregon Region, will now come to order.”

Dad cleared his throat, and I was afraid he was about to speak out loud, but he just sat up a little straighter, and narrowed his eyes. Don’t want to miss anything, I could almost hear him say, so I paid close attention.

Soon, however, I was lulled almost to sleep by the unfamiliar words and businesslike tone of the three men, and I forgot to pay any attention at all. I began to count the plaster curlicues on the ceiling, and to watch the light turn different colors through the leaded pane windows. How many minutes I floated away, I wasn’t sure, but I was brought back to the room by the sound of little wheels being rolled over the tiles. A large bulletin board was brought from the side of the room and turned toward us. It held a map, a very large map, in black and white, with different colored ink markings. The curve of some of the

lines seemed quite familiar, and as I studied it, I began to think of our road, our creek and the shape of the mountains, until I was almost sure it was High Valley.

“Dad, that’s where we live,” I whispered.

“Shhhh,” Dad said.

“Under new business,” the man with the gavel said, “we’re to consider today two petitions regarding this sector,” and he pointed with a stick to a rectangle on the map, “which borders the Blue Mountain and Wallowa districts.”

The cattlemen behind us, who had been silent during the proceedings, now began a low hum of conversation, scraping their boots and shifting their chairs. I leaned against Dad to get a better view of them, and felt a muscle jumping in his arm.

“Petition number one asks for a diversion here,” the chairman indicated forked lines near the mountain range at the very top of the map, “which would reclaim a dry streambed as a viable channel for a portion of Upper Jonathan Creek, now flowing southwesterly from the source. Mr. Courtright, we have your application here. Can you come forward?”

The leanest and oldest of the cattlemen rose and went through the little gate to stand by Mr. Busik’s table. Mr. Busik stood up, and they shook hands.

“I’m serving as advisor to Mr. Courtright today, and will answer any questions the board might have,” Mr. Busik said.

The man with the gavel nodded, and replied, “Well, Mr. Courtright, you may as well have a seat, then.”

“Thanks all the same,” the cattleman said, “but I’ll stay where I am.”

Mr. Busik walked around his table, and stood in front of the three men on the board. He cleared his throat and began, “Gentlemen, I believe this petition is quite clear. Mr. Courtright is simply asking to re-establish a former fork of Jonathan Creek to its original

status as a minor tributary. It would not significantly reduce streamflow at that point, or at any point downstream. The main channel would simply be redirected slightly.”

The man on the far left, who seemed to have the most papers in front of him, replied, “My calculations, unfortunately, do not support your contention, Mr. Busik. Water conditions have deteriorated throughout this region, and we expect a major reduction in flow this year, and perhaps over the next five. Any further decrease in the main stream could be detrimental. What basis would you have for reducing this creek?”

Dad’s face began to redden, and he breathed a little faster.

“Mr. Courtright and the northern High Valley cattle and sheep ranchers are asking for this water to supplement inadequate ground water sources in their area. Water would be used exclusively for stock watering purposes,” Mr. Busik replied.

The second man continued, “Yes, Mr. Busik, I see that outlined on the permit application here, but that doesn’t satisfy the requirement. What precedent can you bring for disrupting the main flow of this creek at this time?”

“Water rights have existed for that tributary continuously, even though it has not been viable. Since the water rights have not been abandoned, we ask that the streamflow be reclaimed to fulfill them.”

The third man at the table laughed, and said, “Mr. Busik, I believe you have reversed the law’s intention. Natural streams support surface water rights, that’s true. In this case, there is no longer a natural stream. If the stream had been recreated by a flood or other natural means, this would be a different situation. But what you are asking for is to divert a portion of another natural stream into a man-made channel. And in order to divert it, you must have permission of both the land-holder, whose property would be disturbed, and the current owners of any and all water rights in that area. Your old water rights could not be considered in this case.”

“And why is that?” Mr. Busik looked puzzled.

The lawyer continued, “Because there has been no use. Water rights where there is no use for five years or more are null. You must re-apply. And, particularly in this case, where there is no stream occurring naturally on appurtenant land. This permit cannot establish a water district, Mr. Busik, and that is what you are really asking for.”

The man with the gavel intervened, “If you were to gain approval of the land’s owners, which seems to be the Forest Service, at least in part, that would give you one piece. The other piece you would need is permission from those vested holders. Prior appropriation is the rule. In other words, the oldest water rights held in the region would have to grant you permission to withdraw so many gallons of water per acre per year. That might be controllable with a sluice-gate, but you would have to be concerned about reducing streamflow for those on the main creek, especially during a drought year.”

Mr. Busik turned slowly and looked at Dad, then he turned around again and said to the first man, “May we continue this petition until a later date? After we’ve discussed this with the water rights’ owner?”

“You may have to wait some time,” the chairman replied. “Water board reviews these cases by district. We have many more cases in other districts. I’ll grant a brief recess, and you and Mr. Courtright can come to a decision.” He brought the gavel down once. “Fifteen minute recess,” he said.

As everyone rose to leave, Mr. Courtright turned to Busik and said, “What happened?”

“Nothing yet, but nothing may. We should have done a little more homework on this, Ted. Water board changes in the last four years have been major. I think we’ve been caught in some of their technical language. That little creek isn’t a creek any more, so

making it one again makes it a ditch. That's about the size of it, I'm afraid. Continuance might be the best bet. Unless..." Mr. Busik looked at Dad again.

Dad snapped open his leather case and slowly brought out a manila envelope with lots of stamps on it. I recognized it as one we'd picked up at the post office the day before. He began pulling long pages out. Then he shut the case, and held the papers in front of him, with the letterhead out. Mr. Busik looked at the papers, and then he took Mr. Courtright's arm and they went down the aisle together.

After investigating the marble counters in the woman's restroom, I went outside to join Dad, just as he'd told me. First I wandered the lawns, checking the iron fences for horses, and looked at all the different cars and trucks parked in the lot. Dad stood by a concrete pillar and rolled a smoke. Mr. Busik and Mr. Courtright and some of the other ranchers walked the angled sidewalk up and down, talking. Finally, they stopped in a knot, gesturing and talking louder, until Mr. Busik shook his head several times. They all looked in our direction. Mr. Courtright said something sharply, and Mr. Busik nodded. He started toward Dad.

"Joe," he said, "got a minute?"

They moved to the other side of the pillar, and although I knew I could creep up quietly and listen, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Mr. Courtright looked so angry, and all the other cattlemen so worried, that whatever Mr. Busik had to say to Dad would come out soon enough. When Mr. Busik reappeared, his shoulders were slumped and he walked toward the group of men with his head down. A few feet away, he raised his head and spread his arms wide. Mr. Courtright kicked some grass and then beat dust from his jeans with his Stetson for a few seconds before he and Mr. Busik led the group back inside.

Dad's cigarette butt arced down the steps and landed near the edge of the sidewalk, and he clicked down after it. His hat was cocked and he swung his case a couple of times while he ground the butt into the ground.

"Better go back inside soon, I suppose," he said.

"What did Mr. Busik say?" I asked

"Never mind," Dad said. "Just remember that it pays to take care of what takes care of you, that's all."

"What?"

"You'll see." He squatted down, like he used to do when I was younger and he wanted to tell me something important. Instead, he opened his mouth to begin a couple of times, and closed it without saying anything. Finally he said, "Don't try to understand it all now, it'll come together."

"Okay, Dad," I said. His hand on mine was damp, and he smelled like wet wool. There were even little beads of moisture on his forehead. The air was cool, and in my coat, I was just comfortable. Dad, however, seemed to have worked up a sweat just talking to Mr. Busik.

Back inside the room, seats had emptied. Most dairymen had gone, and the men in the dark shiny suits were packing up. Only the three board members and the High Valley people remained. I looked for our former seats. Although there were plenty, everyone seemed to have filled the aisle seats first. Mr. Carson now sat kind of crosswise in Dad's chair, his stiff left leg stuck partially into the main aisle. The front row, however, was completely empty. Little bits of straw and a patch of dried manure on the floor signified that those chairs had been full just a few moments earlier. The dairy farmers who remained had joined the cattlemen. All six chairs directly behind the rail waited for us. Dad waved me in, and I moved down several places, and toward the middle. He stopped

at the first one, however, and sat down, putting his briefcase on the seat next to him and opening it.

“Let’s resume,” said the man in the center, tapping the table twice with the gavel, “we have a long drive in front of us. Come to order, gentlemen,” he nodded toward me, “and lady.”

Mr. Busik came up the aisle, and took his seat at the table in front of us.

“Your decision?” the chairman asked him.

“We have no choice at this point but to ask for a continuance. One question before we move on?”

“Ask away,” the chairman said.

“I have asked the State Engineer’s office by phone to forward records of streamflow for that tributary in the past, for more normal water years. This may take some time. May I make my continuance contingent upon receipt of those findings?”

The chairman considered this for a moment, then turned to the lawyer and they talked quietly for a few seconds.

“Mr. Courtright’s application will remain open and no hearing will be scheduled,” the chairman replied, “but there is no guarantee that this information will change anything.” He looked out over the crowd. Then he turned to the man with all the papers in front of him, and said, “Go ahead, Jim.”

“Second application before us today brought by Ron Carson, lower Jonathan Creek watershed,” Jim said. “Mr. Carson, would you join us, please?”

Mr. Carson came forward, his leg dragging a little. In his good right hand, he carried a blue folder of papers. He reached for the latched gate with his curled left hand, and began shaking it a little and fumbling around. Before I knew it, I was up and moving,

ready to open it quick, so nobody would notice. But by the time I got to the end of the aisle, Dad's legs stopped me.

"Leave him be," he muttered.

I sat down quickly, so quickly that Dad's briefcase hit the floor with a crash, spilling some of his carefully organized papers onto the ground. Only a little manure got on them, and maybe one piece of straw, and even though I dusted them off really carefully, Dad was disgusted. His face was red again. By the time I looked up, Mr. Carson had negotiated the gate, and was standing in front of the three men, smiling to himself.

"Are we ready now?" the man with the gavel asked. "Mr. Carson? Mr. Busik?" He waited for their nods. "Mr. Beale?" Dad nodded one short nod.

"Mr. Carson, although on the face of it, your application seems quite similar to Mr. Courtright's, in that you're also asking for a diversion, there are other circumstances involved," the man called Jim said.

Mr. Busik stood next to Mr. Carson and intervened, "Mr. Carson is simply asking for a slight variance of the beneficial use statute. Stock watering is described in this statute as an important public right as regards surface water, along with watering gardens and domestic use. Mr. Carson's stock, however, varies from the norm. He's asking for water enough to support both their drinking needs and their need for living conditions appropriate to their kind. His ducks and geese need to swim, and conditions on Jonathan Creek are not conducive to their survival year-round. Therefore, he needs to construct a pond. He is asking for a diversion of a very minor amount per acre, enough to support his small flocks year-round."

"Once again," Jim continued, "we must take into consideration the present conditions. We are talking about very low water years here. Normal use, even protected use like stock watering, must respect the streamflow. Drought conditions will be in place for

some time, and indications are that this region's recovery may take five years or more. We may see creeks this size dry up completely." He paused, and looked around the room, avoiding Mr. Busik and Mr. Carson. "Given the evaporation rate of a pond this size, it's difficult to recommend it." He pulled a series of graphs and charts from his stack of paperwork, and said to the chairman, "I can explain this in more detail if necessary."

Jonathan Creek would never dry up. At the source, water ran out of the rocks, and came from mountains that were as old as the stars. How could that just disappear?

Mr. Busik spoke up quickly, "We realize water is scarce, and it needs to be used carefully. If you'll notice the drawings I supplied today contain a much smaller pond, and covered conduits. Mr. Carson is willing to do all he can to safeguard Jonathan Creek. But his stock is his livelihood, just as cattle and sheep are to everyone else here. A pond is the only way he can provide for them adequately."

Dad squirmed briefly on his chair, and looked at some of the papers he was still holding. Mr. Carson had gone pale, and the left side of his body trembled ever so slightly, not so anyone behind us would see, but enough that I could see him fighting not to shake or fall, not to seem like a man with one good side and one bad. My idea, the pond, their pond. Surely it wouldn't take that much water. A hot summer day, and all kinds of geese and ducks swimming on the cool, still water. Cattails at the edge, and frogs to catch, and Mrs. Carson with a picnic basket. Sara running with me, both of us laughing. I tugged on Dad's coat. He brushed my hand away. I tried again, pulling at the loose fabric above his elbow.

Then the lawyer on the board said, "This is a new use. But a new use permit can be granted, even under not so favorable conditions, if water usage in the region remains stable." He looked at Mr. Carson for several seconds. "Your situation, Mr. Carson, is this: You have purchased a farm with lapsed water rights, and therefore, have had to

reapply. Like Mr. Courtright's case, the lack of use is equivalent to abandoning the rights, regardless of the circumstances which caused that discontinuation. Therefore, the water rights you have just acquired entitle you to last usage, that is, unless Mr. Courtright must also reapply. In either instance, your concern has to be the major user in the canyon, or the person of longest prior appropriation. If that person would grant you a water allotment to the extent of your pond, including seepage loss and evaporation, your application could be approved. Although you would use that water for a new purpose, your pond would not decrease the amount available overall."

Mr. Carson looked at Mr. Busik, then at the water board lawyer again. "Grant me? You're telling me that this board here can't allot me the water!"

Mr. Busik put his hand on Mr. Carson's weak left arm, "Let me handle this, Ron." He brought a chair from the other table. "Sit down." Then he took the folder from Mr. Carson's other hand, and laid it on the table. "Get those papers organized for me, would you? I'm likely to need them."

They looked at each other for a few seconds. All the men on the board were watching Mr. Carson, too, and they wore concerned expressions on their faces, concerned but also impatient, like teachers waiting for a particularly difficult student to finish. Finally, Mr. Carson moved to the chair and sat down heavily. "Then handle it," he said.

The board lawyer looked right at us, and said, "Mr. Beale, I believe you might as well join us, too."

Dad stood up, and stayed behind the railing.

The chairman added, "Come right on up, Mr. Beale, where we can hear you nice and clear."

I felt cold and alone after Dad went through the gate and stood in front of the long table. Even though he had only walked a few feet away and been gone only a few seconds, already he seemed like a stranger.

“Mr. Carson, Mr. Busik, I believe we can get to the source of this application today, if you’re willing,” the chairman said.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Mr. Carson said, moving his chair as far from Dad as he could. He looked smaller now that Dad was standing by him, and seemed to strain to look up all the time. “Go on ahead,” he said.

Mr. Busik began, “Mr. Chairman, perhaps this might be more appropriately handled in private?”

“No need,” Mr. Carson said, “just get on with it.”

Dad had said it would all come together, and if I missed anything, it might not. I felt as if I were floating on that bench all by myself, but I listened as carefully as I ever had.

Mr. Busik shook his head slowly, and glanced at Dad, who didn’t look back. The chairman caught his eye, and Mr. Busik sighed, then nodded.

“We seem to be in some agreement, then,” the chairman said. “Mr. Beale, this is your bailiwick, I’d say. Have you heard the proceedings so far?”

“Yes, sir, every word,” Dad said clearly.

He looked very sturdy and strong up there, and his brown suit snugged up his shoulders. It looked just as comfortable on him as the black or blue suits did on the other men. I couldn’t remember ever seeing Dad in anything he didn’t look right in. He took over the clothes the minute he put them on. My chest tightened, knowing everyone else was watching him, too.

The water board chairman explained, “In mediating a case such as this, the Water Board cannot take sides, but only interpret laws and regulations. Our only purpose in

bringing these gentlemen together today is to resolve this important water usage issue before the critical irrigation season. Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded again. Mr. Busick pulled at his ear, and looked at Mr. Carson, who was sitting up much straighter now. I could see the muscles in Mr. Carson's good leg tensing up. He seemed ready to bolt out of his chair any moment. Dad's hands rested loosely at his side. He looked down occasionally at his briefcase, but otherwise, he could have been standing in the kitchen doorway, talking to Mother.

"Mr. Beale, since the water rights on your property vested before 1901, and were continuously maintained, you are entitled to use water in circumstances that most other High Valley residents cannot," the board lawyer began. "During drought conditions, however, everyone must conserve, and beneficial uses must come first. Mr. Busick's argument is a valid one, that Mr. Carson is simply asking for water for stock. His application can be approved, if you could see your way clear to grant --"

"I know what you're asking," Dad interrupted. "You're asking me not to use a creek that my family has lived on for generations. I have a right to that water." He stopped for a second, then said, "Proof is right here," and pointed to his briefcase.

"We're not asking you to stop irrigating completely, we're only asking for a decrease in your usage," the lawyer argued.

"Obviously, you know nothing about this area," Dad replied, "because when there's a drought, there's not much to go around. Not knowing how much we'll lose anyway, I can't afford to give it away. Especially for something like this."

Mr. Busick finally spoke up. "Water in the state of Oregon is publicly owned. Even the fact that four years ago, the legislature established a board, and you gentlemen from different counties were appointed to it, shows how important the regulation of water is

for all people in the state. No one person should determine water usage. The good of the entire canyon should be taken into consideration in this instance.”

The chairman sighed. “What you say, Mr. Busik, is all well and good, but as we’ve said before, the rule of law is prior appropriation. Oldest water rights, last to be shut off. Newest water rights, first to be shut off. Mr. Beale cannot be forced to grant water to Mr. Carson that is rightfully his by law.”

To grant water. Like granting wishes. I thought of the fairy tale book Mother read from, the one with the Red Shoes and the Six Swans, and how wishes were granted in those stories. Only someone very powerful, like a king or a sorcerer could make wishes come true. Dad wasn’t like that. And the one who had wished first had to go through darkness and trials. Mrs. Carson’s eyes came into my mind. I shivered. And there was Mr. Carson, his face white, struggling to stand. Grant it, I silently asked Dad, grant it!

“This can’t be right,” Mr. Carson said, as he gained his feet. “This just can’t be the way the law works. I’ve got every cent I ever earned tied up in that place. It’s worthless without water. Worthless!” He looked at Dad.

“That place of yours was worthless all along, water or no water,” Dad said. “Should have known that from the start.” He paused, looked at Mr. Carson’s crooked stance, and began to walk away, then he turned slowly and said, “You’re not cut out to be a farmer. Especially in a place like High Valley. Takes experience, and know-how. Take my advice, Carson, and pull out while you can.”

“Not as long as I can stand,” Mr. Carson said

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” the chairman said, “let’s not get personal. Obviously, Mr. Beale has made his decision.”

Dad turned to Mr. Busik, “And you, Les. I would’ve thought you’d do better by me. All those years you worked for my father don’t count for much, do they?” He approached

the gate, and without waiting for the chairman to give his permission, clicked it open and stood at the end of the aisle, with one hand extended to me.

The moment I looked into his face, I knew I had to just take his hand and walk on out of there with him. Mama had only hurt Dad's feelings a couple of times that I'd ever seen, and the blotches on his cheeks now and the hard flinty sheen to his eyes were just the same as those times. I took his hand, and he squeezed my fingers for a second. Then we walked out, with everyone looking at us, maybe hating us more than ever.

From behind us, the chairman said, "That's it then, Mr. Carson. I'm afraid your application is denied. Meeting adjourned."

The gavel fell with one sharp knock that echoed off the walls of the room, and lodged somewhere near my heart. I kept looking straight at Dad and walked alongside him, my hand holding his, just as if nothing had happened.

For two years, Mother had not ridden her mare. Dad had exercised Sassy by driving her in large circles while holding a long lead, or occasionally he rode her gently around one of the fields. That Spring, Mother rode Sassy every day. Weekend or weekday, once her housework was done, she headed out the door and didn't return until the afternoon shadows lengthened. Dad's lunch was kept under a plate in the refrigerator, and often he had the same sandwich I found wrapped in wax paper in my school lunch pail: cheese and pickles or perhaps leftover roast beef and mustard. On the weekends, the refrigerator held both our lunchtime meals.

Dad had changed, too, but in another way. The day after the board meeting, I came up behind him in the barnyard, and caught him just standing there, looking down at the creek. After that, he didn't seem with us much of the time. Whenever I could, I trailed

behind him. Several times, he turned around, grinned a little, and then went back to digging post-holes or mending panels on the fence.

“Me and my shadow,” he had said last Saturday. “Go on, now.”

Come lunchtime, however, he had grinned again, glad to see me. Our lunches had become like our meals up at the source, just the two of us, surrounded by silence. I no longer asked to be taken to Sara’s. Dad sat and watched the creek out the kitchen window, his sandwich still on his plate, uneaten. His eyes had a faraway look, and were always troubled.

Every year, near the end of school, there was a play day in the sports fields for the boys and their fathers, and a tea for us girls and our moms. For some families, this meant both parents got to come to school and be with their children. Dad always checked the school calendar at the beginning of May, and made sure he had a project scheduled for that day. That year, I thought maybe it would be different. I hoped he would stay, tell me it didn’t matter. But his truck was gone when I got up, even though the sky was barely light.

Mother peered out of the kitchen and said, “He’s working on phone lines, up the canyon. Building rock jacks so the cattle won’t loosen the cables.” She was dressed in levis and boots, and dried a dish as she spoke.

Mama could dress like a man, but that didn’t make her one. Something I could never change would always break down whatever Dad and I built, no matter how hard I tried not to let it. All it needed was a reminder, like the Mothers’ Tea.

“You’re not going riding are you?” I asked. “Not today?”

She smiled, “I was thinking about it.”

She didn't care either. Off to ride, and there I'd be, the only one without a mother or a father. "Mother, don't you remember what today is?" I asked.

"Two days until school's out?"

"Quit it!"

"You think I could forget? And you reminding me every night for the past two weeks? I'll be glad when they find something else for you girls to do." She looked at me, stopped drying for a second, and said, "Don't worry, I'll be there. On time."

In Mother's bedroom, I removed her nail buffer from the clutter of items on her mirror, and after scrubbing my nails for several minutes, buffed them until they were pink and shiny. Perfect.

I missed four spelling words that morning, and Mrs. Schroder had to speak to me twice about daydreaming, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the windows. Although I liked being in Mrs. S's class, I missed Sara. I even missed Jeanine and Kelley. There were many more boys in this semester's split class, all better at math than the girls had been, and I had to work much harder to keep up. Being accelerated wasn't good for anything, far as I could tell. Except for the science projects. I looked at the long table up front, where my cardboard and toothpick bridge still had its blue ribbon on front. That had been fun.

That day, I couldn't have kept my mind on bridges or anything else. I should have torn up the flyer for the tea, and hidden the school calendar. My stomach began to hurt as it had not for months, and the clock moved on slowly, and ever more slowly, hardly ticking all afternoon. Finally, it was time. The boys streamed out of the doors, into the warm sunshine, yelling at one another as they raced toward the fields. All the girls headed

to the cafeteria. Getting the long tables carefully lined up at the front of the room, and the paper tablecloths on, took us quite some time, and the pains in my stomach slowly subsided. Across the way, other girls were setting up chairs in the large circle, lining the wall of the room. Skits and other entertainment would occupy the center. As usual, I would serve cookies, since I had no talent I could share, as well as having a reputation for being careless with punch.

During the winter, Sara's hair had darkened to almost black, like her mother's, and her untanned skin was pale. As she picked up a chair and carefully sat it down exactly where it should be, she could have stepped out of Junior Miss magazine, with her very grown-up sheath dress topped by a short jacket and her straight brown hair held back by a ribbon. She wasn't going to look like Mrs. Carson, however. You could already tell.

"You look wonderful," I said, coming over to her side of the room.

"It's from Elaine," she replied, picking at the fabric of her narrow skirt.

As she and I put the centerpieces, little milk cartons covered with paper and filled with ribbon flowers, onto the tables, I couldn't think of anything else to say. Even dressed like her mother, Sara still looked like her father, or as I imagined her father might have looked if he were straight and strong, and young again. All these long tables, just like the water board hearing. The gavel sounded in my memory, and I could only listen as Sara talked.

Conversations swelled in the hallways outside, and the tapping of high heels accompanied by laughter announced the arrival of groups of mothers. We had to hurry to finish.

Mrs. Carson came in with Kelley and Jeanine's mothers amid a larger group. She wore a navy blue suit with white piping, and had startlingly white gloves. Sara ran to her, and pinned a pink carnation to her lapel. In my pocket, I felt the construction paper name-

tag I had intended for Mother. Maybe I could steal a bright red ribbon flower from one table. No one would notice.

With one arm around Sara, Mrs. Carson gazed at me from across the room. She might have moved her fingers briefly in greeting, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe she hadn't waved. She wasn't smiling, that I was sure of. Maybe she would never smile, but just stare at me all afternoon. Stare and stare, until . . . I felt a shiver beginning near the roots of my hair, and shook myself a little. Leah and Kay giggled behind me.

"Fleas?" Leah asked. "Or is it bedbugs?"

Kay giggled uncontrollably at that, and I had to glare at both of them before they moved away, bumping their violin cases against one another as they leaned and laughed.

Most of the mothers had arrived, and the reception line at the door was thinning as they took their seats. The hallway was empty, and the clock said five minutes 'til. She would be late, if she came at all. The other girls were beginning to get into line, and I had to hurry back across the room to pick up my platter of cookies. Then the doors were closed.

Everything was ready, and as if we were all backstage where no one could see us yet, we all stood at attention while Mrs. Nolan moved from girl to girl, inspecting. Jeanine and Kelley, at the punch bowl, were whispering together, looking at me, I thought, and Mrs. Nolan hissed at them, "Stop that." They stood quietly then, their faces to the front, but their eyes still followed me.

The doors opened, bang, then one shut, bang again, and Mrs. Nolan snapped around, ready to discipline whoever had interrupted the proceedings. It was Mother. She swayed in front of the doors, her long skirt still swirling, and one of her hands held behind her, keeping the other door from slamming as well. She was breathing fast, and her white lace blouse had slipped down, almost baring one shoulder. Her auburn hair

was piled on top her head, and one long curl trailed down her neck. Her lips curved into a smile that would be laughter any second. In fact, she looked like the whole outdoors: the sun, flowers, breezes, everything, just like when she galloped in on Sassy, and came to a stop right in front of you, her cheeks flushed and her eyes lit from inside. Giggles began to bubble in my throat. At that moment, she made me just want to laugh out loud. Then Mama waved, and walked to the nearest empty chair, with all eyes on her. Since my hands were occupied with balancing the cookie platter, I smiled until my face ached. Now the room had come alive. My gorgeous mother!

“All right, girls,” Mrs. Nolan said, “You may begin.”

Tea carts were pushed forward, and girls hurried here and there with napkins and paper plates. Most of the mothers remained seated, and were waited on by their daughters. I wanted to run to mine, too, and bring her anything she wanted, the world if she'd asked for it, but I was stuck with a tray of cookies, and with serving them to half a circle of other mothers first. And I had to get past Mrs. Carson.

I lowered the platter carefully in front of each woman, but my eyes stayed on Mrs. Carson. Her hair was tucked under, every dark strand smooth and motionless. Her suit was pressed, and not a single wrinkle broke the even surface of her skirt. Even her shoes were perfect, navy and white spectators, matching her suit exactly. She sat quietly, shoes together, and drank her tea.

Mother couldn't seem to sit still. She talked to the new mother next to her, tilting her head politely, but, as soon as they were done, she was up, walking around, looking at the ribbon roses, and the centerpieces. Finally, she began strolling from window to window, sipping her punch and gazing outside. The sunshine, streaming in the long windows, made it obvious that she wasn't wearing hose or a slip. Her legs were completely outlined through the thin paisley fabric. Kelley and Jeanine stared, and then

heads together, began whispering. I was sure they were discussing the slip, or maybe they'd noticed how her breasts pushed out of her blouse and the V of freckles that led down between them.

"Christine!" Mrs. Nolan said, her hand under my elbow, righting the platter, "Do be careful with the cookies, please." She smiled at the mothers, then whispered, "If you can't do even this little thing right, maybe you should just sit down."

No, I wouldn't. This was simple, and I could do it, as well as anyone in that room could. Mother would be proud of me that day, just as I was proud of her.

Violin music flowed over us as Leah and Kay began to play.

"I'll be very careful, Mrs. Nolan," I said and grinned all around.

A scene was the last thing Mrs. Nolan wanted, and let me go. I smiled invitingly at each mother, and lowered the platter to exactly the right level, and walked slowly from one to the next, timing my steps to the music. I was pleased when each woman took at least a single cookie. There were only a few left.

When I offered the plate of shortbread to Mrs. Carson, however, she looked at my hands as if they were dirty, and shook her head.

"They're clean, honest," I said and smiled. She looked into the air above my head. "Mrs. Carson?" Was she listening to the music?

She pressed her lips together and shook her head again.

"They're not as good as yours." I said very quietly and moved a little closer. "But won't you take one? For me?"

The sound of the violins dipped and rose, together, then apart. At first it had been cheerful; now it was quite sad. Like the wind, it was mourning something, something in the dark. I couldn't breathe very well.

She finally said, "I don't care for any, Christine." And then she turned her eyes on me. For a second, a fleeting second, the dark strangeness that had haunted me for weeks returned full force. The cafeteria and all its cheerful decorations disappeared. Mother receded into the distance, and I was sure, couldn't reach me. Nothing seemed real except those cold eyes. Time meant nothing.

Ice on the creek often looked thick and safe, and although you might study it for a long time from shore, it could fool you, breaking the instant you stepped out on it. You would freeze in those icy waters. How could you ever know where the ice was thin? Maybe she had simply looked at me and nothing had happened. I had imagined it. I moved sideways cautiously, one baby step at a time, until I was in front of the next chair, and even though my heart was still pounding and the shadows lingered, I served cookies to that mother who was next in line, while the music wound round and round.

Later, when I had the chance, I bumped into Jeanine, and watched as dark red punch spilled on her pale yellow dress.

"Shut up," I said, "just shut up."

Sara watched me from across the room, frowning, then came to help Jeanine press paper napkins against her stained dress.

Jeanine, her face red and blotched, said, "My dad says your mother's a real handful. Maybe that's why your father's so mean." She threw a handful of wet, red napkins near my shoes. "You're just like him!"

Then Mrs. Nolan hustled Jeanine toward the bathroom, and Sara and I were alone.

"It wasn't --" I began.

"Your mother's looking for you," Sara said, motioning across the room.

"They were the ones being mean," I said.

"Just go, why don't you?" Sara replied.

We were almost out the door when Mother said, "Wait, Chris, I want to say hello to Marie. I haven't seen her for months." She turned back, and walked toward a group that included Jeanine and Kelley's mothers as well as Mrs. Carson. They scattered as Mother approached, until only Mrs. Carson was left. Mama had no idea what was waiting for her, and I just let her go.

I heard her talking quietly for a few seconds, and then Mrs. Carson replied, her voice growing louder, and louder. "What did you expect? Thanks?" she asked.

"Marie, I know you're having a rough time, and I'd still like to help," Mother said, putting her hand on her arm.

"We have nothing to talk about, Mrs. Beale," Mrs. Carson said, pulling away. "If you wanted to help, you would have done it before now."

"We're neighbors," Mother insisted, "and I want you to call me if you need anything."

"What we needed was a fair chance," Mrs. Carson said, taking her purse from Sara. "You've never given us that. People like you don't have neighbors." She slipped her arm through the purse handle, looked briefly at me, then took Sara's hand.

"We can try," Mother replied, folding her arms across her chest. "Think about this, Marie, because we can still be friends." She rubbed her arms as if a cold draft had hit her.

Mrs. Carson raised her chin, and pulled Sara forward with her. They walked to the doorway, where several pairs of mothers and daughters were waiting for them. Sara didn't even say good-bye.

That was the last time I would see Mrs. Carson for some time. But it didn't matter, because she was with me wherever I was. All I had to do was close my eyes.

Drought

Across High Valley's hills, June grass had turned purple in waves and then, just as quickly, it turned brown in the summer sun. By mid-June, the mountain slopes and their canyons were brown, gray and tan. Wild roses along the fence drooped in the heat, and for the first time I could remember, the ancient bushes had only a few pink blooms. I began to miss color, not only their pink, but other colors, too, like purple, red and green. Except for blue. Blue was always above us. Our short Spring had been gobbled up by a ferocious heat wave that left us with clear skies day after day. The entire dry country longed for coolness, and a day without wind. And rain. I dreamed about rain, thought I smelled it or heard it tapping on our roof.

By late June, temperatures felt more like August, and during our drives to town, we saw dust rising from hay fields, fields that just a few weeks ago had been a patchwork of green. In town, gardens were wilted by mid-morning, and pocked by gopher holes. A small ground squirrel had been perched in Mrs. Edvalson's window box in the middle of the day, and as I watched, a petunia disappeared into its mouth.

Mother had finally planted a garden, but it was nothing like her gardens the past two years. A few rows of our favorites, and none of the hated parsnips or kohlrabi.

"It's just not worth it this year," she had said, as she crossed out row after row on her garden plan. "We can't carry water to every plant. We'll plant just what we need, and if it doesn't survive, well . . ." she had smiled grimly, "we'll just have to live off our pantry."

Dad had dismantled the tower sprinkler in the center of the garden to save it from heat and wind damage, and its long pipe lay next to the fence. Instead, we had what he called a soaker system: old garden hose punctured by a nail along both sides, and positioned

carefully alongside each plant. Then he set the alarm for 3 a.m. and turned on the water. “Less evaporation,” he’d explained.

When I heard him in the soft darkness, I’d always listen for the water music from the field sprinklers to begin. That summer, I was often disappointed, as Dad only ran them two or three times a week. The soaker hoses dripped into the soil efficiently, but the sprinklers made such a lovely sound.

Our hay had grown quickly, and already lay in heaped yellow rows around the field, cut and raked. The haying crew was still miles away, working near John Day, when Dad hooked up the baler one morning. All week he’d been cleaning and oiling it, checking the tires on the tractor, and unloading boxes of brown twine. The day before, I’d practiced for an hour with a hay hook, snagging bales. I still couldn’t lift one by myself, but I could with a little help. I was ready to try.

“Want me to ride lookout?” I asked as Dad struggled with the bale chute. I quickly crawled underneath, and pushed the red metal box up as far as I could. It was hot enough to hurt, but I held on. Finally the two pieces met, and Dad stopped for a second to wipe his forehead and neck.

“Nope,” he finally said. “Guys are on their way.”

“Dad, hay’s ready.” The grass had dried in a day, and now was in danger of becoming tinder instead of feed. “It’ll be a week or more if we wait for them.”

“Bale today and tomorrow, they’ll haul for a couple days after that.”

“They’re over the mountain.”

“And,” he said, somewhat impatiently, “they’ll be here Sunday night.” He checked the twine threading and jerked it taut. “They’ll probably be plenty hungry when they get here, too,” he commented over his shoulder.

They always were. And Mother always had more than enough for them to eat. But why was Dad telling me this?

I soon found out. Mother had been cooking for haying and harvest crews for years, but I had never done more than keep her company, and entertain the men with my chatter. From the outside, there had been the comforting picture of Mother in a gingham apron serving cold lemonade to a group of contented men. I quickly learned what it was like from the inside.

When the crew arrived, windburned and sweaty, Mother had a picnic supper spread on tables under the willows, where it was cool. I remembered only one of the men, Sully, with his fuzzy sideburns and freckled face and hands. He had been with us for years. Some of the others had been to our farm maybe once before, and for others, it was their first time. As they washed up at the outdoor basin, I heard them talking.

“Nice layout,” one of them said.

“Four fields hay, two of grain,” Sully replied.

“Must be a thousand feet of pipe in one of those stacks,” said another.

“We moving it?” a young voice asked.

“Not unless we’re asked,” Sully replied, “and work is work, you all. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Do tell, Sully,” the first one replied. “Which one are you?”

“Nobody here but us chickens,” said the other one, squawking and splashing.

“Let’s get at that grub,” the young one said. “I smelled chicken frying when we drove up.”

As they headed down to the tables, I heard Dad come up and say to Sully, "Glad you guys were able to head over this way so soon."

"That's okay, Mr. Beale," Sully said. "Good to be back."

"Must have finished in John Day a little early this year," Dad said.

"Not much choice," another man commented. "Hay's pretty sparse."

"Yeah," the younger man added, "we're doing more driving than working."

Sully intervened, "We're ready to get at it first thing in the morning, Mr. Beale. You tell us when."

"Well," Dad said, "it'll be good to get that hay off the ground."

"Worried about rain, are you?" said the one who had squawked earlier.

The other men laughed.

"No," Dad said, his voice tightening, "I'm not worried much about rain."

The next morning, Mother woke me before dawn. The kitchen was still cool, and the linoleum felt good to my bare feet. In the starlight, I saw two coyotes drinking from the creek behind the house, near the willows where we'd picnicked the night before. At the sound of the window opening, they turned and trotted up the creek together. The air was fresh and still. I could hear the trickle of the creek. Why hadn't Mother hired a girl from town like she usually did? Then I could spend my days outdoors with Dad, like I had last year.

In the kitchen behind me, Mother was anything but still. She slammed cupboard doors, flipped pastry cloths onto the counter and buttered pans. Then, as if she suddenly remembered I was there, she slipped an apron over my head, and tied it in front.

"Fill this with flour," she instructed, handing me a canister.

I stood there for several seconds, and watched her work. The apron was old and faded, and its strings cut into my stomach. Untying the knot, I fingered the ties for a second.

“Christine,” Mother said, stopping completely. “I can’t do this alone.” She indicated the counters and the table full of canned fruit, milk and eggs. “I need you.” For several seconds, she simply gazed at me, and her green eyes were clear and direct. “Okay?” she finally asked.

“Okay,” I said, and tied the apron strings.

While Dad and the hands slept, we baked biscuits and rolls, apple pie and burnt sugar cake, cornbread and raspberry cobbler. Until first light, we mixed and stirred and rolled out, then put pans in the oven and took them out again. My back ached and I yawned and yawned, but eventually I began to watch Mother and learn.

After baking, came breakfast. Coffee we made in a half-gallon pot, with eggshells crushed and thrown on the bottom. Potatoes and onions were peeled, chopped and fried. Three kinds of jam on the table. A huge pitcher of milk. Butter and cream. Eggs in the pan, a dozen at a time. Ham on the griddle. By then, I was so tired, I moved in a daze from kitchen to dining room again and again, my hands full of steaming bowls and heavy platters. The men’s talk that morning rumbled in my ears; their streams of words combined into one murmur. Biscuits were reached for, buttered and gone. Plates emptied. Chairs scraped back, and the crew headed for the fields.

“Thank you, ma’am,” they said on their way out.

“Thanks, little miss,” said Sully. “Fine way to start the day.”

Dad came down for his breakfast after the men had gone. He only stayed a minute, long enough to put an arm around Mother, grab a bacon sandwich and mess up my hair as he left. Soon as he appeared on the path, men put out their cigarettes, and piled into the vehicles.

After seeing them off, we turned back to a dining room full of dirty dishes, and a kitchen littered with greasy pots and pans. Flour clouded the air, and the smell of bacon lingered. My stomach growled. Mother pulled two chairs up to the table, and got out two plates, silverware and two cups. She poured milk and coffee in the cups, then put biscuits, bacon and one cold egg on each plate. My mother must have eaten cold eggs all her life. That was my first one. I had a little trouble getting it down, and it seemed a poor reward for all our work that morning.

Mother ate with her head on her hand, taking a sip of coffee with every other bite. “We’ll get used to it,” she said. “Did you see old Sully?”

I shook my head.

“Always keeps a cough drop in his mouth. I don’t think he tastes a thing.” She laughed a little, then lit a cigarette. “That kid sure ate, though.”

“Where do they live?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The crew. Do they live anywhere?”

“I suppose they do. Somewhere.”

“Maybe they just travel around all the time. Like Grandma.”

“Grandma?” She laughed again. “She doesn’t travel, she just moves.”

“I’d like to do that.” Like the sun, move east to west, and start again the next day. I’d like to see the sun go down in the sea, like that picture in National Geographic. “That’s

what I'm going to do," I said. "Travel all over, and live in different places." I finished the last bite of biscuit, and let my head fall onto my arm. My eyes began to close.

"Don't let your dad hear you say that," Mother might have said as I moved off into sleep.

I woke up on the couch in the living room, my hair plastered to my head and neck, and my clothing damp. Harsh sunlight streamed through the large windows, and the room was hot. My mouth tasted like old metal and dust. Water ran in the kitchen, and Mother was banging pots together again. A haze had settled over the house, inside and out. Dust was everywhere. Road dust billowed each time a car drove by, and farms on either side of us had clouds of dust rising like smoke from a forest fire. The air smelled dry and empty, like the inside of an old bone.

Quietly, I pulled on my shoes, and headed downstairs, through the basement door, and buried my face in the coolness of the mint growing in the shade next to the concrete wall. The creek, although only a few yards away, had no welcoming wet smell and no cascading sound to help cool me. Slipping off my shoes, I dangled toes in the water. Two years ago, the creek had been as high as the bank, and full of trout. That seemed like a very long time ago, when I was much younger. I moved my feet in the water, and found the heart of the creek, that single stream of ice-cold water flowing down from the source. It was very narrow and shallow. Downstream it would flow into Dad's new pump basin, a concrete box that reserved water for the sprinklers. It took two days to fill it lately, and one run of pipe could use it up in six hours. Hardly anything was left to flow downstream, some, but not a creek. It wasn't a brook or a stream or even a rivulet. In fact, none of the good words fit what ran by the Carson place.

The sun was fierce, even by the creek, and its heat weighed me down. My head began to pound and I could hear heartbeats in my ears. Against my fingers, the pulse in

my throat surged. As I tightened both hands round my neck, black spots began to swim in front of my eyes and I finally had to let go, and lay back while the world spun around me. That's what a noose around the neck did, cut off the blood until you blacked out, then kept on until you died. The pulse resumed, steady and even, soon as I let go.

"Christine!" Mother hollered from the back porch.

"Coming," I replied. When I stood up, the world still spun for a second, and my cold feet had to be forced back into shoes.

For the next several days, three times a day, Mother and I baked and cooked and served. She was right. We did get used to it. But there was no time for anything else. After dark, Mother sat on the back porch, and looked out at her garden, and fretted. The heat kept up day after day, and the nights were so warm that the men slept out on the brown grass of the lawn. Sometimes I could hear the slap of playing cards. The young man whistled and once in a while, played his harmonica. Mother said that once they were done for the day, some of the crew were so quiet, you wouldn't know they were around. One of them, a tall, thin man who wore suspenders, never said more than two words at a time. He didn't talk to the others, and spent most of his time sleeping when he wasn't working. He'd just pull his hat down over his eyes, lean up against anything, and seem to go straight to sleep. I always figured he was fooling. He wasn't asleep, he just didn't like to talk much, and wanted to listen to everyone else. I could understand that.

Now that I was used to the work, and able to pay more attention, certain things began to attract my notice. The young man, Dennis, ate like he was always starved, but he watched Mother the same way. He kept his head down, and his blue eyes followed her whenever she was in the dining room. If he saw one of the other men looking his way,

he quit. He was very careful, but he never paid any attention to me, and therefore never caught me watching him. That morning, the man with the suspenders did, and winked. I felt my face grow warm and rushed back to the kitchen so fast, I stubbed my toe.

Later, while Mother was resting, I put on my hat and boots and wandered down the fence-line. There in the distance, the men were still hauling bales. Three stacks already stood near the barn. Last year there had been six. Several more days of work might remain. Climbing up the wooden ladder on the side of the silo, I reached a point where I could see all the fields except the one up the canyon. They were almost empty. Bales remained near Brownie's fence, but not many. The canyon field always had the fewest bales, and Dad left it until last. If we lost hay in that field to rain or mice, it didn't matter like one of the other fields would. I counted bales to be sure, and although I couldn't see every one, I figured them per quadrant, like in math. By dark, they could finish this field easy. Next day would be the last haying day, and the men would be gone all day up the canyon, taking a cold lunch with them. And the morning after that, they would all leave. I waved my hat around, and the hot wind caught it, almost snatching it from my hand. Even in the shade of the silo, it was scorching, and the ladder rungs almost too hot to hold. I scrambled down. Day after tomorrow, Sully and all the others would leave, including that Dennis, and things could go back to normal.

I didn't have to ring the dinner-bell that night, because the men were back early. The trucks rolled in by late afternoon and the men, covered with chaff and dust, headed right to the wash basins. Mother and I kept snapping beans on the porch.

Dad had a particularly hang-dog look as he came up the path, and as he got closer, and raised his arm to wave hello, his hand looked swollen. He stumbled a couple of

times, and instead of heading to the wash basin with the men, he came toward the porch. His usually tanned face was bright red.

Mother said quietly, "You all right?"

"Might have got a little too hot," he said. "Fix me a big glass of vinegar water, and bring me a wet bath towel, maybe a little ice in it." He checked around the corner for the men, then sagged onto the porch rail, lowering himself slowly onto the bottom step. "Chris, go get that laundry tub downstairs, and put the rest of the ice in it, take it up to the crew." Dad's face was rapidly turning white, leaving red blotches on his cheeks and nose.

I ran. There was little ice left, but I dumped it all into the metal laundry tub, and hauled it upstairs by the handle, bump, bump, bump. By the time I got outside, the men had wilted onto the grass around the wash basin. They weren't even sitting on the bench where the buckets were, but had slumped on the ground, as if avoiding the sun meant getting as low as possible. Dennis looked the worst. His skin was gray-white, and he was breathing unevenly. I started passing out pieces of ice, which the other men took gratefully, but when I came to him, I stopped, unsure of what to do.

Mother came up behind me, knelt down, and took the largest piece of ice. Jerking open his sweat-soaked shirt, she rubbed the ice down his chest, and on his neck and face.

"Get that lemonade," she said. "Bring the whole jug." She put one arm behind Dennis' neck, and lifted his head up a little, and moved the ice through his wet hair. "And don't forget glasses."

By the time I returned, everyone but Dad and Dennis looked fine. Sully had rolled himself a smoke, something he had not done in front of us before, and he and the man with the suspenders sat quietly near the lilacs, as the dusty leaves moved in the wind. The other men were standing nearby, watching Mother and Dennis.

I poured glass after glass of lemonade from the heavy jug until I thought my arm would fall off if I had to lift it once more, but the men couldn't seem to get enough. Dennis' first glass came right back up, and Mother refilled it with chips of ice and water. After a few moments, he was able to sit up, but he refused to look at Mother. He hunkered there, hands between his knees, and kept his head down. She patted his back, then headed for the porch. Dad's normal color returned, but he stayed on the step with Mother, and studied the apple trees. Finally, the shade deepened and more breezes blew, and by putting one arm on the porch rail and one arm on Mother's shoulder, he got up, walked slowly up the steps and into the house. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sully and several others lift their heads to watch him go, then quickly look away.

Supper was ready a couple hours later, and the men took their seats quietly, looking everywhere but at Dad's empty chair. It was very strange to be serving without the rhythm of their talk, and I felt as if I'd forgotten how. Even Mother seemed slow and clumsy that night, spoiling her usually clean apron with pickled beet juice. Sully tucked his napkin in his shirt as Mother put the ham on, but no one else did. They just sat there. The rotating whirl of the electric fans spread over the room. If I made even one noise, something would surely happen. Right in front of me, Sully clicked his cough drop with his tongue, and I jumped. Then the upstairs steps creaked, and Dad came down.

He was freshly shaven and wore a crisp white shirt. After he pulled his chair in, he looked down at his plate for a second, and I thought he was about to say grace, which we had never done before. I held onto the plate of tomatoes and cucumbers, and waited.

“Well, fellows,” he said. “It was a rough one today.” He clasped his hands and set his chin onto them. “Tomorrow will be much easier.” His eyes touched each man at the table in turn.

No one said a word or took a serving of food. Everyone stayed very still. Dad seemed to be thinking about something.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” he finally said, and spread his napkin in his lap. “You sure earned your supper tonight.”

The men laughed, and everyone suddenly regained their appetites. Food was passed, glasses filled, and suppertime went by as it had in past evenings.

Afterward, however, Dad followed the men outside. Once the dishes were done, Mother settled in the living room, near a fan, and read. I lay on the carpet and flipped the pages of a McCall's. After a while, Dad came back into the kitchen and took something out of one of the cupboards. Mother smiled.

When it grew dark, I wandered out onto the front porch and sat listening.

“I still think this place is kind of like an oasis,” Dennis said.

“And kind of like the Sahara, too, huh?” said the man who liked to joke.

Sully said, “June, and it's a scorcher. Don't do nobody any good, does it, Mr. Beale?”

“After tomorrow, it can rain all summer long,” Dad replied.

“Whole country's dry,” said another man “Even in the Valley, it's damned brown already.”

“You think you'll get a second cutting?” Sully asked.

Dad took his time answering. “Couldn't tell you. I'll let you know.”

“I'd appreciate that, sir,” Sully replied. “Not many places haying.”

Dennis blew several chords on his harmonica, then said, "I wouldn't mind coming back here." He blew a few less cheerful notes. "No, I wouldn't."

"In your condition?" the joker asked.

"Shut up, Reilly," Dennis said.

Dad laughed. "Don't worry about it, son," he said.

"Christine," Mother said from behind me.

How long had she been there?

"What?" I said.

"We get those sandwiches made tonight, you can sleep in tomorrow," she said.

It would be a long time before I realized that Mother had a reason other than sandwiches for getting me off the porch that night.

Back to normal didn't mean what I had hoped it would mean. The day the men hayed the canyon field was the only sleeping-in day I got. They left early the following morning, and what did we do, first thing? Garden. From sun-up until it got so hot we had to quit, we worked that garden. Weeds had grown wherever there had been a bit of moisture, and where there had been too little, green bean vines and corn plants shriveled, their leaves yellow. We watered each one by hand, carrying water where the hose didn't reach. A thirsty plant drinks, much as we do, and it's a satisfying sound, but not one that can keep your tiredness away, or prevent boredom, or blisters. Although I continued to marvel at the plants' recovery each time I emptied the watering can onto the dirt around them, after an hour or so, I had had enough. I wanted to rest in the shade, drink a glass of ice water, or take a long, cool bath. And that day, Mother never said keep going, Christine; never said, don't stop, you have to keep watering, weeding, hoeing. She

didn't need to. Somehow our work in the kitchen together had changed us. She saw that I understood about important work, and that I was needed in the garden as much as I had been in the kitchen. From that point on, she trusted that I would work on our farm the same as she or Dad would. As I would come to find out, however, Mother's ability to read the future extended only to the weather, and not to anything else -- not even to me.

The old striped mattress, musty and thin, seemed wonderfully comfortable. I peeled at my sunburn for a few moments, and felt lucky that I was no longer out in the cruel heat. I could barely see out the dusty windows, as their sills sat on the ground, but the buried basement stayed cool even in the hottest weather. Like the animals in their dens, we escaped there for a few days every summer. That year, we were down in the basement several hours every day. The spring-water pump clicked into action and whirred and gurgled its way through its cycle. It marked time in the basement, often sending me deeper into sleep, assured that something out there was keeping things going.

Just as I slipped off, the phone rang three short rings. Dad padded up the stairs. Drifting in and out, his muffled voice became too much of an effort to listen to, and I dozed. When I awakened, the pump was running again, and Dad's voice was loud and angry. Mother went upstairs. I debated for a moment, the soothing sounds pulling me away from the disturbing ones upstairs. Then I followed her.

"I'm not saying I won't," Dad said into the receiver, "I'm just saying you're asking too damned much."

Mother blew smoke into the air, and the heat in the kitchen seemed to turn it into a wall of blue fog between her and Dad. She put her finger to her lips.

"I can pay a fine," he said. "Come on, you know what it's like up here."

He listened for a moment or two, and then turned toward the wall.

“We can’t say less than that?” he asked.

Mother put her head on her hand, and kept crushing the cigarette in the ashtray, even though it had been out for some time.

Dad slowly took his notebook and pencil down from the refrigerator, and held the phone against his shoulder while he wrote something down. “Okay, but that’s it!” he said. “No more!” He slammed the receiver into its holder.

When I started toward him, Mother grabbed the elastic band of my shorts, and pulled me back. “Not now,” she said. She looked at Dad.

“We’re cut off,” he said.

“Completely?” she asked.

“Might as well be, it’s that bad. At least sixty days, maybe more.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, looking from one to another. The red toes of Dad’s gray stockings curled, then straightened and moved toward me, like fiery little half moons.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said, putting a palm on my hot cheek.

For the next two days, Dad worked straight through lunch, risking another bout of heat stroke as he hauled pipe out of the fields. There would be no more water music that summer. Instead, silver stacks of pipe lined the fence behind the smoke house, and shimmered in the sun. The last trip he made, near sunset on the second day, was for the pump from the concrete basin. He brought it in on an old canvas tarp, laid out in the middle of the flatbed wagon that had hauled hay just a short time before. That night, he didn’t come in for supper.

“Shall I go get him?” I asked.

“Leave him be,” Mother said.

Restless sleep and a tangle of damp sheets woke me in the pearly light of moonrise. Shadows of clothes and even the books on my desk took on strange shapes. Dark outlines seemed to appear where I had seen nothing before. I couldn't move. Something had come in my window, perhaps was still perched there, watching me. I tried to keep my breathing even, but I couldn't. If it was after me, I was going to face it. So I turned.

Dad was leaning on my window sill, looking out at the creek. A red glow came from his cigarette. His head turned slowly toward me, and for a moment, I was terrified that his eyes would be gone, or something else horrible would have happened to change him.

“Did I wake you up?” he asked. Then, without waiting for my reply, he began straightening the sheets on my bed, unwrapping me, so that the white of my legs and the sheets almost hurt my eyes. Then he covered me again. “Go back to sleep, punkin’,” he said, and went out the door.

“Is Dad not feeling well?” I asked Mother at breakfast.

“He's worried is all,” she said. “Brooding about that creek.”

“I'm going to go see him.” The screen door slammed behind me, and my bare feet pounded down the path.

Mother yelled, “He'll be back soon. Don't go running off.”

Buck came out to greet me, thinking all my hurrying had been for him. His red fur was covered in dust, and he slobbered and panted. “Hot, aren't you?” I asked. Dog days all summer this year. Poor old Buck. I brought him a fresh bucket of water, and watched as he crawled back into his cubby under the old stone steps beneath the apple trees. It was

somewhat cooler there. Those old steps had led to the farmhouse old Joseph built years and years ago. All the people who had lived in that house were gone now, and the house itself was gone, but those steps were still around, just like the rocks up at the source. The stone stairs were smooth, and in the middle of each one, I could feel a gentle hollow, where footsteps had worn the stone down. Water did that, too. Wore things away, even rocks. Dad's worry wouldn't last. Grandmother, his own mama, always talked about things abiding. Well, the creek would abide, just like the stones in the steps had. I peeked into Buck's little hidey-hole, and he was curled up, his eyes gold in the darkness.

Dad drove in the driveway. Mail had piled up in the last week or so, and he had a whole cardboard box full, which he set down by the tire. He saw me, and yelled, "You got a package back here." He ducked in the back seat and held it aloft. "From Aunt Bonnie, looks like."

Every time you think life is just going one way, downstream maybe, it surprises you. My birthday present! Late, but I didn't care. Aunt Bonnie had remembered.

"That cheered you up," he said, and smiled. "One sourpuss in a family's enough, I'd say."

The package was just the size, and just the shape, of a shoe box. Very disappointing. Shoes were not a good birthday gift. Shoes were meant for going back to school. And I was far from being ready to go back to school. In fact, I didn't even want to think about it, not even a little. So the present could wait. I'd open it later.

All day, the box haunted me. Aunt Bonnie never sent stupid gifts; she had been in tune with me before, why not now? I began to think that the box itself was a trick, and whatever was inside would be nothing like shoes. Twice I headed toward the house, ready to snatch it off the dining room table, and rip off its brown paper wrapping. Wait

until supper, then open it. That way, whatever it was, I'd have all evening with it. Then there'd be no interruptions. And, it was good to have something to look forward to.

"Are you going to open Bonnie's gift, or not?" Mother said as soon as we came indoors. She hefted the box, and shook it a little, listening with her head tilted.

"Give me it!"

"Well, you don't seem very interested in it. Maybe I'll keep it."

"Right after supper, I'll open it, Mom, okay? Can I have it, please?"

She handed it over, and I had the feeling she just wanted to be a little closer to Aunt Bonnie for a moment. Her younger sister, and they never saw each other any more. Aunt Bonnie wasn't the visiting kind, I guess, because she had only come to see us twice that I could remember. And once, she'd cried almost the entire time.

Underneath the brown paper was more paper, slick blue and green balloon wrapping, and then inside the lid was tissue paper, pale mint green. I lifted it, and there they were -- slippers. In the movie magazines, they were called mules. Deep red, with high heels and open toes, and a fluff of feathers like an elegant powderpuff, right in the center.

Mother laughed, "You just never know, do you?"

"They're the most beautiful things I've ever seen," I said. I blew on the feathers and they danced and shimmered. Aunt Bonnie was very smart. She knew Mama would never let me wear high heeled shoes. But slippers? Slippers were another matter. I could wear them for dress-up, and at bed-time. "Aunt Bonnie did it again, didn't she?"

"She certainly did," she said, laughing even harder.

I stripped off my sweaty socks and wiped off the bottoms of my feet. After tennis shoes and boots, my feet were callused and none too pretty, but the slippers fit. A step or two, and I knew I couldn't walk in them yet, but I could stand. Dad came in the back

door, took his hat off, wiped his forehead and then stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his hat.

“Bonnie?” he asked Mother.

“Of course.” she said. “And she loves them.”

I put the slippers carefully in the box, covered them with the tissue, and replaced the lid. Then I ran upstairs, and checked the calendar near my desk. Sara was home from Portland.

Some crickets were just beginning their night song and the shadows had lengthened. My parents sat on the front porch to watch the sunset, Dad’s arm around Mother, both smoking. They had not seen me, and would think I was in my room, still admiring my gift. I’d be back before they knew it.

The creek was my guide as the sun got lower in the sky, and the colors went from gold to pink, turning its shallow water into a rosy ribbon. I had no trouble finding my way this time, and covered the distance quickly. Near Brownie and Carmela’s, a lone heifer stood on the bank above my head, and gazed at me as I walked by. Boys whooped in the distance, probably Smith kids, playing, if Smith kids ever got to play. The air was cooling, and I walked a little faster. I didn’t want to be gone long.

Around the next bend, there would be a ford, and the Carson barn. I tucked the shoe box more securely under my arm. If I came around the creek side of the barn, I would be right in line with the back door, and no one would know I was there until I knocked. I imagined their faces when I opened the box, and then modeled the slippers for them. Sara would be delighted, I was sure, and of course, she’d want to borrow them. We would

have such fun playing dress-up again. And Mrs. Carson, well, maybe she would see me in a slightly different light.

The sky was cloudless, but it seemed to grow darker, as if something invisible had moved across it while I'd been walking, and had hidden the light. There, that was the ford where I'd fallen, and Mr. Carson had helped me up. A few yards beyond that was the large, dark barn.

The banks nearby had been cleared and were mostly soft dirt with very few rocks. I left deep footprints as I crossed them. Behind the barn loomed a huge pile of rocks of all sizes. When I approached, some animal, sleek and long, ran from the side of the barn, and into the rockpile. It had come from a small building near the barn that I hadn't seen before. A little larger than a dog house, it had a pitched roof like a chapel, and real glass glinted in the slits of windows at the top. I made my way toward it.

The door latched with a stick on a string through a metal loop, and I pulled it open carefully. A smell, somewhat familiar, came drifting out, but I was still unable to see anything. I set the shoebox outside and bent down to look. Straw lined the floor -- and a few pale feathers. In the background, the creek murmured softly, joined by whispering from the cottonwoods. A nice place for a little house. I opened the door wider. White. I saw white. Two stark-white figures in the shadows in the back of the small house. The geese! Nestled together, one had its wing extended and bent at a sharp angle. They weren't even frightened, and didn't flap their large wings. Still asleep, perhaps. I could touch them -- as I had always longed to do.

I crawled inside, and reached out to stroke one's chest, then the other's. Warm, but the flesh was stiffening. In the fading light, I saw why they hadn't moved or made a sound. The backs of their necks were bathed in red, shades deeper than their beautiful crowned beaks. Blood pooled beneath them, staining the straw of their nest, coating the

wooden floor. They were dying. Moments ago, as I walked up the creek, they had been alive. Had I come a little faster, left a little earlier, they might still be.

How could they seem so alive? From just a little distance, they still looked as if everything were the same, just as it should be. But it was not. They had been killed right in front of me, and I hadn't even known it. That sly animal had run and hid in the rockpile as soon as he heard me coming, having already done his killing in secret. And now that secret had passed to me. Why did I have to come here and find them?

Snuggled up against one another, they looked like lovers, like a couple, even now. Their togetherness sent a splinter into my heart. I wondered if one knew the other was dying. If they had felt fear. And the teeth . . . I hit my hands against my forehead and then backed slowly out, feeling my way, and sat by their doorway, crying.

The light faded, until I could no longer see them, and I shut the door, latched it again. Somehow, I couldn't leave them alone. And in the rockpile, the weasel waited, and would return for his meal. I stood guard for a while longer. Then, the moon began to rise, touching the dark barn and little house. Soon my parents would wonder where I'd gone, and perhaps even come to look for me. It was light enough to see my way. I looked upstream, toward the mountains, and my house, then back down again. I couldn't go home. Not now. Mrs. Carson was up there right then, believing her geese were still alive, and it seemed so awful to think of her not knowing, then coming out in the morning to find them dead. Didn't I have to tell her?

Around the small building, the hard ground had been worked until it was as soft as the bank had been, and underneath the corner closest to the barn was a burrow, where the weasel had come in. He must have dug a little each day, making it bigger slowly, and waiting to attack, knowing that the geese slept right there every night. From the mound of stones, I selected one larger than the burrow, and forced it under the building's corner,

piling dirt around it. Even if he watched me, he couldn't do anything that would stop me. And, he would not be able to return. Mrs. Carson would have her geese to bury whole, not half-eaten.

Then, I walked through the barnyard slowly, toward the house. When I got past the fence, I heard voices, one deep and low, the other small and higher, coming from downstream, and since there were no lights on inside the house, I cut across the field toward the voices instead. The Carsons must be working, even this late.

Ahead, in the trees at the edge of the creek, Mr. Carson's old truck was parked, and I heard his voice.

"Get up here, Sara. Come on!" He sounded angry.

I heard Sara reply, but I couldn't understand what she said, so I moved forward until I was near the truck. I could see Sara standing below her dad, who was up on the sluice gate, struggling with the large metal wheel. His crippled hand kept slipping off as he tried to turn the heavy handle to open the gate. It wasn't moving.

"Sara! I mean it, now. Get up here and help me!"

"Won't we get in trouble?"

"Do as I say," he said, still struggling. "All we have to do is open this one gate, just for a few hours."

"How come we're opening it in the dark?" Sara asked.

"Never mind that. If Joe Beale thinks he can tell me what I can do on my own land . . ." He whacked the wheel with his useless hand. "Now come on!"

"Maybe Mom could help," Sara suggested, as she struggled up.

"Your mother doesn't need to know," he gasped. "Now, push!"

I could hear Sara grunting as she pushed against the spokes of the wheel, and Mr. Carson panting. After a few seconds, metal ground against metal, and water gushed as it

escaped. Little by little, it flowed into the ditch, then slowly out across the fields, spreading silver on the dark soil. Moonlight sparkled on the water, and for a moment, it seemed as if the moon had come down, out of the sky, and was flowing across the fields.

Sara and Mr. Carson came out of the trees, and I ducked down, headed back down the bank and into the creek, keeping to the shadows.

By the time I reached home that night, I was shaking. Dark forms had lurked in every shadow all the way, and strange sounds hovered around me, even in the yard, where the yellow light from the kitchen spilled across the brown grass. I put my feet into the safety of that brightness, and followed it.

My parents were not in the kitchen, nor the living room, but I thought I heard soft voices downstairs in the basement. I sneaked upstairs, quietly as I could, holding the slipper box against my pounding heart, which I was sure anyone might hear. I slipped finally, finally, into my bedroom. Moonlight splashed the floor, and I pulled the shade down. In their box, I knew the slippers still were as red as blood, and their pom-poms white and feathery. I would have to wear them sometime, otherwise Mother would ask why. But now even the cardboard shoe box seemed dangerous. I put the box in the linen cupboard, as far from my bed as possible, and shut the door, making sure it latched. There they would stay. At least for tonight.

When I hugged myself to sleep that night, I kept a tight hold, for I had begun to fear that as I slept, all the secrets would somehow fly out of me, and into the air.

Early Winter

Fall began with frost, early and without warning. In the garden, plants turned black overnight, and Mother, dressed in heavy jeans and sweaters, spent most of her gardening time hauling tomato vines to the compost pile, and clearing away shriveled bean plants. Only root vegetables had survived, their bodies hidden safe in the dirt, while their leaves drooped with frostbite. They were damaged, but would survive.

“I guess we have two seasons now,” Mother complained. “Hot and cold.”

“Oh, Jenna,” Dad said, “you’ve lost a garden before. We’ve got a root cellar and a fruit room clear full. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, it’ll be rationed, that’s for sure,” she said. “You can’t eat canned peaches every day, now, Joe. We just don’t have what we usually do.”

“I don’t care,” he said, and headed outside. In a moment, he poked his head back in and added, “Don’t you work out there all day today. Find something else to do.”

Mother lifted her hand, and waved in assent, but didn’t meet his eyes. She reached for her cigarettes, then put them back on the windowsill without lighting one, and looked at me. “Bus coming soon,” she said.

I stirred my oatmeal around some more, and said, “You can smoke if you want to.”

“No, it’s fine.” She smiled, and looked at my bowl. “How’s the tummy?”

Since school began, I had been sick every morning, and would gag every time I smelled almost anything. Like bacon frying. Or Mother’s cigarettes. Perfume. It didn’t matter if my stomach was empty, I still found enough bitter liquid to throw up. I had begun to hate mornings. Nights, however, hadn’t been much better. Either I couldn’t close my eyes without white wings flying into my face, and dark things reaching for me, or I slept and slept and slept. The weekend before, Mother hadn’t been able to keep me

awake long enough to do homework or chores, because I would doze off anywhere, even at the table. Nothing tasted good any more anyway. I wished I could just stay upstairs, under my covers. I finally shook my head at Mother, and said, "Not so good."

"Well, I don't think you should stay home again, Christine. You're missing too much school, and getting so far behind."

"It doesn't matter." That particular morning, my clothes felt heavy on my skin, and I was aware of the cloth against it. Some places my skin felt so sensitive, I'd jump right out of it if anyone were to touch me there. And yet I also felt some strange sense of excitement, as if I were at a movie, and the music was making you think something scary was about to happen.

"Have you made your lunch?" Mother asked.

I sighed. I knew I wouldn't eat it anyway, and the effort was almost too much to even think about.

"How about if I make your lunch today? Put something special in there? A little surprise?" she suggested.

I shrugged.

"Go on, then," she said, "since you're not going to eat that. Just get changed."

I wasn't the only one who hadn't been feeling well. Sara had come to school the first week with pink eyes, and lately she always sat in the front of the bus in the little jump seat, right behind the driver, big old Mr. Arborgast, hanging onto the back of his seat. At school, she wasn't friendly or unfriendly. She just didn't care about me one way or the other. That was the worst. I told myself I could accidentally say something about the geese, so it was probably better that Sara spent most of her time with Leah and Kay anyway. She'd even started taking music lessons, and carried a violin case, just like they did. But if it was better, why did it hurt so much?

Fog still covered the mountains that morning, and its pale gray suited my mood. I couldn't have stood it if Fall were as beautiful as last year's Indian summer. And the chilly weather had its advantages. We couldn't play outside much at school, and organized games in the gym were easier than just being on the playground watching the other girls. Even if I didn't get picked until almost last, right before the Smith kids, at least none of us was alone. We played Simon Says and Dodge Ball. Sometimes I was almost the last one to get taken out. Not the very last. But almost. I had gotten much better at avoiding the ball, and I was quicker than before. Even though my body sometimes felt as if it didn't belong to me, it worked very well.

The worst part that Fall was the bus. School always had its cliques, but some of them got separated in gym or on the playground by teachers, and in class, we worked most of the time. I was good at that part. For half an hour on the bus every morning and every night, however, only Mr. Arborgast was in charge, and he never turned around unless someone screamed bloody murder. And it wasn't as if anyone actually hit me, or did anything like that. No. It was more the weasel's way: sneaky and threatening. No matter where I sat, the big boys from up the canyon would move in a group and sit in front and behind me, and stare, making faces, and gestures with their hands, a stiff middle finger, then a circle with two fingers and one going through. Sometimes they said things about Dad and me. What could I say to Mr. Arborgast? He'd probably be on their side.

And the only other girls on the bus, the two who went to the high school, whispered together, and pointed at the boys, and at me, laughing. Sara never turned around, she just held onto the bus driver's seat, and rode as if no one else were on the bus. I could do that. There was room for two. I would just sit with her, whether she wanted me to or not. It was either that, or move to the back of the bus with the Smith kids. Nobody ever sat

with them. Once I did, there was no going back. I had to do something. I couldn't take much more. Things would be different if Sara would just be my friend again.

I had felt myself changing, at night. The secrets had become little lizards inside me, scratching to get out, and all their commotion had made me more than sick. They made me think about doing things, things you only thought about at night, and left in the dark. I was about to bring them with me, out into daylight.

“What are you doing?” Sara asked, when she got on the bus.

“Two can sit here,” I said, scooting up against the window.

“That's my seat. Go sit back there,” she said, her light eyes beginning to look pink.

I locked up my sympathy, and said, “No, Sara, we have to talk about something.”

“I don't think so,” she said.

“Not here. At lunch, by the gate to the bus barn.”

She still didn't look convinced, but she did lean onto the seat back next to me. The bus lurched around a corner, and she sat down quickly, and said, “Tell me now.” She stayed on the seat, but she moved over to the edge.

I shook my head, and looked out the window. “At noon,” I said.

I could feel her looking at me, but I didn't turn my head. When we went around corners, and I reached for the back of Mr. Arbogast's seat, she jerked her hand away. But she never did move to another seat, and we walked off the bus together. Kay and Leah were waiting. Music was their first period. Mine was math. After that, it was reading and geography, then lunch.

Wind moaned around the chain link, and the sky had darkened. Squatting down, I opened my silver lunch pail, one that I'd chosen because it was a miniature of Dad's, and unwrapped a sandwich. I was starving, and ripped a hunk of meat and bread with my teeth. When I looked up, Sara was standing there, both hands on the handle of her tartan plaid lunch box.

"They're waiting for me," she said, "so this better be important."

You're going to listen to me from now on, I thought, then said, "You remember when you got back from Portland this summer? The day after you came home?"

"Yeah? So?"

"Well, I was there."

"You were not!"

"Yes, I was, Sara. I saw you. You and your dad."

Sara's mouth opened and shut.

"I saw your father trying to open the valve and he couldn't because of his crippled hand, and then you had to climb up there and help him." I stopped to catch my breath.

"And then I saw you both open the sluice gate."

She took a step back, and started slowly shaking her head.

"You were stealing water." It was the truth, but in the air, it sounded worse than a lie. I took several slow breaths. Sara came closer, and looked into my eyes for a second. I don't think I even blinked.

"Why are you saying this?" she finally asked.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," I answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I won't even tell my dad."

She dropped her lunch box, and knelt down beside it. Brushing the dirt off, she held it in front of her chest, and looked up. “What do you want, Christine?” she asked, her voice small and flat.

“I just want you to be my friend, that’s all. Like before.” I smiled but it felt more like a snarl, so I quickly covered my teeth, and tried to have just my eyes smile. “Remember all the fun we had?”

“And you won’t talk about it to anyone?”

I shook my head. “Not a soul,” I said, and crossed my heart.

“And not your father, either,” she said, and began to get up.

“Nobody. I told you.”

“What happens if I say no,” she asked, coming to her feet, and beginning to back away.

“Well, then I’d have to tell,” I said, slowly. “Don’t you see? I wouldn’t have any other choice, would I?”

“All right,” she said, shakily. “What do I have to do?”

Tiny flakes of snow fell the first week of November, and with that first storm came fierce winds and brutal cold that stayed and stayed. No lovely feathers of snow, soft and floating, fell that year. The gritty snow disappeared into the wind by the next day, only to have another storm take its place, and make the ground momentarily white again. Snow and wind, snow and wind, the pattern continued, on and on, day after day, week after week. There was never enough snow to make a snowman, or go sledding, and anyway, the temperature stayed below freezing, and occasional dropped to zero. School was closed once, then again, and again, and no one played with anyone much of the time.

Everything was frozen: the creek was dark ice, almost to the bottom. Tiny trickles appeared occasionally, here and there, but mostly, it was silent. Deer, even in hunting season, came down to the farm, and drank by the smokehouse, where it was possible to break through to one small stream.

“Look at that,” Mother said one morning after Thanksgiving.

“What?” Dad asked.

“They’re eating my willows,” she said. “Clear down to the ground.”

Dad started toward the gun cabinet in the dining room.

“Oh, don’t, Joe. Those deer have to eat.”

“You gonna let them have the fruit trees, too?” Dad asked.

“The willows will come back,” she insisted.

He reached out and held one of her auburn curls. “Better hang some of this around, then. Otherwise we’ll have nothing left.”

“I’ve been meaning to cut it anyway,” she said.

“You’re getting mighty soft for a rancher’s wife, Jennalee.” Dad said as he headed outside.

“Are you going to cut it, Mom?” I asked, looking at the waves of curls.

“It’s only hair, Chris. Maybe we’ll cut yours, too.” She looked at me. “Huh?”

“Only if Sara cuts hers,” I said.

For the last two months, Sara had been as good as her word. She had seemed to be my friend. We sat on the bus together, ate lunch together, and teamed up for games in the gym. But, like playing dress-up, it was only pretend. On the weekends, she always had some excuse. I have to help out, she’d say, or, we can’t have company right now, Mother’s not feeling well. I hoped that if once, just once, she and I could be together at my house, we could get to be real friends again.

“Can we go get her?” I asked.

Mother looked at the sky. “Well, if we go before lunch, and get her back before dark.”

I carefully dialed their number, remembering as I did, that I had made more phone calls in the last two months than ever in my life before. Things had changed. Even pretend could change into real, if it went on long enough.

“Mrs. Carson,” I said, when she came on the line, “can I talk to Sara, please?”

She didn’t say anything for several moments.

“Hello,” I said, “Mrs. Carson, can you hear me?”

A sigh. “Yes, Christine, I can hear you.”

Mr. Carson’s voice came out of the background, “Who is it?”

Finally, Sara picked up the phone. “What do you want, Christine?”

“Mom’s going to cut my hair, and I thought maybe you could get yours cut, too. We could get them cut just alike .”

“Your mother?”

“Yeah. We’re going to put it out to scare the deer away. So Dad doesn’t have to shoot them.”

“Why would he have to shoot the deer?” Sara asked.

“Because. Oh, it doesn’t matter. Can you come over?”

Mother was getting out her black box with the long scissors and electric clippers, and the straight razor with the rosewood handle. Then she left the kitchen for towels, but I knew she wouldn’t be gone long.

“Come on, Sara,” I urged quietly, “I never have company. And wouldn’t it be fun to have the same hair style?” I pictured her straight dark hair, and wondered if anything about us would ever be alike.

“Well...” Sara said slowly. “Just a minute.” She covered the mouthpiece with her hand, and I could hear the murmuring of their three voices, discussing.

Mother came into the kitchen, and picked up the tall stool, “You two better make up your minds,” she said, heading toward the bathroom with it. “Get off that phone.”

“I . . . I just can’t,” Sara said. “I don’t want my hair cut, and . . .” she was about to cry, when her mother got on the phone.

“Christine,” Mrs. Carson said. “Sara is not going anywhere in this weather.”

“But -- ” I began.

“Now, that’s final. You’ll see her at school. At school,” she said, her voice slightly trembling, and then she hung up the phone.

“She’s not coming,” I said.

“So you can surprise her on Monday,” Mother replied.

By noon, the wind had risen to a howl, and flecks of ice and snow hit the windows. Dad went out early to feed cattle, and to secure doors in the barn and chicken house. Above the wind, Mother and I could barely hear the sound of the truck moving through the field, and somehow hair cuts didn’t seem that important any more. The willows had disappeared into a cloud of swirling white, as had the creek, the barn and anything more than a few feet away. We could be on an island, thousands of miles from anyone else. What if something happened? Who would come to help us?

When Dad came onto the porch, stomping his feet, and blowing on his hands, it was a relief.

“Not enough snow for a blizzard,” he said, opening the kitchen door, “but it’s damned close.”

“How long will it last?” I said, looking hard into the blur of white outside the kitchen window.

“Day or so probably,” he said, looking at me. “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.”

“But what about school on Monday?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” he said.

Sunday the blowing snow continued. It had grown even colder, and the windows were coated with ice. Dad spent part of the morning luring the cattle into the corrals around the barn, and had opened the old machine shed so they could find shelter. When the wind died for a moment, I saw a herd of white, shaggy cows moving stiffly behind the truck, which was loaded with hay, including several bales hanging out over the tailgate, where the cattle could almost reach them. Then, the swirling snow hid them all.

The storm lasted two more days, and school didn’t resume until Wednesday. Mother finally had cut my hair, and hers, and our combined curls would dangle in little white muslin bags from all the fruit trees by nightfall. We had not seen the deer since the storm.

As I waited for the bus in the still-freezing temperatures, I wished I didn’t have to wear my wool hat, but even with it on, my ears were burning from cold. I couldn’t wait to surprise Sara, and I had a cunning plan. I wouldn’t say a word to her about my new, very short hair. I’d simply pull off the hat in the cloak room, and see what she would say. I remembered the picture of her sister, Elaine, that I had seen at the Carson’s house last year. Her hair had been short and glamorous. Now mine was as well. Sara was sure to like it, and therefore, me.

Finally, the bus rolled down the canyon, ice and snow packed underneath in brown and white clumps. Only a few of the high schoolers were on the bus that morning, and they sat alone or in pairs, bundled in their coats, cold and quiet. When the bus reached the

Carson place, no one was waiting. Mr. Arborgast honked once, waited a few seconds, looked down the lane and then honked again. He was about to put it into gear.

“Wait for her,” I said. “She has to be coming.”

“You see her?” he asked impatiently, and started the bus rolling again.

Girls were in the cafeteria in small groups, and in classrooms, several sat on desks, but not one was Sara. Finally, I went into the music room, and walked slowly through the forest of dark metal chairs and music stands to where Kay and Leah were unpacking their violins. Miss Brettelle, the music teacher, was practicing elaborate scales on the piano in the front of the room.

“Isn’t Sara here?” I asked.

The two girls stopped and tilted their heads as if listening to unfamiliar music.

“Where’s Sara? Do you know?” I asked again.

“It’s a secret,” Leah said.

Kay began to giggle. “We won’t tell.”

“Maybe I should ask Miss Brettelle?” I suggested.

Leah said, “She’s not in school today, Christine. You ride her bus, you should know that.”

“Yes, Christine,” Kay echoed, “you should know that.”

Then they both laughed.

“And what did you do to your hair?” Leah remarked.

Miss Brettelle finished playing, and I got out of there before she could ask me any questions.

I didn't have long until the bell, and the hallways were filling with students on their way to class. My math classroom was at the opposite end of the school, and I would have to hurry. People were bumping into me, and finally someone hit me so hard, I crashed into the wall, and stopped. Jeanine! And, of course, a few steps behind her, or perhaps leading, was Kelley.

"You're in the wrong place, aren't you, Christine?" Jeanine said, imitating Mrs. Schroder's husky voice and stern tone.

"Oh, I don't think she was," Kelley said. "Not if she was just looking for Sara."

"Is that where you were?" Jeanine asked, changing her voice to false sympathy.

"Were you looking for your best friend?"

"I just want to get to class," I said.

"No, you don't," Kelley said and moved in my way. Kelley had grown unbelievably during this year, and was taller than Miss Brettelle already, and almost as big as Mrs. Schroder. "You want to find Sara, don't you, Miss Priss?"

"I'm going to be late," I insisted.

"You don't even know where she is today, do you?" Kelley said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"If you were really her friend, you'd know why she wasn't in school today," Jeanine said.

"Why?" I moved closer to Jeanine. "What's wrong with Sara?"

"She could have called you on the phone, but she didn't, did she?" Jeanine continued. "She called me."

"If you don't tell me, I'll scream, and you'll both get in trouble," I said.

Kelley laughed. "Nobody's going to care what we do to you." But she moved off down the hallway a few steps and leaned against the wall, watching.

Jeanine came closer. "She's home sick because of you."

"No, she is not."

"You know what happened to her?" Jeanine said, her cheeks beginning to redden.

"All her rabbits died. Every single one. They froze to death in their cages, and she found them." She poked her finger into my chest. "That's why she's sick today."

I remembered the three dopey brown bunnies with storybook names, and the big red rabbit who had been such a coward, Prince, when he had pulled out all his hair and looked so funny that day. And the brave one, Snow White, who had thumped so loudly. I pictured them all covered with snow and ice like the cows had been, only instead of moving, they would be still and white like the geese. Even thinking about the geese made me shiver. Poor Sara, finding those rabbits all alone. I grabbed Jeanine's finger, and pushed her away. Why hadn't Sara called me? If I was her friend, she would have called.

"From now on," Jeanine said through her teeth, "you leave her alone."

Kelley bumped into me again on her way by, and said under her breath, "Poor old Queen Christine. Lost her only friend."

I took my lesson from the creek that day: I froze solid. If I weakened for a moment, I knew I would dissolve into tears, and perhaps once they began, I would melt into a pool of nothing but tears. Jeanine and Kelley would be delighted. So I looked straight ahead, didn't smile at anyone, didn't talk to anyone unless it was a teacher asking me a question, and somehow or another, I made it through the day. How many more days would I have to do this? As the bus rounded the corner, and my house finally appeared in the distance, I blinked rapidly. Our gate blurred.

But as soon as I stepped onto the ground of home, it hit me. What did Kelley and Jeanine matter? They weren't important. Why had I even believed them? Dad wouldn't have given up so easily. I started trotting downhill, looking for my father.

Inside, Mother was entering figures in a dark-red journal in her careful penmanship. Scratch paper covered with numbers lay scattered on the desk on both sides of her.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, puffing.

"Hello to you, too," Mother said. "In the basement, I think."

I dumped my books and lunch pail on the floor, and headed down the stairs.

"Did you have a good day at school?" she called.

The basement seemed particularly dim that day, and the octopus-shaped furnace sighed occasionally. I could hear scratching coming from the corner near the fruit room. It could be rats.

"Dad?" I hollered. "Are you down here?"

At first, there was no answer. The cobwebs near the water heater moved in the air as the furnace breathed in and out. Then I heard a clank, and "Yeah," he said.

Near the pump, Dad knelt by his tool box and oil can. He was scraping a flat piece of metal with a wire brush. The air smelled of rust and stale water. Our water pump for the spring was in pieces. I'd never seen it torn apart before, never thought it would be even momentarily unusable.

"What's wrong?" I asked, still breathing hard.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, looking up, then reaching for a cloth. A smell of solvent and oil drifted out.

I began to feel slightly seasick, and the room was temporarily in motion. "Oh, nothing much," I replied, then thought better of it. I really did need his advice. "School, I guess." I held my nose against the smells.

“I thought you and school were like bread and butter now,” he said.

“It’s not that,” I admitted, “it’s some kids at school.”

“Like that Sara?” he asked.

“Sort of.”

“That family’s got a pack of problems,” he said, placing the metal piece back onto the pump shaft. “I kind of hate to have you around their place.”

“They don’t have that many problems,” I said. “Besides, don’t you think I should have friends in High Valley? People like us? You always said I should.”

“Nothing good will come of it.” He cranked the wrench around quickly, and as the metal ground into place, his hand slipped. He jerked back, knuckles showing red through the black oil. He grabbed the cloth again, and pressed it against the blood. “That kind of thing can rub off on you.”

“I don’t care if it does,” I insisted.

“You will,” he said, wincing. Blood stained the oil rag.

“So what if somebody tells you something and you don’t know if it’s true?” I leaned down, keeping my eyes on Dad’s hand. Had he really hurt it bad? “How do you find out?”

“You can figure this one out,” he replied. With the cloth wrapped round his knuckles, he put his tools back into the case, and latched it. We both stood. “Think about it a minute.”

“But what if they tell you not to do something, and that something is how you can find out?”

“Okay, let’s see, that’s not so hard. Which one of those things means the most? You want to know? Or is it more important to do what they tell you? Depends on who it is, I’d say.” He headed for the fuse box. “Move away from there now.” A click, and the pump

belt began to move, and the wheel to turn, and the old familiar rhythm started up again, bringing water from far underground into the house. Dad grinned.

How would we get water if Dad hadn't fixed that pump? With the creek frozen solid, and nothing but dirty snow on the ground, we wouldn't have had much. But he hadn't seemed worried or scared, he'd just done what he'd had to do, even if he got skinned knuckles. His advice hadn't been very clear, but he had been.

I went right upstairs to my calendar, and marked off that day with a big, black X. If Sara didn't come back to school, it would be two more days. Then it would be Saturday.

For the first time in weeks, the sky showed patches of blue and white on Saturday, instead of the grayish white of more storms. No wind blew that day, but icicles still hung from the barn, and the cattle's breath fogged. An extra cardigan fit under my coat, and I stuffed mittens in my pocket, to wear over my gloves. The blue in the sky seemed a sign that I should do what I'd planned. At least it was hopeful.

"I'm going to the barn and swing in the hayloft," I yelled to Mother, before she could think of even one thing for me to do.

A smell of hot linen and the sound of steam came from the dining room. "Well, then, stay in there," she answered, as the iron exhaled. "It's still awful cold."

Banging came from the far side of the chicken house, as Dad was taking advantage of the still day to patch near the chicken runs. During the last storm, dry and brittle shakes had begun to splinter in the cold, and the wind just peeled them away. None of our chickens were laying, since all their energy had gone into staying warm. Soon, if their house was cozy again, we would have eggs. I wouldn't mind searching under the cranky old black hen for eggs, if only I could have one scrambled with butter.

I cut across the garden, down through the broken willows, where shreds of bark hung from their trunks and even good-sized branches had been pulled down from as high as deer could reach. Mother was sure the willows would come back, and be green and graceful in Spring. They were her favorite trees. Why had she allowed the deer to hurt them so badly?

Up close, the ice on the creek did not seem nearly as solid as it looked from a distance. Stepping carefully, I watched for cracks to appear and moved forward, checking each time. Only at the edge, where the ice looked like Grandma's lace collar, did it seem unsafe. Moving further out, I stomped once, then twice. Nothing happened. Like standing on the playground. As long as I kept to the middle, and watched for where the tiny stream broke through, I could walk cautiously on the ice all the way to the Carsons' farm.

As trees and brush began to block my view of our road, I wondered for a second if I should have taken it instead of the creek. This had to be right. It was important to find out, but the way I did it was just as important. Hadn't Dad got what he'd needed by going up the mountain, all the way to the source? I would do it the same way. Already I'd been down the creek twice. Just because it was frozen wasn't going to stop me.

Since the ice was in deep shadow all day in the canyon, it had become very thick. During one particularly unclouded stretch of ice near Brownie's place, I squatted down, and rubbed a spot clear with my red mittens. Peering deep into it, I could see the water running below, in a stream as small as a willow branch, but still flowing, still moving, still alive. Walking a bit further on, I turned slowly, until I made a complete circle and could take stock of the creek. Judging by the banks on either side, it was two or three feet deeper already. That meant there was quite a bit of water beneath my feet. I stopped for a second, and shivered. Enough water to drown in. Especially if I fell through the ice, and

couldn't find my way out. I imagined swimming and swimming in that freezing water, looking for the light above, the light that you remembered leaving, and finding only a wall, one that you could see through, but was still a wall.

The banks were too steep to climb. I had to either go upstream or down. The weak sun disappeared behind a cloud. I went downstream.

Sometimes the ice groaned and complained, and I watched carefully around my yellow boots for the pale stretch marks where it might break. Finally, I was past the Porters' rock fence and the creek broadened, then turned and headed toward Sara's, flattening out enough to provide small banks. The dirt and rocks, however, were as slick as the ice. Suddenly, I was on my knees, my hands burning, and when I stood up, both knees throbbed. Rubbing them, I was comforted somewhat that they were only bruised and not bleeding. I hobbled a bit after that, but kept going. The water was definitely deeper all the way downstream. Once the ice melted, there would be much more water in the creek than before. I could tell Mr. Carson the good news. He wouldn't have to steal water this year. I clapped my wet mitten over my mouth. I would have to be careful what I said.

As I approached the ford to the Carson farm, my plan felt muddled. Should I go to the front door and knock? Or maybe the kitchen door? Should I call Sara from outside? Near the barn, where the geese had lived, stood a neat stack of used lumber, a rusty nail pointing skyward from the top board. Inside, dusty snow piled in the corners, even though several of the larger holes had been patched with new wood, bright against the gray. Fencing now divided the barn from the meadow near the house, and I crawled carefully over its peeled logs. Even that cold winter, Mr. Carson had been busy, working to make the farm better. Dad should come down and see. Then he wouldn't care if it rubbed off, and maybe instead, he'd want to help.

One light burned in the upstairs bedroom, and another in the middle of the house. Through the small panes of the dining room window, I saw Mrs. Carson lying on the rug near the table, staring at the ceiling. She looked at the window, just as if she were expecting me, and motioned for me to come in. She had a secret smile, but her eyes crinkled and looked friendly. I wasn't the least bit afraid. Besides, I knew all about secrets. Maybe she just wanted to share one with me.

Sara and her father were nowhere to be seen. She motioned again. There was nobody around but me, so I went in, and stood by the door, shuffling my yellow boots on the mat. Mrs. Carson patted the rug next to her, and it seemed like when you're in church or the library, and you know you shouldn't talk because what's happening is somehow important. Everything was very quiet. I felt a little funny, but I stretched out by her, and looked up at the ceiling. She started to talk, like she was talking to herself.

"Sometimes I lie down here, and look up at the spots on the ceiling. They look like flowers, some of them. See, look at that one." She pointed, and glanced at me, then turned back to the ceiling. "There used to be one in the middle that looked like two faces close together with the noses touching. I liked that one, it made me think of Ron and me when we were young, first kissing" She sighed. "All that kissing. . . Sometimes I couldn't get my breath, and it felt like my heart would jump right out of me." She glanced at me again. "Lately, I can't even stand to look at it," she finished, almost angrily.

I couldn't think of anything to say, and I continued to look very hard at the gray and white blotched ceiling, both trying to see and hoping not to see what Mrs. Carson was talking about. Was it polite to lay on the floor if somebody asked you to? There wasn't a single sound in the room but our breathing. Where was Sara?

She started again, "I didn't even know they were dead when I first came on them." Her voice was a whisper, and I had to lean closer and closer to hear. "I thought they were just nesting there, for warmth."

She turned and looked at me, directly into my eyes, and I knew exactly what she meant. In fact, I didn't just know, I felt it. All over again. Discovering the geese, and knowing she would discover them, and not doing anything about it. It all came back to me in a rush.

"I'm so sorry I didn't . . ." I began.

She squeezed my hand a little, and went on, her voice rising, "But when I got up close, and touched them. They were just stiff." Her hand was beginning to hurt mine. "Ron had to break off a wing to bury them." She began to cry, not with tears or noise, but a kind of inside crying.

I patted her hand a little, and said, "It's all right, Mrs. Carson, it'll be okay."

"Geese like that mate for life, you know. Like we're supposed to," she said. "Love and support one another, and death do us part, that's what they say." Her cheeks were wet and tears seeped into the carpet, darkening spots to almost black. "All I can do lately is cry." She grabbed my arm hard, and I began to pull away a little. "You wait," she said. "Your time is coming."

My plan had been to find the truth, and maybe Mrs. Carson was telling me that right now, only it wasn't the right thing. I struggled to get away from her sharp fingernails.

"Mother!" Sara appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Christine! What are you doing?" She rushed at us, and pulled her mother's hands off my arm.

"She wanted me to," I said, getting quickly to my feet. "She wanted to talk to me." Sara looked frightened. "Sara? Is she . . ."

"Just get out of here!" she insisted, shoving me toward the dining room door.

I held my ground for a moment, and asked, "Are you all right? Jeanine and Kelley said -- "

She grabbed my hand and dragged me outside. Keeping my coat grasped in her hand, she yanked me close to her. My heart thudded.

"Don't tell anybody, Christine, please!" she pleaded.

In the dining room, Mrs. Carson still lay on the carpet. The panes in the window divided her into little squares, each one twisting and pulling in a different direction. I began to feel so weak that I was sure if Sara let go suddenly, I'd fall to the ground.

"Can't I do something? She's so upset about the geese and all."

"Help me," Sara argued, "and her. Don't say anything. Not to your mom. Not to your dad. Nobody. Promise?"

"Look at her, Sara. I don't know," I said. Did I have room for another secret? One more thing I couldn't tell anyone?

"You wanted to be my friend," she said, pressing her hand against my chest, against my heart. "Be my true friend. Don't tell?"

Later, when I was at home, I could figure this all out. "All right," I said, crossing my heart over her fingers. "Someone has to do something, though," I declared, looking one last time at Mrs. Carson, who was now holding her hands over her eyes and shaking.

Sara let go of my coat. "Go before my dad sees you," she finished breathlessly.

"Haven't you told him?" I said, over my shoulder. "Tell him!"

"He knows. It's you being here that'll upset him."

I stopped. "Me?"

"Christine, we can't talk about this now," Sara was about to cry. "Just get out of here."

As I ran across the field, I realized what Sara might have been saying. She had gone back inside, and the door was just closing. “It’s my Dad, isn’t it?” I hollered.

No one came out.

“Isn’t it?” I yelled again.

She came back out onto the porch without her coat, her arms crossed.

“He’s mad about my dad and the creek, isn’t that it, Sara?”

I didn’t hear what she said, but I didn’t have to. I could tell by the way she stood there, with her arms down to her sides and her white palms showing, that I was right. Our fathers hated one another. Maybe our mothers did, too. I was glad I wasn’t going upstream this time, that I was just walking on our old gravel road like any other traveler. I didn’t want to be anywhere near that creek right now.

Ice-melt

I was lying on the flowered rug with Mrs. Carson. We were looking up at the sky, and it was full of wings, white wings. The sky was deep blue and velvet soft, and the wings floated like clouds. She was holding my hand and smiling. But when I looked down, I saw that we were on ice, the ice of the creek, very far from the banks, and that branches of white were shooting through the dark ice, cracking it. I heard the ice creak and groan. Rumbling rolled beneath us, and then an even louder crackling noise came. Large pieces of ice began to break apart in the water, and I was on one and Mrs. Carson was on the other. Her hand was pulled from mine, and although I reached for her and reached for her, she moved off into the distance, and the ice continued to break apart around me, cracking and crashing. She disappeared into a white fog. The tiny island of ice I was riding tossed and rocked. Waves of dark water grew larger, and then came toward me. I took a long breath and waited for the freezing water to cover me, and pull me down. Then I jerked awake.

I lay quietly for a moment, and realized the sounds were still there. The ice was breaking. The ice on our creek, right outside my bedroom window, was thawing. It was still too dark to see anything, but I opened the window, and the air that met my face was almost warm. We had been through a long and freezing winter, months and months, it seemed, but we were about to come out on the other side. Water was flowing in our creek again, over the rocks and under the bridge. It made a lovely sound as it moved downstream. I breathed in the smell of water and dirt. Spring would come again.

“Christine, get away from that window,” Mother said.

“I’m watching the ice,” I replied, as I kept gazing out the large dining room window.

“Look at that big one!”

“You can’t just stand there and watch it melt.”

“I’m ready for school. Look at me,” I argued.

“Well, come eat then, and let’s get something done around here.”

“Did you see all the pieces piled up under the bridge?” I asked.

“Christine! You have to eat something. I don’t know why breakfast is getting to be such a problem for you.”

Mother moved to the counter, and the cotton blouse she’d chosen showed off her strong arms, as she cut slices of homemade bread. I saw her glance out the kitchen window at the willows, then look down at the knife again. Somehow she made it work.

“You know what? Tomorrow’s not a school day!” I said, as I looked at the calendar. “Toast. I’ll eat some toast.”

Sara was seldom in school any more, and when she did come, she appeared on the playground just before school began. Her father’s old truck, racks swinging, would be rounding the corner and there she’d come, from the far side of the playground, walking just slow enough that she had to run the last few yards to reach the school before the second bell.

A rumor had been circulating. Our old school bus, small and dingy inside, was about to be exchanged for a new, larger bus. One without a jump seat, I was sure. I would have to sit in a regular seat, and when Sara wasn’t there, which I knew she wouldn’t be, I’d have to sit in the middle of the big kids. Or I would have to make the choice, move to the back, and the Smith kids. So every day, before the bus came, I felt less and less like

eating, and more and more like I was about to explode. My jaws hurt from keeping myself from talking at school, and my face was like the ice on the creek -- it felt as if it were about to crackle into a million pieces. If Kelley or Jeanine bumped into me, I might just burst.

“I could stay home and help you,” I suggested.

“Nope,” Mother replied, and spread butter on my toast.

I carefully painted apricot jam to the edge of the bread, covering every speck except the tiniest ribbon of crust. Golden-orange, like the sun as it set, the jam glowed on the bread. But when I tasted it, it plucked at the inside of my mouth, and bits of skin and pulp caught in my teeth. I finally swallowed one bite. I ate the crust, then scraped the jam off, and ate a few more bites. I hid the jam jar behind the salt and pepper shakers and Dad’s hot sauce.

“It can’t be that bad,” she said, coming up behind me, and giving me a half-hug. “You’re good at school, Chris. And Sara will come back, you’ll see.”

“Dad says their whole family has a pack of problems.”

“Everybody has troubles. Theirs aren’t worse than most people’s,” she pulled at the little curls growing at the back of my neck. “Why do you worry about them so much?”

I swallowed hard. Mother looked down at me with eyes that were clear and kind. She thought I was smart, good in school, but I couldn’t think of a way to tell her, and not give away Sara’s secrets. Dad’s voice sounded in my head: What do you want most? Which means more?

“Mrs. Carson . . .,” I began, then the words sort of shriveled on my tongue. I just couldn’t. Something terrible would happen. “Never mind.” I looked down quickly, and shredded the last of my toast, putting the pieces around the outside of my plate.

“Well, I do mind,” Mother said. “I’ll think about this while you’re at school. You can forget about it for that long, right? Just let me worry about it today.” She reached past me, and wiped crumbs off into her hand, then said, “Bargain?”

“Bargain,” I said, but I wondered what I’d just agreed to. I didn’t think it would make any difference, Mother thinking about it, too, especially when she had no idea what it was. Or maybe she did? You never knew about Mother. She could be spooky sometimes.

That night, when I went upstairs to change out of my school clothes, the linen closet door was open slightly. There on the bottom shelf, under Grandma’s ivory tablecloth, was the shoe box. I slowly opened it, and there were the slippers, still under the tissue paper. Maybe if I wore them, somehow, the story of the geese would be told, and I wouldn’t be guilty of breaking any promises. Maybe then, Mother would know about Mrs. Carson. I blew the soft, white feathers into their dance. Grandma always said red was a good color, and that when she played pinochle at her club, she wore her red dress. I wondered if the slippers would still fit. I slipped my bare feet inside. Perfect. They fit me even better than they had. I clomped downstairs.

“I wondered where those were,” Mother commented.

Dad looked at the slippers, and then at Mother. “I thought you knew.”

“Not me,” she said. “Chris hid them, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t exactly hide them,” I said. “They were put away.”

“So why are you wearing them now?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe it’s time. Grandma says red’s lucky.”

“Oh, oh,” Dad said, half-jokingly, to Mom, “your mother’s got another convert.”

“Well, I think we could all use a little luck,” Mother said. “Spread it around, Christine, and it’ll come right back to you.”

Dad waved Mother away, “Don’t be teaching her that stuff.”

“Go on, Joe, do your chores,” she replied.

He pulled on his overalls by the porch door, and had his hand on the doorknob when I finally said, “Dad?”

“You better make it fast, kiddo, because Mom says I have chores to do,” he said.

“Isn’t there a whole lot more water in the creek?”

“Some,” he said, buttoning his sleeve, “but a lot of that will be run-off. Come summer, we’ll have a little more, but not much.”

“But there’s enough,” I insisted.

“Sure, there’ll be enough for our hay, and maybe one grain field,” he stopped, and looked at me. “What’s this about?”

“Will there be enough for everybody?” I asked, watching his face.

“Goddamn it to hell, why can’t you just be satisfied with your own family?” he jerked the door open, and it hit the wall with a bang.

“Tell her, Joe,” Mother said, heading toward him.

“Well, Jesus, Jenna, she’s been acting like everybody matters more than we do. That we’re somehow not good enough. I’ve about had it,” he jerked his coat down from the hook.

“You wanted her to care about that creek,” Mama said, dodging the tails of the coat as Dad whipped it around, “and now she does. You can’t undo that. So explain it to her. So she can stop wondering.”

Dad took a deep breath and for a second it looked like he was going to march right on outside, but he took hold of the door, and leaned against its side for a second. Then he shut it, slowly.

“All right. But this will be the last time,” he said to Mother. “And I mean that. If she doesn’t get it, I’m through.”

Mama said quietly, “I know that’s not true, Joe. You would, too, if you weren’t so mad.”

Dad was red-faced and the work coat made him look a little like Mr. Carson, all bunched up and bent. He took the coat off, and hung it up by the refrigerator again, and sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the table.

“This is the way it is, Christina,” he said. “Water is regulated. Laws determine who gets what. I don’t. I have nothing to do with it. Water Board tells me how much I can use, same as they do Brownie or the Porters, or the Carsons. And you know that. But even if there were twice as much water in that creek, there wouldn’t be enough, not for all the people living in this canyon now.”

“But there might be enough for the Carsons, if we gave them some, right?” I looked down at my red slippers, and shuffled them a little under the table. “At least enough for a pond?”

“No. They can’t have water we give them. It goes down the canyon by oldest rights. They are last. They’ll always be last. Unless they stay here for years and years, and everyone else pulls up stakes and moves, they’re going to be last.”

“But it’s just not right,” I said.

“It’s the way it is,” he said, beginning to move his chair back out again.

“You could do something if you wanted to,” I said.

Dad put his hands on his head, and looked down at the floor. He sounded tired. “No, Chris, I can’t. That’s just not the way things work.”

“But they can’t keep ducks and geese without a pond, and if they don’t have the ducks and geese, they might have to move away,” I felt the tears coming, and knew I had to stop, “and I want Sara to be my friend,” I finished.

He stood, turned to Mother and shook his head slowly. “What good did it do, Jenna? Huh?” He grabbed his coat again, and headed outside. We heard the truck start up, and drive toward the cattle waiting for feed.

Mother patted my back as she walked by, and said, “Get a drink and blow your nose.”

“I think he’s wrong,” I said, as loud as I dared. “He’s making them hate us. And I’m never going to have a friend. Or a sister!”

Mother began running hot water in the sink, and one after another, she began washing the dishes. She didn’t say a word. Not for a very long time. I sat and watched her, until she had washed and rinsed every pot, plate and bowl. Then she dried her hands, and turned around. Her eyes were awfully glassy, as if she were feverish, or as if, like I had been practicing, she was trying to keep them from showing anything to anyone.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I said.

“I know, Chris, but it doesn’t work to just hurt one another. There’s enough pain without that. We can do what we can do, and beyond that, it can’t be helped,” she rubbed lotion into her hands, and the smell of almonds almost made me cry.

“But what can we do? It’s too hard not to do anything, and just watch, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Well, I have one idea,” she said, and headed to the dining room.

“But do they know? That they can’t have any more water this year? Not even for the pond?”

Mother came back with a box, which she set on the kitchen table. “Yes, I’m sure they do. The Water Board sends out a letter, first of every year, telling everyone on the creek how much water they’ll have. Mr. Carson has probably already seen it, and I’m sure he talked to his family about it.” She opened the box, and began pulling out large and small manila envelopes. “Now, look at this.”

Mother upended several of the large envelopes and colorful packets dropped out, scattering across the table: petunias and cosmos and marigolds and zinnias and baby’s breath and hollyhocks, even bachelor buttons. She emptied another one: radishes, peas, lettuce, green beans, and two kinds of tomatoes.

“Seeds?” I asked in disbelief. “For the Carsons? What good will this do?”

“You can grow a lot from one little seed,” Mother said.

“Without a lot of water?”

“Look at last year. We didn’t have that much water, did we? And look at the garden we had!”

“But they have even less than we do.”

“And they can still have acres of beautiful flowers, and a garden full of things to eat.”

I shuffled through the packages, bright primary colors flashing through my fingers.

“No kohlrabi?”

“Or turnips. Or parsnips. Not a single white vegetable. Just carrots. Red radishes. You can help Sara plant all your favorites.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not sure she’ll ever like me.”

She smiled and nodded. How could I not believe her with those short curls soft around her head and her green eyes dancing. She had known about the deer, who hadn’t

eaten our fruit trees once all the rest of the winter, and she hadn't been afraid to sacrifice her long hair for it. I submitted, "It is a good idea, isn't it?"

"Of course, it is. You'll see. We'll go there right now."

When we reached the lane, I saw Mr. Carson get into his truck and start it. Was he leaving because we were coming? But instead of driving toward the road, he headed out across the field, toward an old cottonwood, half of which was broken, and lying on the ground beside its trunk. Had he seen us?

There were lights on in the living room and upstairs. Mother got out of the station wagon first, and went to the front door. I was glad not to be near the dining room, or to be able to see the barn and the little pile of used lumber. She knocked several times.

To my surprise, the door immediately opened, and there was Sara, and behind her, smoothing her apron, was Mrs. Carson.

Sara came out on the porch, and silently waited for me, as Mother and Mrs. Carson went inside. Sara was thinner and taller. Her dark hair was down to her shoulders now, and there was so much of it, she looked as pale as a ghost.

"You're taller," I said.

"Why are you here?" Sara asked.

"You really look different," I said. "More grown-up."

"Coming here isn't going to change anything," she replied.

"You can't say one nice thing to me?" I asked.

"Let's go in the kitchen. I don't want to leave your mother alone with her."

The house had changed. Dust sheets covered the sofa, and in a corner a scrap of plaster hung down from the ceiling. Tools were scattered nearby. A smell of stale food,

like cooked cabbage or perhaps turnips, hung over the room. Everything seemed dimmer, as if I were seeing it through dirty windows.

“How is she?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” Sara said. “But I don’t think she’s getting any better. I can hear her in her room, walking back and forth most of the night.”

“What’s your father say?”

“Oh, he’s worried. But he’s got so much to do,” she indicated the tools.

“What about you? What about school?”

“Shhh,” she said, as we came into the kitchen.

Mother was seated at the kitchen table, while Mrs. Carson worked at the stove.

“Come and sit down, girls,” she said.

“Why don’t you let me do that,” Sara suggested, moving toward her mother as she lifted the steaming kettle.

“No, Sara. I can do it. Just sit. I’ll be there with the tea in just a moment,” she replied, and filled the teapot, steam rising around her.

“How are you, Sara?” Mother asked, looking at Sara’s long hair.

“I’m fine,” she said, still watching her mother.

“Well, it was a long winter,” Mother said. “Wasn’t it?”

Mrs. Carson brought the teapot, and sat down. “Is it over?” She tilted her head momentarily, as if listening to something, then half-smiled, and began pouring tea into cups. “I’m not sure it’ll ever be truly over.”

Mother sipped her tea, but didn’t offer any comment. The clock on the kitchen stove ticked. Mrs. Carson was turning her spoon over, then back, then over again. Sara cracked her knuckles.

“Sara has been learning to sew,” Mrs. Carson said after a moment or two. “Show them your dress.”

Sara got up slowly, and moved into the dining room, looking over her shoulder. We could hear her rummaging around, near where I remembered seeing Mrs. Carson’s sewing machine .

Mother said, “We’ve haven’t tried sewing. Have we?”

I shook my head, remembering the baby doll. Sara came in, holding a pale pink dress with thin straps and white buttons down the front. As I looked closer, I realized it wasn’t sewn out of new fabric, or made from a pattern, it was a dress that Sara had made over. You could see the old hem line where she’d tried to press it. She had taken it in, and cut off the sleeves, but it didn’t look finished, it just looked made over. Makeshift.

“It’s not very good,” she said, crumpling it over her arm.

“I’m sure it’ll look pretty on you,” Mother said, and looked away.

“You’ve certainly grown,” Mrs. Carson said. “You look, oh, I don’t know,” she looked me over carefully, then met my eyes, “like a young lady.”

Nothing about Mrs. Carson seemed strange. Her eyes were brown, just like they’d always been. Why had I been afraid of her? Was she tricking us? Or had she tricked me before? Would she turn, any second now, and become the woman who lay on the floor with me, or the woman with the dark, powerful eyes in the bedroom window?

“She’ll be eleven soon,” Mother said, then winked at me, and reached under the table. She brought out the seeds. “Marie, I know you must be busy, and we won’t stay long. Christine wanted to bring you something, that’s all.” She handed the box to Mrs. Carson. “They’re for your garden this year.”

Sara moved behind her mother’s chair, and put her hand on her shoulder. Mrs. Carson slowly opened the box, and brought out a handful of brightly colored packets.

She looked at them one after another, shuffling them like cards. When she looked up, her eyes had widened, and her smile, already lopsided, began to quiver.

“Seeds, Mommy, for the garden,” Sara said. “See, look at all these. Flowers. Zinnias. You love those, remember?”

Mrs. Carson stood up slowly, crushing the seed packages in her fist as she braced herself against the table. She looked at Mother and then at me as she struggled to stand.

“You --” she began. Her face twisted, and when she gained her feet, she put both hands over her eyes, then left the room, crying.

“Oh dear,” Mother said.

“She cries a lot,” Sara said.

Mother replied, “Sometimes a good cry is what you need.”

She was serious. “Mother!” I said.

“Well, it’s true. The world looks better after you get things out of your system. I know. I’ve had my share of tears.”

Sara looked at Mother, then at me, and shook her head. “I better go see if she’s all right.”

“We can let ourselves out,” Mother replied.

“Will you be at school?” I asked Sara.

She stared at her fingernails for a second, then shrugged.

As I closed the door behind us, I saw her grab a fistful of her hair, and yank it hard. Then she slowly went up the stairs to her mother’s bedroom.

The next morning, since Dad was having his usual Sunday sleep-in, we did most of his chores. In the chicken house, the hens sang as I scattered feed, the older ones

scratching and pecking around my feet. The pullets scurried to the feeder tray as I dumped the slop, scraps from dinner the night before: sour milk, potato skins and soggy cornbread. Near the heat lamps it was warm and I lingered for a moment before reaching under the setting hens for eggs. The old black hen fluffed herself, and cocked her head, but she was too slow. Her sharp beak missed me by an inch or two, and I pulled a large brown egg from underneath her.

“Missed me,” I told her. “You’re getting old, and slow.”

Afterward, I put the egg carrier carefully in the barn, right by the hayloft ladder.

Fox and Sassy got grass hay in their feeder boxes in the morning, a chore I always loved. The smell of hay was like summertime all over again. Like sunshine and wind blowing the grass. I was never allowed to grain the horses, for fear I’d measure wrong, and they’d founder. But I didn’t mind. Grain was grain. Hay was an armful of memories. Let Dad use the pitchfork. I grabbed a huge armful, and sent it down on top of the horses’ heads and into their manger. The smell that came from the tumbling hay was heavenly.

Mother had done the milking, and the calico barn cats ate in a row out of old baking pans. She always gave them an extra portion of kibble on Sundays, followed by a splash of fresh milk. Dad kept them around for the mice, and made sure they had enough to eat, but he never gave them a treat like Mama did.

The front of my coat was covered with bits of straw and hay, and a few foxtails stuck into the fabric. I brushed and brushed until Fox finally stomped. He was ready for me to stop making noise, and leave them to eat in peace. I picked up the eggs and walked toward the house.

One thing good about early, early spring: no gardening yet. Warm weather was wonderful, and fun, and all those things, but it was also a time when the most work was

done. I could wait to weed and hoe, and plant potatoes by the barrowload. The air was crisp and cold, and the sky mostly clouds, but it wasn't all that bad of a day. Except for my stomach. If that got better, it might be a pretty good day.

My hands were raw and red as I untied my wet shoe-strings on the porch, then quietly opened the kitchen door, keeping my shoes behind me. I hadn't gone into the basement that morning to get my boots. Cobwebs and spiders and dark corners had kept me upstairs. So I'd committed one of the major sins in Mother's book. I'd worn school shoes to do chores. I'd blame it on my stomachache if I got caught, I decided. The shoes could stay on the porch until later. I tucked them in a corner before I came inside.

Mother watched the creek steadily as she sliced bacon from the slab. The silver knife cut straight and sure through the pink meat and white fat. The smell of sourdough biscuits came from the oven and combined with the smoky bacon. My stomach knotted. It was not a pleasant smell this morning.

"God, it's a dreadful day," she said.

"It is not," I argued. "And you shouldn't say God."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did." I waited for her to turn, smiling, as she did whenever I said something Grandmother might say. She never thought anything her own mother said was particularly funny, but somehow Dad's mother was another story. She kept her back to me, so I continued, "Only thirteen eggs today. The hen with the yellow wing is trying to set again."

"Well, I don't suppose we can have thirteen eggs," she said. "Into the slop bucket."

"I could give it to Buck," I countered.

Buck had grown older during the winter: his fur was now a rusty red, and his walk stiff-legged. Since he had been my first birthday present, I always celebrated his birthday

then, too. This year, in not so very long, he'd be seventy-seven dog years. He would be older than Mrs. Hyatt. It didn't seem like we even had a dog any more, since he slept all the time. But he was my dog yet, and I thought if the cats got milk on Sunday, Buck deserved an egg. That would leave twelve.

I squatted next to Buck's bowl on the porch, cracked the egg over a piece of stale bread, and then watched the yellow liquid run slowly down as he licked it against the side of the bowl. A full feeling in my stomach resulted, even though I hadn't eaten my breakfast yet. It was followed by a cramp, which got better when I hugged myself.

"Feeding that worthless dog again?" Dad asked. He was dressed, but not shaved, and he still had his slippers on. He looked down at my bare feet. "Where's your shoes?"

I stood up quickly, making sure the muddy shoes weren't in plain sight. "I'll get them. And we had thirteen eggs today!"

As I headed for the stairs, Mother said to Dad, "I could have sworn I saw something in the creek this morning real early."

"What do you mean? In the creek? Like a cow maybe?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "Something white. Kind of floating."

"So is it on the water, or in it?" he asked, sounding slightly irritated.

"Have your coffee," she replied.

"A ghost?" he suggested.

Bacon sizzled in the pan, and Mother opened the refrigerator door. I scurried up the stairs, grabbed my slippers, and tumbled down again, as fast as I could.

"What? Are you starving?" Mother asked. "Slow down."

Dad went to the kitchen window, leaned onto the sink, and gazed out into the willows. "It's so misty down there, I don't know how you could see anything."

“It probably wasn’t anything,” Mother replied, as she cracked an egg. “I’m sorry I even brought it up.”

“What wasn’t anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “Come eat your breakfast.”

“You’re sure you didn’t cook me that thirteenth egg, now?” he continued, watching Mother’s strong arms move as she put biscuits, butter and jam on the table.

“Cut it out,” Mother began, and then as he came up behind her to rub his unshaven chin against her neck, she laughed.

I sat down in my chair, placing the slippers under the table. I hadn’t really worn them yet, but now I was anxious to. Maybe they were lucky. Dad didn’t know everything.

Dad sat down, too, pulling out his chair with a loud scrape, and immediately put Tabasco on his eggs, then looked around the table. I knew what he wanted. He was looking for fruit: peaches or pears or plums, something soft and sweet to go with his spicy eggs. But there were none on the table.

Mother was cooking eggs for the two of us, the bacon grease beginning to sizzle in the pan. Don’t send me, I pleaded silently. She turned, saw Dad scanning the table and said, “Christine, go down to the fruit room and get your dad some peaches. Is that all right, Joe?”

“Peaches or pears. That’s fine. Or applesauce, if there is some. I could go for some of that cinnamon sauce today.”

“How about blue pears, Dad?” If I wouldn’t bring anything but blue fruit, he might go himself.

“Not for me, Chrissy. I’d rather have plain old peaches.”

Mother always made several jars of colored pears, in green and blue. She often cut the canned pears into flowers on our home-made cottage cheese, or into fruit salads,

making them full of bright colors. They were her favorites and mine, but Dad always liked fruit the way fruit looked.

“I know,” I sighed. “I’ll get peaches.” I retrieved my new slippers from under the table, and put them on. Then, I walked on only the green squares of the checkered linoleum, admiring the contrast of the deep red slippers. I felt silly that morning, like a little kid.

“Go on, Christine!” Mother instructed. “Your eggs’ll be cold.”

All the way down the stairs, I kept watching my feet in my new slippers. I loved the way they looked on my feet and the flip-clomp sound they made when I walked.

A sudden gust of wind blew around the house, crying and moaning, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to go downstairs after all. Dad might not be happy, but he could get his own fruit. I stopped, and looked back upstairs. If I didn’t do it, Sunday breakfast would be ruined. And then, it wouldn’t be a good day at all; it would be worse than dreary. I looked at my slippers. The furnace sighed. I clomped down a few more steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, I felt a cold draft and the wind grew louder, accompanied by banging. My stomach still felt strange, and a steady dull pain had begun lower down. Bang! Bang! The back door was open, and swinging. I pulled on the heavy door, pushed up on the doorknob so the old, crooked door would fit into its frame, and shut it securely. Then I moved toward the fruit room. As I took a step, there was a sharp pain in my crotch and I felt a warm wetness flowing down my leg. I stopped, and looked down to see dark red blood trickling from my pants leg, on the inside of my ankle, running down toward my new red slippers. I bent to inspect it, and suddenly heard another noise, not a sighing like the furnace, but a kind of breathing noise. Breathing that gasped for air.

Moving in close to the furnace, I laid my palm on the warm metal, and dragged my fingers across it as I crept along, touching it for as long as I could. Finally, I let go, and

rounded the corner slowly. At first she seemed only a shadow, something from my imagination that had leaped next to the pump. Then the shadow became solid. It was a woman, with long dark hair plastered to her face, and her clothes wet and muddy. She crouched against the pump cover as if she might attack, or escape. Unreality faded, and I recognized her: Mrs. Carson.

The hem of her flowered nightgown looked just like my bathrobe the time I tried to chase the cows across the creek. The flounced edge was muddy and limp and her terrycloth slip-ons were soaked, too. She didn't seem to notice, or that her hands and face were smeared with mud, or that there were red marks where branches had caught her. Welts were beginning to show on her face, closing one eye and pulling her upper lip away from her teeth. She could be half-grinning -- or snarling. A pool of water had formed around her. Had she walked all that way in the creek?

Her good eye opened wide, and shone like glass, but her gaze was not directed at me. Instead she looked continually at something terrifying in the distance, her body twitching. Whatever was frightening her, she was keeping secret. All those secrets. Had she come to finally tell me? I moved toward her. Her mouth opened, and as she panted, she said, "Ahh, ahhhh," over and over again, a rhythm of sounds I couldn't understand. Although still staring at something behind me, somehow she also saw me. The closer I got, the louder she made the sounds.

I backed up slowly, and she quieted a little. Overnight, her dark hair had been marked by two wings of white near her temples, and her eyes looked bruised and hollow. Yesterday, she had seemed normal, a little teary, yes, but not this! The Mrs. Carson I had known seemed changed forever, replaced by this

Suddenly, the pump began to run. The cover vibrated, and she jerked away from it, and leaned against the threshold to the fruit room. Then she began to rip at her neck and

chest with her nails, and blood welled up from the scratches. I tried to move again, to go to her, to comfort her or at least, to stop her. I was too afraid. I could only stand there, against the warm metal of the furnace, watching. It seemed to go on for a long time. Blood continued to run down my leg, and my pant leg was soaked with it. We were both bleeding, but I was frightened only by her blood.

When the pump stopped, we could hear water running as it came up from the spring. For a second, she tilted her head, listening, as she had the day before, and then, she ripped open the front of her nightgown, and screamed. Buttons clicked as they scattered across the concrete floor. Her breasts were blue with cold, nipples purplish-brown, and she clawed at them, as if she were trying to open up her chest. I had to get help.

My ankle twisted on the wedge of my slipper, and I wobbled, almost fell, then regained my balance. Would she panic and run? Or could she jump on me with her sharp nails and teeth, and rip at my chest and face? She didn't turn her head and slowly I shuffled backward, little by little, toward the stairway. I stumbled again, slid off my slippers and left them lying on their sides, their white feathers fluttering in the basement air. She had grown quiet, but strange noises like muffled yelps were coming from somewhere. It was me. I was sobbing in short bursts.

Then Daddy was behind me, hands on my shoulders, pulling me against him, then pushing me toward the stairway. He stood looking at Mrs. Carson.

"I'll take care of this," he said quietly, "you tell your mother to call Mr. Carson. Tell Ron, come and get her."

For a moment, I couldn't understand what he was saying. I took one last look. She had brought her knees up to her chin, and hunched over them. Her mouth and eyes were hidden. Dad was already moving toward her. I went on upstairs, leaving one bloody footprint on each step.

Mother was waiting for me at the top. I got out the story, and Dad's instructions, and then we stood together as she made the call. Blood soaked her shirt tail when she kneeled to hug me and she looked down, her expression worried. When she discovered my bloody ankle, she touched my leg, kept feeling my wet pants, on up to my crotch, and without a word, took me into the bathroom, where she took off my clothes. I was shivering uncontrollably. She turned on the faucets in the bathtub, and filled it, as steam rose, softening everything around us.

Though I tried to stop, I still hiccupped sobs until Mother put me in the tub of warm water, fragrant with bubble bath. She still didn't say anything, but soaped me as if I were a toddler again. The water turned pink with blood, and she quickly rinsed me with fresh water poured from the old crockery pitcher, then helped me out and wrapped me in a big, soft towel.

She pulled me very close to her and said, "Chrissy, darling, you're okay. She didn't hurt you."

"But, Mama, why is she like that? Making herself bleed, and...and..." I didn't want to remember what else she had done, the thought of her open mouth and clutching, clawing hands driving everything away.

"I don't know. She's just very unhappy. Living here can be very hard."

"We didn't do anything, did we?"

Mother shook her head briefly and said, "Sometimes when women get older, things happen. Everything changes. Even our bodies change. Just like yours is."

"Could you change like that someday?" I asked. Her arms around me were warm and strong.

“I couldn’t stand it if you did,” I whispered, trying not to cry again.

Mrs. Carson hanging clothes on the line, her movements like dancing. The old Teeter place being transformed under her hands. Her gentle encouragement of Sara. Where had that all gone? I looked into Mama’s eyes, trying to see deep inside her. All I could see was my own reflection. Would this craziness come to me? It would be a long time before I would know. Perhaps it would never come, not to me, or my mother. But it was out there, and now I knew it.

“It won’t happen to you.” I said, making it true.

“We’ll talk about this later, Honey. Mr. Carson’s on his way now. Here’s a clean pair of pants, and I have something for you to put on, for the bleeding.” She opened her special cupboard in the bathroom. In the distance, there was the sound of a truck, moving slowly, coming closer and closer.

Mr. Carson didn’t say a word. He just put his wife in the truck. Dad said a few words to him as they stood by the gate, then he reached out to touch Mr. Carson’s shoulder, but his hand fell short as Mr. Carson turned away just then. Mother and I stood on the porch. When Mr. Carson got into the cab of the truck, we all went back inside.

I watched from the window and saw him try to smooth his wife's tangled hair. His crippled hand moved awkwardly through her hair, pushing her head to the side. She just sat there, leaning, and staring out the windshield. He straightened her a little, moving her head and neck into position as if she were a jointed doll. Then his shoulders slumped, and he simply sat and stared out the windshield, too. After a moment, he started the engine and drove away.

Confluence

Until the day he died, my father lived in the dry country. I came to understand that. No matter where we moved him, old and ill as he was, he was still in the dry country. It was in his heart.

Here at the source, this lovely June day, however, my granddaughter and I have rediscovered the creek. The clear and cold waters that run out of solid rock, magical as that seems, don't influence her in the least. It is just good wading, and now she beckons me to a special spot.

We squat, looking deep into the clear water where all the small streams meet, then walk downstream and squat and look again. Somewhere in the water, her Great-Grandma Jenna's medal glows. We may never find it. But it doesn't matter to this child whether we do or not. It is still her favorite story.