

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Valerie P. Rosenberg for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 22, 2000.

Title: Claire Lies And Other Stories

Abstract approved:

Redacted for Privacy

Jennifer C Cornell

The five short stories included in this thesis depict characters who struggle as they try to balance their responsibilities to each other, and their own independent desires. Whether those desires include personal freedom, another relationship, or self-protection, these characters are at least minimally aware that obtaining what they most want may have a negative impact on those closest to them. Many times, the cost of maintaining the lives they've constructed is too great, and the characters have no other choice but to try to change, regardless of the consequences. At other times, resisting the demands of their relationships is what threatens to destroy them.

© Copyright by Valerie P. Rosenberg
May 22, 2000

All Rights Reserved

Claire Lies And Other Stories

by

Valerie P. Rosenberg

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Completed May 22, 2000

Commencement June 2001

Master of Arts thesis of Valerie P. Rosenberg presented on May 22, 2000.

APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Major Professor, Representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

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

Redacted for Privacy

Valerie P. Rosenberg, Author (J)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to personally thank all of the Creative Writing professors that I have had a chance to work with during my program at Oregon State: Jennifer Cornell, Richard Daniels, Tracy Daugherty, Ehud Havazelet and Marjorie Sandor. Each of these professors has given generously of his/her time, and has made a unique contribution to my understanding of the craft of writing. In particular, I wish to thank my major professor, Jennifer Cornell, to whom I cannot express my gratitude wholeheartedly enough. Professor Cornell has been a wonderful teacher—patient, and respectful, yet not afraid to let me know when I need to work harder. She is a very strong asset to a fine writing program, and I will always be grateful for her assistance and support.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Max, and two sons, Russell and Daniel, for helping me through the stresses and strains of a graduate program, and understanding how important this was to me.

Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------|----|
| CLAIRE LIES | 1 |
| PERMAFROST | 18 |
| VOLTAGE | 40 |
| FRANK AND NINA | 61 |
| BENEDICTION | 87 |

Claire Lies And Other Stories

CLAIRE LIES

“It’s not that I don’t believe you,” Liz says carefully, picking her way through the mine field of possible arguments with her daughter, “it’s just that I think you may be mistaken. Maybe you overheard something and misinterpreted it.” Claire has just returned home from school, leaving a trail of her belongings scattered about the house: blue school blazer, book bag, a green velvet bow. Liz stands at the kitchen sink washing dishes as Claire opens and closes cupboard doors, murmuring under her breath that there’s never anything to eat in the house. Liz scrubs the pot in front of her with increasing vigor, leaning into the force of her arm against the curved steel, finding a welcome comfort in its repetition.

It’s beginning to be a regular thing, the way Claire tells her something, waits for a reaction and then, satisfied that she has received one, goes off to read or listen to music, or even worse, gets Liz to do something that she has misgivings about. She sighs and places the freshly-scrubbed pot in the dish drainer, drying her hands on the towel in front of her before reaching up to the shelf just above for the *Celebration Times Cookbook*. There are rows and rows of cookbooks in her kitchen: Northern Italian to Heart Healthy, 10-minute French to Vegetarian. There is something she feels when her hands are covered with flour, working deep inside a spongy loaf of dough, or when the smell of cilantro and lemon bursts from

beneath her knife, tangy and raw, that make her feel as close to being alive as she ever does these days.

Claire looks at Liz long and hard, unnerving her. She has the face of a child, still soft and unformed, but her eyes are dark and hungry, just like Liz's own. "It's not what I heard, it's what I saw." She picks up a bag of chips and rips it open with her teeth, something Liz hates. "I saw Dad and this woman get on one of those ships by the waterfront."

This, as they both know, is significant because of Michael's drinking problem. There will be a Founders Day Festival down by the waterfront this weekend, and besides the carnival, the ships in the harbor, the fireworks and the street dances, there will be lots of alcohol everywhere. Michael has never been the kind of alcoholic whose personality completely changes when he's drunk. He doesn't do stupid things like hit her or yell at their daughter, but he has, in the past year or so, started drinking enough that people have begun to make comments. She has even had reason to suspect an affair, though he has assured her this has never happened. Liz knows that if something doesn't change soon, it won't be long before they will be going to AA and doing twelve-step programs and having to blurt out their personal lives to total strangers. Just since last month, though, Michael, at her insistence has sworn he won't touch a drop. At least, she hopes this is so, but that is the worrying thing about this kind of problem, you can never be sure.

"Mom. Did you hear what I just said?"

“Of course I heard you,” Liz says as she continues to move about the kitchen, straightening things that have already been straightened, cleaning a spot or two off a counter that is spotless. “I just don’t know what to say.” Through the kitchen window, Liz looks out over the garden in the back where the trees have littered the lawn with white blossoms—the closest it will get to a March snow in California. It reminds her of the freak snowstorms they’d get in Nevada when she was a girl. She and her dad used to drive the back roads from Elko to Ely, winding up the highway toward the Ruby Mountains. The tall granite peaks jabbed holes in the overhanging clouds and sent flurries of snow onto the valley below. The flakes came down fast, in big chunks almost the size of her palm. She held her bare hands out the window and caught them, keeping them trapped, like butterflies, until the white lace edges of snow melted against her skin. When she turned to show her father the drops of water on her palm, she’d seen him as he looked out into the distance, watching the curve of the road that would eventually take him away from her and her mother.

“Is Canada the one with the maple leaf on its flag?” Claire asks, all innocence as she cocks her head to one side. “That’s the ship they went on.”

For the first part of the drive down to the waterfront, Claire, sitting in the back, has wedged herself forward, elbows resting on the driver’s side seat. She brushes Liz’s hair, long and auburn, her best feature, in the intimate way that the two of them have done ever since Claire was four or five. She braids it, takes the

braid out, shakes it, fluffs it and curls it with her fingers. Liz can feel Claire's cool breath on her neck and the softness of her fingers as she winds the long strands first this way and then that. These moments of closeness between the two of them are rare now, and Liz finds herself almost wishing they wouldn't happen at all. What good is a moment of hope, when the future seems so impossibly difficult? As they come closer to the waterfront, Claire, as if sensing the atmosphere of a new world, leans away from Liz, and slouches down in the back seat of the car, her head level with its low-slung back and her legs stretched out, balanced on the seat in front of her. Claire is no longer in her school uniform and Liz can't help but note that her daughter's jeans are much too tight and her shirt far too revealing of the small, firm breasts that she has recently developed. She is only fourteen, but has none of the self-consciousness about her body that Liz remembers she felt at that same age.

Liz looks out into the distance in front of her windshield, a rectangular frame surrounding the blue of sea and sky laid out before them. Why did she let Claire convince her to come here in the first place? This is a weakness of hers, this salvaging of lives, but it's something she can't keep herself from doing. Everything about what is happening now feels wrong, feels like she is watching herself in a movie, the kind where you know something bad is going to happen, but you also know that it's inevitable. If only Claire weren't so rebellious, so difficult to control, things might be different.

As they approach the waterfront area, they must inch their way along among the crowds of people milling about. She feels a horror at the excesses of the fair:

the vendors in their torn jeans, ragged hair falling in their eyes and nicotine-stained fingers rolling coins and folding dollar bills; the tattooed forearms of the men who tend the carnival rides with their vacant stares; the overpowering scent of old grease and too-sweet cotton candy. A film of soft, yellow dust hangs in the air—a mixture of trampled bits of straw and sawdust that clings to the bare shoulders of the crowd. There will be a harbor dance at midnight where more fighting than dancing will take place. Last year, a child of twelve was accidentally knifed when he walked into a gang fight and Liz still remembers the news photo and the look of anguish on his mother's face. She knows she would hate this kind of exposure—her emotions raw and tortured, on display for everyone to feel bad about.

A young man in his early twenties, blond hair in dreadlocks and nose pierced, moves closer to the car and Liz instinctively checks to see if all the doors are locked. Catching a glimpse of Claire through the rearview mirror, Liz sees her suddenly look up, intrigued. This is what life is about, this is dangerous and Claire wants to know more. Liz studiously avoids his gaze as he looks into their car and makes funny faces at them, pulling his mouth this way and that and grimacing. He leans into the car, his young body firm and muscular, and plants a sloppy kiss on the windshield. Claire giggles from the back and waves playfully at him and Liz is thankful when the crowd suddenly moves ahead and she is able to turn the corner. She finds a parking place about a mile from the center of the Festival and she parks, her hands shaking slightly as she takes them off the steering wheel. Claire is already out of the car and halfway down the street before Liz has a chance to think

what to do next. She quickly gets out and follows, her own lightweight sandals clicking after her on the sidewalk as she feels the heaviness of her body making contact with the pavement.

Claire moves through the crowds as if she knows her way around, has been there before, and Liz has a difficult time keeping up. She feels stupid, out of her element, with all of the wild, happy faces moving in and out of her vision, the tinny music from the carnival rides: the deep bass of a boom-box somewhere pulses like the beat of a heart. She sincerely wishes that she had never come. Even if Michael is here, the chance that they will find him is very slim.

Liz feels the slight touch of Claire's hand on her elbow, steadying her, keeping the panic at bay. A momentary glance of what? concern? passes across Claire's face as she looks at Liz. Is it possible that her daughter might actually have some misgivings about coming here in the first place? But then Liz thinks that she's probably overestimating what she reads into this. If anything, Claire's probably more concerned with being seen with her middle-aged mother who is heavy in the wrong places and decidedly uncool. "It's over there," Claire says, pointing across the crowd to the looming hull of a ship docked in the harbor. "That's where I saw Dad." Then, trying to be kind, perhaps, though Liz isn't sure, Claire says, "You look a lot better than she does. Really, mom."

As they approach, Claire waves up to one of the sailors standing on board. They wear white bell bottoms, and long sleeved tunics with stripes across the

chest—typical sailor uniforms, but underneath the black-brimmed, white hats, they're smooth-faced boys, and they whistle and grin at Claire.

“Come on up,” one of them, maybe a littler taller than the rest, a little more muscular, calls out, “we’ll give you a tour of the ship.” They all laugh at this and Claire responds by going over to the stairs and climbing up; several pairs of hands reach out to help her as she nears the top. Liz sees Claire grasp and hold onto the lightly-tanned forearms of the sailor who had called out to her. She seems small and vulnerable, a version of Claire that Liz has not noticed for what seems like years.

“Wait,” Liz says, her voice turning to chalk the moment she tries to call out. They’re too far away now and her voice drifts out over the water, lost in the tide and their lack of interest. She follows up the stairs, a few remaining sailors helping her at the very top of the ladder.

They are led in and out among various short passages, hallways, lower decks, upper decks, engine rooms, and map rooms, and after ten minutes Liz has absolutely no idea where they are. Neither does Claire, she knows, but it seems not to bother her. She’s laughing and talking, standing with her hands on her hips, one knee bent, the other straight. She flips her long hair off her shoulder every once in awhile and laughs at some of the jokes, but not too many of them—it is obvious that for the moment, she is in control. They go down a final set of stairs—Liz being guided down by one of the self-professed tour leaders who helpfully places his hands on her hips. She knows she is being made fun of, but she is too

overwhelmed to say anything about it. As they are led into a last, small room, it is so dark that Liz has to blink once or twice to figure out what it is that she's seeing. The bass tones of the raucous music blaring out from a speaker overhead resonate in her jaw, and a red light illuminates the small, dark-paneled room. They are in the ship's bar, and, as her eyes adjust to the light, she sees Michael bent over a wooden table in the far corner, talking to a woman.

She moves over to their table and says hello, trying to keep her voice steady. Michael looks up, surprised, and then smiles in his lazy way, eyes half closed, the corners of his mouth only slightly lifted.

"Liz," he says, the surprise in his voice and eyes evident. He sits up in his chair just a bit and moves it closer to the table. There is an awkward moment when no one knows what to say, until Michael quickly adjusts and introduces Liz as he might if they have all just met at a party. "Hon, this is Margaret Abel, she's the designer we're working with for that new restaurant on Arlington I told you about. They want it to look like a ship's galley." Michael is an architect for a busy downtown firm, and it suddenly all makes sense. Margaret gives Liz a quick nod and holds out her hand. She is carefully made-up, though Liz can see a faint line of foundation along her jaw, and has slender, finely manicured hands. After a few perfunctory remarks, the woman purses her lips slightly and looks down at the wine glass in front of her, twirling it where the long slender stem meets the base. Normally, such quiet disdain would make Liz feel as if she wanted to shrivel and

dry up, become dust that floats along the street, but at this point, she doesn't even care. She just wants to go home, and she wants to go with Michael and Claire.

Margaret excuses herself. "I'll just get us another. The same for you, Michael?"

"Yes, orange juice," he says.

"Of course." She smiles and looks at Liz. "Anything for you?"

Liz shakes her head and watches with relief as Margaret leaves them and instead of heading toward the bar, immediately moves to another table across the room from them where she obviously knows someone else. She dismisses Liz and Michael with a toss of her shoulders, her back towards them, intent on the others.

"Look," Michael says, taking some blueprints out of a portfolio. "This is what we've come up with." He clears the glasses off to one side and carefully lays out the blue-lined sheets in front of her, making sure there is no moisture on the table. The long, oversized pages won't all fit on the tiny round table top and so they sit close together, their knees touching, forming an extension of sorts. Liz watches as his fingers gracefully trace over some of the lines. She listens to the low murmur of his voice, intoxicating in its intimacy, and feels the light touch of his hand resting on her back. There is a closeness they have developed over the years together which she sometimes feels will let her love him again.

"Claire told me you'd be here," she says.

He looks at her, puzzled, his dark eyebrows lifted slightly in question, and removes his hand from her back. "Well, of course. I told her last night I was

coming here to meet a client. She wanted to go too, but I can't have her along when I'm trying to work. You know how she is—very demanding.” He softens his voice just a little. “She wanted you to bring her here but I told her that you'd feel too uncomfortable.”

“God,” she says, and rests her forehead on the palm of her hand. “I feel so angry. She makes me feel so stupid and helpless.” But she feels something else too, some hint that maybe it isn't as easy as it seems, and desperately wants to know why Michael's hand shakes slightly as it rests on his knee and why he continues to glance, just once or twice, just briefly, in Margaret's direction.

“I was so worried that, well, you know,” Liz says, trying to pin him down with her eyes. “But you haven't, have you?”

He shakes his head and picks up a paper coaster in front of him, carefully bending its edges as he turns it in a circle. “Did Claire come with you?”

“She should be here somewhere.” Liz cranes her head and looks around the bar but doesn't see Claire and knows instinctively that she's no longer there.

“Maybe she's back outside,” Michael says over the music and takes her hand. “Let's go.”

Before they leave, he says good-bye to Margaret. Liz watches as he slips a thin white piece of paper out of his wallet and places it in her hand. Her look is grateful, but it is more than that, too, and Liz suddenly feels chilled, like the air conditioning has been turned on full force. She shivers as he walks back toward her, his eyes on the floor.

Michael knows his way around the ship somewhat and they make a half-hearted search for Claire while they are winding their way out. At one point, Michael sends her down a long hallway that leads to the kitchen, while he goes the other way to see what someone has pointed out as the rec room. The corridor that Liz takes is dark and long, lit only from above with a few glaring, fluorescent lights. Several couples walk past her, arms linked, the unmistakable glow of successful lovemaking on their faces. They move past her but take no notice; she is invisible to them. Farther down the hall, she spots a bright turquoise earring on the floor and stoops to pick it up, realizing as she does so that Claire has earrings exactly like this. She puts the earring in her pocket and goes back to find Michael.

The late afternoon light, a ribbon of yellow-gold on the horizon, is glaringly bright in contrast to the dark interior of the ship and Liz puts on her sunglasses as they climb the last several stairs to the deck. There is no hint of Claire, she could be anywhere really. They are just getting ready to contact the fairground security office, when they hear light steps behind them and Claire's breathless voice asking them to wait.

"I couldn't find you anywhere," she says, going up to her father and planting a kiss on his cheek. Liz just shakes her head and crosses her arms against her chest, forcibly keeping herself from grabbing Claire and digging her fingers into her daughter's thin shoulders.

"Where have you been?" says Michael, his tone low, slightly menacing. His voice is sterner than Liz remembers ever hearing it, though she reasons that it could

have something to do with the fact that Claire's eyes are too bright, as if she has somehow swallowed a star, and her blouse is badly wrinkled. Liz notices a movement out of the corner of her eye and sees the face of one of the boys that Claire knows at school. He's tall and lanky, blond hair drifting around his face. She has seen the two of them talking; sometimes they walk home from school together. Had they planned to meet here, or was that just a coincidence?

Claire's eyes open wide, her mouth quivers slightly and Liz watches as the stern look on Michael's face begins to melt away into the folds of skin that are etched firmly onto him in the same way that water erodes the hardest rock surfaces. "Never mind that now," he says. Though he is still upset, it's clear he's less so. "Let's just get home." Claire looks over at her mother and Liz swears she sees a triumphant glimmer in her daughter's eyes. Claire's light brown hair is slightly tangled in the one turquoise earring she is still wearing.

Once home, everything dissolves into its normal pattern as if they had all had the same kind of afternoon they normally do, though somehow, there is an unmistakable edge to the air around them. The dinner, and their light conversation, the sounds of the house that are normally muted throughout the day like the hum of the refrigerator and the whir of the clock hands, complete the picture of family life they are trying to frame for the moment. It is complicated, though, by the fact that Claire seems to be more distracted than usual, picking at her food with her fork and

pushing most of it to the side, and it doesn't help that neither Liz nor Michael speak unless it is absolutely necessary.

Claire and Michael do the dishes together afterward, talking softly in the kitchen. Liz hears the clatter of pans and the squeal of the oven door that needs to be oiled and, after awhile, sees the main light go out overhead. She envies their lack of memory, their ability to move on as if nothing disturbing ever happens in their family. They have somehow made it through all these years with a minimum amount of clutter and misunderstanding, something that Liz longs for and yet feels would be dishonest.

Claire murmurs a vague good night to them and makes her way up the stairs. Michael comes over to the sofa where Liz is sitting and kisses the top of her head. He smooths back the hair from around her neck and puts gentle pressure on the muscles running along the tops of her shoulders to the base of her skull.

"This whole right side is really knotted up."

"Hmm."

He is silent for a long while, distractedly massaging the same spot over and over again. "You're still upset," he says, his voice rising slightly at the end.

"Is that a question?"

"I don't know." He continues to knead the muscles in her neck, but slowly tapers off, saying he will go do some more work. She hears the softness of his feet on the hardwood floor as he shuffles to his office in the back of the house.

Liz, despite her pounding headache and a tiredness that makes any action seem overwhelming, retreats back into the kitchen where she turns on all the lights and strews cookbooks here and there looking for a recipe for zabaglione, a custard made with egg yolks, marsala wine and sugar that has become her favorite over the years. She's not sure why, but she must have this. The recipe, handwritten on a slip of paper, falls from one of the cookbooks she takes out from the second shelf. Moving everything else to one side, she takes a carton of eggs from the refrigerator and places it on the counter along with the sugar and the wine. She opens the carton carefully, lifting one of the brown, smooth shells and feels the softness of it, like the powdery rouge her mother used to put on her cheeks. There is something about the fragile nature of this small oval which is familiar to her, and disconcerting. Cupping her palm around it, she squeezes as hard as she can, but nothing happens. Then, wrapping both hands around the egg she presses even harder so hard that she feels the blood pulsing in her fingertips, and still nothing gives way. Somewhere, she has read that it takes more than 40 pounds of pressure to crack the shell of an egg, and knows as she smashes it down on the counter, that this much force will be enough. First one, then another, then all of them. There are yolks and bits of shell everywhere, some dribbling off the counter onto the floor, some splattered on the front of her shirt.

She feels a hint of air brush past her and turns to see Michael opening the door to the kitchen.

“What’s going on here?” His voice is quiet and low.

“Nothing. Just a little accident,” Liz says, and begins to wash away the yellow stickiness from her hands. She is relieved that he didn’t see what happened.

“You’re sure you’re alright?”

She nods and then shakes her head no. “Yes. I mean, no. No, really I’m fine.”

For just a moment, he watches her carefully, then turns and looks away from her, out through the glass doors into the backyard, where, in the blackness of night, there is nothing to see. “You’re full of shit, too,” he says softly, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. His breath is warm against her neck, the roughness of his face stinging her skin as he rests his chin on her shoulder.

Although she can only vaguely hear the music coming from upstairs, she is suddenly aware that she can feel the dull reverberations of the bass through the floor coming up into her legs and arms. “What happened tonight, Michael. Before I saw you on the ship.”

He moves back slightly, almost imperceptibly, but she has felt it before he can recover himself and cling more tightly to her. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

She pushes him back roughly with both hands and heads towards Claire’s room, the pulse of the music in her blood. It has suddenly occurred to her that if she is wrong about Claire and Michael, then what else is she wrong about? Possibly the earth and sky; gravity; the sun. She sees Michael’s reflection in the hallway mirror as she passes by and Liz no longer knows how to behave.

A slip of yellow light floats out from beneath Claire's door. It is enough to keep her moving up the stairs, though the walls are dark and seem to close in around her, their weight pressing against her body.

Claire looks up momentarily, her wan face paler than usual, as her mother enters her room. Tall pillar candles, placed here and there on a dresser or desk, illuminate the room and there is an eeriness about the dark silence with its posters of people Liz has never asked about displayed on the wall, their features shimmering in the slightest movement of the glowing wicks. How like Michael Claire is, and Liz thinks that she should have noticed this before, but hasn't.

There are scarlet patches on Claire's face and neck as if she has been trying not to cry, the force of holding back all of her tears staining her cheeks. Just for a second, Liz senses that the real Claire is there, vulnerable and lonely. She seems unreachable, and Liz tries very hard to remember what she might have felt like at this age, but even if she could remember a specific incident, she senses that it wouldn't matter at all. She and Claire are so different. They just don't look at the world in the same way. Claire reminds her of those girls at her school who wore thick, black eyeliner and smoked cigarettes and always seemed to know more than they should. She felt inadequate next to them, as if they could see through her, just as she feels with Claire now. Claire, the one who has always been watchful and silent, the one who was just a bit different. Claire, who, when she was very young, could always be counted on to tell the truth. Now she still has those eyes, the ones that look beyond, but what does she see?

Liz turns down the stereo and then sits on the edge of Claire's bed, putting as little of her body on the space as possible. She is careful not to take up too much room. She puts her hand out tentatively and Claire places hers on top, leaving it there only a moment, before drawing back.

"Everything I did today has a good explanation," Claire says, her voice distant.

Liz doesn't say anything, doesn't even look at Claire, doesn't know where to begin.

"It's just that you don't understand about a lot of things."

"You're wrong, Claire," she says, her voice surprisingly close to tears, "I do understand," for Claire's lies are completely transparent. What she doesn't understand though, but has come to believe is true, is how much her own feelings for Claire and Michael have become a lie, something she does without thinking, like waking up in the morning, or eating when she's hungry; but it's rote, practiced and not there for her to choose. Claire reaches for the stereo, cranking up the volume so high that further conversation is impossible. Liz shuts the door carefully behind her and goes down the stairs, feeling the pitch and roll of the uncertain ground beneath her, and she wonders if she is strong enough to see this through.

PERMAFROST

Angie would've called him The Marlboro Man if she'd been herself that summer, and had enough energy to kid around. As it was, her mother had died in May, just four months ago, which meant she'd had to tag along with her dad when he left to do research in Alaska. Since then, she'd been stuck up North in a cabin with him and two workers he'd hired to help out. The younger one, Larry, was 34, more than twice her age, but not nearly as old as her father and this made him somewhat acceptable. He wore a stupid cowboy hat over his ski mask and had permanent tobacco stains between his second and third fingers. She called him Larry because it was an abbreviation of Lawrence, his family name, and because it suited him. He'd been married, twice, and divorced, twice, and had a kid somewhere in New Mexico. He was the only driller her father had been able to get for the job on such short notice and before this, he hadn't worked for several months. He said he'd been through a bad spell, but was eager to prove that he was past it all. She'd wondered at the time about this personal failing of his, though they'd really had no choice but to take him on. The money had come in at the last minute and true to form, her dad hadn't actually expected to get the grant, so they'd had no plans in place when he did.

Larry listened to an old recording of Edith somebody—he said she was French—on the drive out past the graveyard to the drill site, constantly fiddling with the volume, bass and treble. He was a fan, he said, of the right kind of music,

which had to be listened to in the right way. In the short time she'd known him, she'd noticed that he always seemed to be humming some distant melody under his breath or snapping his fingers in time to a tuneless rhythm. It hardly mattered to her what he did, because each time they drove past those graves she was immediately drawn to the seven crosses on the hill—their shadows stretched long against the snowy ground—an imprint against nothing but snow and sky and more of the same for miles and miles. No one was actually buried there, because this was tundra, and the ground was frozen solid except for the few inches that thawed each summer. The miners who had died—victims of the 1918 flu outbreak—had actually been buried in a town about three hours south of where she and Larry were now. Still, she had an uneasy feeling every time they drove by, and imagined thin, stick-like men, stiff and uncomfortable with the cold, curled up beneath the weight of the earth.

They parked the jeep on the ridge by her father's field area. With nothing but their bodies to alter its course, the wind enveloped them with its low-pitched moan at every point. The force of it pushed against the car door as she stepped out and she felt its sting along her cheeks and chin, the skin red and raw where the parka rubbed against her face. Ducking her head down and pulling the jacket hood around her face to protect herself as much as possible, she followed Larry along the narrow path to the point where her father and Jack already stood. Though it was close to eight in the evening, the end of summer sun was still high in the sky—far away and cold. A halo of snow, formed by drifting flakes, lightly dusted her

father's wool cap and hung in wet droplets from his mustache. She called him Theo, because that was his name, and because it fit him better than any form of father she could think of to say.

"About time you got here," said Jack, rubbing his hands together and stomping first the left foot, then the right, "we've been freezing our butts off for the last hour." Jack was not a large man, but he had an oversized belly that he tried to rein in with a silver belt buckle the size of a saucer. He drank too much, and it showed, not just in his gut, but also in his face, with its deep furrows and uneven coloring. Jack had a peculiar shyness about him that made him difficult, an uneasiness that radiated from within, and made the others avoid him when they could. The only reason Angie had been able to stand him up to this point was because she'd seen him take a picture out of his wallet and run his finger over the outline of a boy's smooth, young face. She found out later from Larry that the photo was of Jack's son who'd been killed in a car accident some years ago. As for Larry and Jack, they were an odd pair, not really friends as far as she could tell, though about a year ago, they'd worked on several projects together. For the most part, they seemed to tolerate each other, though she sensed it was more than merely putting up with their differences. They were like distant relatives, connected solely by name and blood, who knew all the family secrets and felt trapped in that uneasy bond.

"We were driving along the ridge and the car got stuck," Larry explained. "The mud is real bad there." He moved the brim of his hat down just a little lower

on his forehead, taking care not to look in her direction. He'd been an hour late before he picked her up at the cabin, even before they went to get the gear they'd left the day before. When Larry had finally arrived, he'd seemed different, more remote, and his eyes were a strange kind of pale. She pretended not to notice, but she was no baby. He had the same look on his face as the kids in school who spent the noon hour smoking dope out behind the shed where the custodian kept his supplies.

"Mud's probably worse down here from what I've seen," Jack said, beginning to stack samples. Though his voice was calm and even, there was a slowness to it that sounded a cautious note—Jack certainly didn't believe Larry either.

"You haven't been to that ridge yet," Larry said, looking at him with a stare so blank she thought it would turn Jack inside out.

"Been in that area enough to know what's what."

Theo, his eye to a hand lens, hadn't even heard, she was sure. He hardly ever noticed them, and when he did, they never held his interest for long. He'd always seemed to have a vague understanding of what she thought of as the real world around them—people and circumstances, for instance—but it hadn't bothered her much before. In fact, it was exactly this quality which had always fascinated her, like he had a secret he hadn't yet shared, a thought which would explain everything to her if only she had the patience to wait until he was ready to say something.

Putting down the lens, he brought over a core sample that hadn't yet been labeled. His research had something to do with ferns that were millions of years old, but beyond that, she couldn't say what it was that was so important. "Looks good, doesn't it?" he said quietly. "Of course, we won't know until the whole thing has been processed and analyzed, but so far, it's what we'd hoped to find."

He handed a gray sliver of rock over to Angie, who barely glanced at it before giving it back. She hated him for the way he seemed to be easing back into life as if nothing had happened. Bringing her all the way out here to pick him up, when she could've just stayed in the cabin, was his way of trying to get her to do the same. "Can we go now?" she asked.

"In a minute." Theo put the hand lens back to his eye and studied the sample once more. "Look here, this is just fabulous. You can actually see the history of the earth through these sediments." Angie looked, but saw only stone. He pointed with a broad, flat finger to a lighter fragment. "This section is from the Paleozoic: huge fern forests, the beginnings of amphibians and insects, a few reptiles, too." He paused and shook his head, almost as if he didn't believe it himself. "The tundra is so barren now, it's hard to imagine how full of life it once was here."

He turned his gaze out over the empty landscape—the thin layer of snow flowing over the marshy plain, a ribbon of white under a hazy sky. "Everything is so sensitive. Any time you disturb the ground cover here it causes this frozen soil to collapse." He gestured with his chin to a spot where two long, wide rows of

brown were plowed into the earth. “Those tire tracks will turn into gullies that’ll probably last for years.”

“I thought you wanted to make things better, not worse,” she said, looking up at him from under her brow.

“Sometimes it just can’t be helped, what happens in the short-term. You do what you can and hope that you don’t do too much damage.” Looking back at her he sighed, and then, after a moment’s hesitation, winked once, playfully, like he always used to—as if she were still a child. “I guess that’s the science lesson for now.”

Angie tightened her jacket around her chin and pushed her hands into her pockets, making her body as small as possible. For some reason it hurt her more when he tried too hard.

“What did you do today?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, which, though she hated lying, even to Theo, was as close to the truth as she dared tell.

“Nothing at all?” Theo asked again, then shook his head at the blank stare she gave him in return.

Actually, except for the few hours Larry had been out by himself, they’d sat almost all afternoon inside the cabin, going out only to smoke, a defiance she knew would hurt her father most of all if he ever found out. Theo hated the smell of cigarettes and constantly lectured about the risks. He’d said from the first that Larry would have to smoke outside. As it happened, the arrangement turned out

well because they had discovered if they stood near the wall that abutted the oil furnace, they could stay somewhat warm and also be far away from her father and Jack, in spirit, if not in reality. Angie liked to hear what Larry had to say—his taste in music, where he'd traveled, who he'd been with. That's how she first found out about Jack and his son, and about Larry and his own divorces. Sometimes though, she wished that he wouldn't tell her everything. Now, for example, she knew more about Jack than she would have wanted. Like the fact that Jack had been the driver in the accident that killed his son. It made it harder to figure out how she felt about him. She wanted to hate him for it, but found that she couldn't.

Larry didn't ask too much about her, but even if he had, she would have told him as little about herself as possible. It would be boring for him to know that she would be sixteen next Fall or who her science teacher had been the year before. Besides, she mainly just liked to be near him, to watch him, the way he moved when he walked, his stride twice as long as hers. She liked his closeness when he sometimes brushed up against her or felt the pressure of his fingers on her arm as he turned her around to show her something.

Theo went back to sorting samples. As he turned away from her, a darkness spread onto the ground beyond him, and she thought she saw something like their two shadows—Theo's, her own—floating on the crust of the snow. When she closed her eyes and then opened them again, she found that the images had vanished. If she hadn't known better, she might've said they seemed like ghosts, but she'd been raised to disbelieve the irrational, even when it made more sense.

“Christ, can we get back now?” said Jack. “I’m damn near froze out here. Besides, I need to get some dinner going.”

After dinner, Angie went back to her bunk and sat down while the three men cleared the dishes. She had an unspoken arrangement with her father that she would not do any work of any kind while they were up here. He had forced her to come, but he couldn’t force her cooperation, or make her like it. Her hand felt for the sharp edge of paper underneath her pillow and she brought out a small rectangular series of photos, the kind you get at the drugstore in the self-service booths: four snapshots for a dollar. There was one place in their town, an odds and ends store where you could find things like angel hair and gold lacquer that still had one of these. She and her mother, in one of their last outings together when her mom could still get around, still feel okay for a couple hours, had gone behind the gold curtain and stood shoulder to shoulder in the airless, cramped booth. They’d been clowning around and each of the pictures, except the last one, showed them doing something ridiculous like sticking out their tongues at each other, or pulling their ears and crossing their eyes. They had run out of ideas at the end of the photo session, and the camera had caught them, for a moment, unguarded. There had always been a remarkable similarity between the two of them. They had the same sharp chins and dark eyes, the same thin faces, and for years the family resemblance had been so strong people would say they almost seemed to be sisters. The likeness between Angie and her mother had all but disappeared by the time they’d found themselves in the photo booth together, though. Her mother’s thin features had

swollen and grown puffy and the small lines by her mouth and eyes pulled her face down even though she'd tried hard to smile. Angie had hated her looking like that, like she needed something that Angie couldn't give. Fighting back the ache in her chest, the hollow point that would suck her up inside it if she wasn't careful, she put the photos away.

She heard the rattle of dishes being put away, then the final slap of cupboard doors closing, and went over to find out what Larry and Jack wanted to do that evening. Ever since they'd come here three months ago, the evening ritual had been an undeniable bore. Usually, it would go this way: Theo would set up his samples on the kitchen table and start sorting through the day's work, Jack and Larry would play cards until midnight, then she'd go outside with them just to see the sun still up in the sky. Afterwards, they'd come in again, put a square piece of aluminum-covered cardboard in the window to make their bodies think about nighttime and slowing down, and then start checkers or chess or just sit around some more. Tonight, Jack brought over some cards, but Larry didn't feel up to a game.

"I'll pass," said Larry, twisting open a bottle of beer and flicking the cap into the corner somewhere. He'd been in a funny mood all day, ever since her father had found a letter for him in the supply drop that morning. She knew, after she'd seen the New Mexico postmark—his daughter and one of his ex-wives lived in Albuquerque—that there was little chance she'd be able to coax him out of his

funk. Theo had also received a letter, plus a small package, probably something to do with his grant, or his work.

“Come on, play some cards,” Jack said, seemingly friendly, though there was an edge to his voice as if he were taunting Larry in some way—the same sort of thing Larry did to him when Jack wanted to be by himself. “Are you going to sit there and sulk all night?”

“That’s about the gist of it,” Larry said, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the wall.

Angie nudged his foot with hers, but he didn’t respond. He just sat there like a stone, ignoring her. “Oh, poor baby,” she said, the sudden sharpness in her voice surprising her. “Poor little Larry.” She stuck out her lower lip, and looked forlornly at him. She’d hoped to be able to get a smile out of him at least, and couldn’t understand where this urge to hurt him had come from. Larry turned flat, expressionless eyes on her, and she felt the rebuke as sharply as if he had scolded her. The heat rose in her face, and she began to twirl the edges of her short, chopped hair, trying as hard as she could to affect a hollow look of boredom. Larry turned away and went back to his beer.

Jack looked over at her questioningly, but she averted her eyes before he could say anything. Sometimes, he acted as if there were a connection between them, as if he could understand her better than Theo or Larry, and she resented him for this. It made her feel as if she owed him something, like she should be on her best behavior around him, or try to get along with him.

“Hey, Angie,” Jack said suddenly, and she turned to look at him. He’d already made a pretty good dent in a fifth of Jack Daniel’s, and his coordination was slightly off. He swayed when he stood up, and then shuffled over to where she sat. He handed her a small paper bag, folded over at the top, an interesting bulge at the bottom. “Go ahead. Open it.”

“Is it alive?” she asked, trying to lighten the moment. She was sure this would be something dumb like a cookie or a candy bar, something you’d give to a child who’d been having a bad time of it, and she dreaded having to pretend she was grateful or touched. She undid the top of the bag, reached in, and felt something smooth and rounded, silky to the touch. She drew her hand out, and found in her palm a finely carved polar bear. The nose and eyes had been painted black as well as the definition of the paws, but the remainder was sleek and white, round and handsome. It was, she had to admit, truly magnificent, and she immediately loved it in spite of herself. The carving was a reminder of the vast plains of snow, the beauty and simplicity of the tundra. She felt her throat catch as she spoke. “Where’d you get this?”

Jack shook his head. “Oh, that’s nothing special. Just something I picked up at a flea market in Anchorage a couple of years ago, probably made in Japan or somewhere like that. It’s not ivory or anything, just soapstone.” He laughed nervously, as if this would somehow soothe him.

Angie pretended to laugh, too, and immediately felt idiotic. She knew very well it was nicer than Jack made it out to be. She had seen some of these same

figures when she and her dad had stopped in Fairbanks at the beginning of the summer. They were hand-carved by the Inuits or the Aleuts, or maybe both, she wasn't sure any more, and finished with skill and something magical—some inexplicable force that seemed to make the figure on her palm come alive. “Well, thanks.”

“No big deal,” said Jack, beginning to deal out cards for Solitaire, “like I said, just something I picked up. Thought you might as well have it.”

She went back to her bed and stuffed the paper bag, with the bear inside, under the pillow. She would look at it more later, when she had some time to herself. Angie felt she should say something else, but when she gazed across the narrow room, Jack appeared to be lost in his card game, and she lost her nerve.

Theo sighed and lay his pencil down on the table. He took his glasses off, folded them neatly and put them in his shirt pocket. There were faint red marks on the bridge of his nose where the weight of the glasses dug into his skin and he rubbed this area with thumb and forefinger. She knew his headaches, the really bad ones, often started there. A momentary twinge of remorse flared in her and then died—if he didn't take care of himself, it was his own fault.

“When are you going to be finished?” she asked, coming over to him.

“Never.” He shook his head and laughed, just slightly. There was something that seemed different about him out from behind his glasses like that—something that made him less like Theo and more like her father. He leaned

forward and looked so hard into her eyes that she thought, just for a moment, he could tell what she was thinking.

“What’s up?”

She shrugged her shoulders and absently played with the pencil in front of her, twirling it around in circles. “Nothing.”

He stroked her hair with his broad hand and then ruffled it badly, letting his fingers rest briefly on her cheek. For years she’d kept her hair long and dark like her mother’s; now it was cut short and dyed blonde, the dark roots just beginning to show. “Want to help me sort some of these?”

“Not really.”

He looked at her, through her really, as if remembering something else. “You know,” he said, his tone flat, “you might not be so bored out here if you took a little bit of interest in what was going on.”

“It’s no use,” she said, moving away from the table, “this whole place stinks.” As she said this she brushed her hand over the tops of the slides—close enough to hint that she could knock them over if she wanted to. Her nerves were unaccountably raw, and she felt weepy and agitated, like she wanted to start a fight.

“Seriously, though. You could be my lab partner up here. Maybe you could even get some high school credit for this.”

Angie shrugged, but his comment irritated her—he must know how much she hated it here. She circled the table letting the index finger of her left hand make a thin trail in the fine layer of dust that covered the table. Angie came around to

Theo again, and just before she reached him, her finger distractedly bumped the package she'd seen earlier, and she stopped to look at it more closely. The return address was the department where he worked, but there was a name written on top of the label—Franklin—that didn't sound familiar. "Who's this from?"

Her father had gone back to his work, and looked up momentarily, then back down to the slide in front of him. "One of my colleagues. You know her, I think. Carol Franklin."

His voice was steady, but she'd been watching him closely, and thought she saw him stop his work for just a moment when he'd answered. Angie made a face. Carol had come over to their house the night before they'd left, saying she just wanted to wish them luck. Her father, she thought, had seemed overly polite, and in spite of the fact that they'd needed to pack for the next day's trip, Carol ended up staying for dinner. Nothing, not even so much as a secretive glance between them had happened, and though Carol had squeezed her father's hand on her way out that evening, Angie had convinced herself by the next morning that she'd been silly to assume anything might be going on. Still, now that she thought about it, this was the third time he'd received something from her since they'd been up here, and he wasn't getting mail from anyone else.

"Can I open these, then?" He looked up abruptly, and she continued, "I just want something to do. Wouldn't that be helpful?"

"Angie, really. It's my personal mail. There may be confidential materials from the department—grade reports, e-mails, etc. I just wouldn't feel comfortable."

“Maybe there’s a love letter,” she finally said, unable to hold back.

Theo laughed, and it surprised her. “Of course not. Where’d you get that idea?”

Angie shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, what if Carol’s in love with you? Suppose she thinks you feel the same way?”

Theo stopped work and motioned for Angie to come over to him. She did so, but slowly, acting as if it would be too much trouble to walk at a normal pace. She sat down next to him, though not so close that they were touching. “Look, Angie, this is silly for you to worry about. I’m not in love with Carol, or anyone else right now.”

She nodded her head, but feeling very close to tears, looked away from him while he was talking.

He cleared his throat. “I think you know how I felt about your mother.”

Angie felt the hair on the back of her neck bristle, and the familiar feeling of dread, which she’d become accustomed to over the last few months, settled heavily in the pit of her stomach. Her mother was like a memento to him now, something he’d put away and would look at once a year. He might even talk of her mother’s death to Carol, and she would feel sorry for him, and comfort him, and he might even fall asleep peacefully at night, and wake in the morning without a thought of the past. Angie wanted to be a child again, and climb into her father’s lap, hear the low rumble of his voice as he talked with her, holding her in his arms, keeping change and terrible fate far away from them.

“You’ve forgotten her already, I can tell,” Angie said bitterly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, and she could tell by his tone, both curt and dismissive, that he’d lost patience with her.

“Yes, you have,” she said, accusing him, and this time she brought her hand down on top of the last three slides he’d made and quickly swept them off the table. The glass popped and burst into tiny shards that lay scattered about her feet.

Theo grabbed her wrist and pulled her back over to him. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” he said, his lips pressed so hard together they were almost white.

She shook her head, not trusting herself to say anything and wrenched her arm free of his grasp.

“Damn it, Angie, I don’t understand you,” he said, shaking his head, but the fight had gone out of his voice. “I’ve been working on this project all summer. You know how important this is to my research. I’m not even halfway where I should be and I’ve only got a couple of months left. Why won’t you help me?”

She spun around sharply and walked over to where her parka hung, listening to the crunch of glass beneath her shoes as she stepped on the broken slides. She slowly put on her coat, feeling her father’s eyes on her all the time, and went over to where Larry was still sitting, moodily drinking his beer.

“Let’s go out,” she whispered, kicking the edge of the chair he sat on, fighting off the ache again. It was worse now, much deeper. “I can’t stand it in here tonight.”

Larry moved his hat back from his eyes, pretending, maybe for her sake, maybe for his, that he hadn't just heard everything that had happened. "Where to?"

"I want to go back to the drill site. There's something I have to see."

"I don't know," he said, looking over in Theo's direction. "Can't it wait?" His fingers drummed a syncopated rhythm on the wall of the cabin. It made a faint thudding sound that echoed around the room.

Angie glanced back at her father, but he was now busy cleaning up the broken glass. Larry would not have to worry about taking her out. "I really need to go tonight."

Larry nodded and stood up, grabbing his car keys and parka on the way out of the cabin. He held the door open for her, and as they were leaving, she heard Jack call out to them to be careful.

Larry took out the Edith tape and fiddled around with the controls until he had everything adjusted for Billie Holliday—at least Angie could understand this one, though it still wasn't her taste in music. That French stuff had been getting on her nerves. He drew off the glove on his right hand with his teeth, careful to keep the left hand on the steering wheel, and listened to the slight variations in sound as he moved around the knobs and buttons. His eyes were as deep and faraway as the sky, and the skin on the back of his hand was faintly lined, the smooth alternating with the rough.

He straightened up and put his glove back on. “So. Are we really going to the drill site?”

“No. Out to those graves.”

“I thought so.”

They were driving, it seemed, straight into the sky. The flat, white plain stretched for miles in front of them and then sloped downward out of sight only to be met by a wall of blue dropping down from the heavens. Somewhere, from a distance inside her head, she heard her father talking about precipitation and evaporation and how the tundra was really a desert, dryer than the Sahara; how the lowlands cracked and formed polygons making them look like dry lake beds; and how high, round ice hills sometimes marked the graves of dead lakes. Angie, who often imagined her mother as a ragged angel, wondered if this was what she saw from up above when she looked down on them and whether she cared, even a little, about what happened to them now.

Once they reached the rise overlooking the graveyard, and she could see it clearly, Larry parked the truck, taking care to stay in the old tire ruts and not make any new ones. She jumped out and quickly scanned the stillness around her, but there was nothing except even planes of white and blue and the wavering ghosts of those crosses on the hillside. The evening sun spilling onto their faces had the same flat brilliance as the sunlight that had streamed in radiantly from the window behind the sofa in their living room at home. There were huge chunks of time—weeks, maybe even a month or two—when her mother had lain there helplessly, not

able to do a thing for herself. Once, Angie had watched as she tried to swallow a sip of water—saw how, with the straw resting between her lips, it had leaked out of the side of her mouth, over her jaw and down her neck. She remembered taking tissues from a box by the side of her mother’s makeshift bed, and trying to wipe away the moisture; gently at first, but then more roughly as she realized that it was no longer water that was spilling out, but her mother’s own saliva. Disgusted, but more than that—terrified, and feeling somehow betrayed—Angie had shoved her, hard. She hadn’t wanted to hurt her, just push her away, but her bones were brittle from the cancer, and her arm had broken in two places. Angie told the nurses later, the ones who came by twice a day, that her mother had rolled off the sofa. She remembered the absolute disbelief that showed in their eyes, but they had allowed her the lie just the same, just as Theo had and still did. Even thinking about it now she felt physically ill, the acid rising into her throat and her stomach contracting.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been standing there, the wind blowing so hard against her that she had to brace herself against the force of it, when she heard Larry’s footsteps on the snow behind her. Suddenly feeling the need for shelter, a buffer against the elements, she leaned toward the warmth of his body and put her arms around his waist, shivering slightly as she felt the weight of his arm around her shoulders. She moved her face up towards his and kissed him softly, feeling the slight return of pressure on her lips before he pulled himself away.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

“How old are you?” he said, his hands gripping her shoulders.

“Nineteen.”

“Right.”

“Okay, fifteen, but I’ll be sixteen next month.”

Keeping one arm around her shoulders, he fished for the pack of cigarettes in his jacket pocket with his free hand. “Same as my kid,” he said, not looking at her, but offering her a cigarette all the same.

She jerked herself free from his grasp and moved away to the opposite side of the truck. Leaning with her back against the door handle, feeling the reassuring stab of metal between her shoulder blades, she whispered through the blur of heat that was in her throat, “The doctors cut my mother’s breasts off when she was sick, but it didn’t help, she still died.” She heard the thud of his boot as it hit the tire, a low-pitched scuffling sound. “She was in a lot of pain.”

He exhaled deeply. “Must have been.”

“I think about her all the time—even when I don’t want to.”

Larry said nothing, but she heard the rustle of his jacket as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I see things I can’t explain—ordinary things like shadows and light that don’t seem to be the way they should.”

She heard the jingle of keys being taken out. Moving slowly around to the other side of the truck, she dug the toe of her boot into the ground in front of her, kicking up a small cloud of snow with each step.

Larry's gaze was fixed on her as she came up to where he stood, and his expression was strange—almost wistful, but sad, too, not at all like the Larry she thought she knew. He put his hand on the back of her neck and drew her close to him, his lips just barely brushing her ear. His voice was low and strange. "There's nothing to see out here. It's so empty your mind makes things up."

"That doesn't make any sense to me," she said irritably, trying to push him away, but he stood his ground.

His eyes scanned hers as if he were studying her. She could feel his breath on her face and smell the sourness of the tobacco from his cigarettes—an aroma so powerful it would have made her sick except for the scent of the fresh, powdery snow that fell from his glove onto her nose and lips as he brushed her hair back from her face. He leaned his body into hers, pushing her up against the truck, and started to kiss her, really kiss her, like she'd always thought about—deep and full of longing—not like anything she'd ever experienced with Tommy Fuentes or any of the other times she'd played around with sex. She imagined herself in the back of Tommy's father's station wagon, the cold vinyl seats sticking to her exposed flesh, and then, as now, felt herself falling through cold and darkness, suspended by nothing, no net below. She heard Larry's breath catch slightly and felt his hand move down her shoulder and onto her breast, and suddenly, instead of desire, she felt as if she'd been scalded; that she was moving farther and farther away from everyone and there was only a small amount of tissue and bone keeping her from slipping into the shadows herself.

“No,” she said emphatically, shaking her head, as she shoved him away.

“Just leave me alone.”

He started to say something else, but she didn’t hear him. She jammed her hands into her pockets and went down the slope in the direction of their camp, her footsteps melting the ground beneath. Away from Larry, who was behind her now, only a pinpoint of black against the sky, and out of sight of Theo and Jack, she saw her shadow stretch out endlessly over the frozen ground, leading the way.

VOLTAGE

“Now let me get this straight,” Owen says. He is sure to make eye contact with his son, Tom, who sits directly across from him on the train. Best, he thinks, to put the kid in a bit of a defensive position. “You say you’re not having any trouble at school? That’s not what I hear from your mother.”

Tom laughs. He is a tall, skinny boy, seventeen years old, much more like his mother in his charming lightheartedness than his father. “School is having trouble with me. They don’t understand me and that makes them uncomfortable.”

Owen drums his fingers on the armrest in the compartment and contemplates the boy in front of him. Tom is too sure of himself for his own good. He folds an air of maturity around himself like a cape, as if he can protect himself this way, but it would be easy to bring his son down, if he wants. For all his talk, Tom is not an adult, he doesn’t know everything, and there may still be room for Owen in his son’s life.

They are going south from Bradley to Glasford where they will catch up with the circus and Owen’s life as an electrician and general handyman for a somewhat third-rate troupe. It is unbearably cold inside, the heating always questionable along this line of track, and they can see their breath coming out in puffs and bursts. Owen’s face is stiff and faintly lined, the skin stippled with gray whiskers. He is a big, bulky man and his size commands attention, though it is the calm, easy way he moves that keeps him from seeming too fierce. Still, he is used

to people listening to what he has to say, and cannot let go of the idea of shaking some sense into Tom. “Maybe they have some problem with you not doing your work or cutting class. That could have something to do with it, don’t you think?”

“Dad,” says Tom impatiently, but not unkindly, as he tucks his hands in his pockets. “They don’t understand when someone is straight with them. They’re always looking for a terrible reason you’ve said or done something—even if there is no such reason.”

This time it’s Owen’s turn to laugh. The sound is sharp and derisive. “That sounds like a whole lot of crap to me.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

He holds his son’s gaze a second or two longer than usual. He wants to make sure the boy knows he is not taken in—he understands more than Tom thinks he does. When it is clear that Tom will offer no further explanation, Owen shrugs, as if to say *I can’t stop you from lying to me*, and turns away.

At his ex-wife’s insistence, and against his better judgment, Owen has agreed to bring Tom home with him for awhile, though in all twelve years since the divorce, Owen has never spent more than a weekend at a time with his son, stopping in to visit him only when there was a lull in his work. This is not because he doesn’t love Tom, but because he feels it would be too confusing—or at least had felt that way at the time of the divorce—for the boy to be moving back and forth between his two parents. Much better to have one solid environment than two uncertain ones. This is a principle he still believes in, though Tom has been having

trouble, especially in school. It certainly is not the kind of trouble Owen would have expected—not the kind of rebellious, stubborn anger he had felt inside himself as a teenager, the quick release of power in his fists and words, the knowledge as he grew older that his unusual strength and physical prowess could take on his father. Over the years, with difficulty, he has learned to check this anger. He could've understood his son's resistance much better if it were the same, but Tom's rebellion is a quiet one. He doesn't yell or act out, he keeps his distance, and though he still has passing grades, they're lower than they've ever been, a warning sign according to his teachers.

Owen takes out a package of greasy, salted peanuts Laura has packed with their lunch and launches them one by one into his mouth, chewing each as if it were a charge of ammunition he needs to snuff out. He looks out the window and watches as flocks of Canada geese rise up in the air, suspended mid-flight, testing the direction of the wind, and takes in the smooth, unrestricted scenery of the countryside. Straw-colored corn stalks are splayed across the brown fields and the sky hangs low and heavy over the earth. Each flat, prairie mile they travel, each town that slips away behind them, makes Owen feel more at ease.

Tom has fallen asleep somewhere along the way. The sketchpad and pencils he has been using threaten to slide off his lap, and Owen slowly moves them to the side, careful not to wake Tom as he does this. Owen marvels at the blonde, shiny hair, the widow's peak he has inherited from his mother, the jeans that ride a little too short, and the shirt cuffs that hang over his wrists. He looks

small and fragile for a boy his age—his wrists are thin and delicate, his fingers slim. Owen remembers how Tom used to measure his hand against Owen’s larger one, their palms together, Tom’s fingers stretched as far and straight as they would go.

The train comes to a halt at the station and he kicks the toe of Tom’s boot with his loafer, waking him at once. “Come on. Time to get going,” Owen says, and takes their two suitcases down from the top rack. Tom opens his eyes, stretches, and looks wistfully up at his father, as if the realization of what is happening has finally hit him. Tom’s eyes fill up almost instantly, and he hurriedly looks out the window, discreetly using his jacket sleeve to wipe away the overflow of tears in his eyes. Owen winces when he sees the gentle side of Tom, the side that caresses the smooth, broad noses of the horses on his grandfather’s farm and allows himself to be nuzzled by slippery horse lips, the part of the boy who still must hug his mother good-night, the part that goes all teary-eyed when he thinks of stray animals. This, in a seventeen-year-old boy, is certainly not natural.

“This is going to be a helluva winter,” Owen says at last, barely looking in Tom’s direction. The gentle tone of his own voice surprises him and he is glad he hadn’t lost his temper, though it has cost him some effort. “Could get some snow in the next couple of weeks.”

“Sure,” says Tom, his voice unsteady, “I guess.”

Owen taps his son good-naturedly on the shoulder, though he feels more regret than he can say for the need of this small deception, and motions for Tom to get out of the train. They walk off the platform—there is nothing more than that at

the stop in Glasford—and immediately take a right, heading west toward the edge of the city and the big tent tops they can barely see over the crowns of maples and oaks. The path takes them just along the river and the brown, mud-laden roil of the swollen waters. The ground is hard, things are beginning to freeze, and Owen's toes feel numb through the soles of his shoes—loafers to appease Laura instead of the usual work boots.

They walk along in silence for a ways until Owen speaks up. “Ever been along this part of the Illinois?”

Tom shakes his head.

“Well,” Owen says, nodding, feeling inexplicably glad to be the first one showing his son the world outside his hometown, “you’ll like this place. The south bank has lots of paddlewheels still working the river and you can see them here in the evenings. At night, if we’re behind on the work, we just keep going after dark. You can see the lights from the big torches reflected off the water. Just here,” he says, motioning with his arm in a broad encompassing sweep of the bend in front of them, “it sometimes looks more like day than night.”

Tom stares up at his father, a questioning look in his eye. They have been apart too long, thinks Owen. Neither of them knows how to talk to the other. He nudges Tom in the side with his elbow, hoping the action seems casual and easy-going. “You’re going to like helping out your old man, aren’t you?” He sets the suitcases on the frozen ground and playfully socks Tom in the shoulder. He shuffles his feet and circles around giving his best prizefighter imitation, only

stopping when he is completely out of breath. “So, what do you think? Are we in this together?”

Tom turns toward him, eyes fixed on his face, with a new expression that Owen doesn’t recognize. “Sure,” he says, and Owen feels a sudden hope gather its forces—maybe this will work out.

Owen’s single-wide, aluminum Windstar trailer is set apart from the others by an extra five or ten minute walk. There is a definite hierarchy among the circus crowd—animal trainers and high wire artists being in the first tier, laborers like himself in the last. Owen doesn’t mind in the least. He’d rather not be kept awake by their noise and exuberance and now, especially, he does not want Tom to be influenced by them. They are a funny crowd, this circus group, very close-knit, and hard to understand or get close to unless you are that type of person yourself. What type this is, Owen hasn’t quite figured out, though he thinks they are dreamers, somehow attached to the notion that life is magical, or at least, more than it seems—an idea he finds as arrogant as it is ridiculous. He is, if anything, a realist. There are exceptions of course, and in this regard, he always thinks of Miriam, a twenty-six-year-old bareback rider who has become, if not a friend, then at least a person he can talk to. Owen remembers the first time he saw Miriam at her place, when he’d helped her install a new water heater. She was smaller in person than she seemed during a performance when the lights illuminated every movement, her body all there was to be seen in the huge arena—and he was struck by the thin

shoulders, the face that was more pale and drawn than he recalled. Though he'd expected to find chaos and abandon, there was an order to things he hadn't counted on, a fact which pleased him more than he felt it should have. The furnishings were sparse, the displays, careful. Small porcelain horses lined the top row of a bookshelf, an assortment of cheap, dime store fans—bright and colorful, just like the kind Tom, at five or six, had insisted on buying his mother one Christmas—was carefully and meticulously framed. Not least, perhaps, it was the assortment of photos on the refrigerator, most of which were of her four-year-old daughter, Rebecca, who was still back home with Miriam's mother, which comforted him most. And whether it is this shared bond of parenthood and loss which also unsettles him, Owen isn't sure. He only knows that when they are together, he feels the same way he did in high school, when he would rev up the car engine just at the crest of a hill, and feel his stomach drop as the car flew over. Now, he will have both Miriam and Tom here with him, and it is the sudden addition of his son to this haphazard world which cheers him unexpectedly.

The next morning before Tom wakes, Owen makes a decent breakfast, something he rarely does anymore on his own. He scrambles some eggs, makes coffee, even puts a few biscuits in the oven, a project which he has meant to be welcoming, but which has had a melancholy effect on him instead. Tom still hasn't woken by the time he's finished cooking, so Owen sits down, ready to start eating. As he maneuvers a mouthful of eggs onto his fork, there is a yawn and sounds of

stretching from the corner of the room where Tom has his belongings heaped on the mattress which doubles as his bed.

“Smells good. Can I have some breakfast?”

“Here. Start with this,” Owen says, and pushes his plate across the table.

“There’s some coffee, too, if you want.”

“Sure,” says Tom. He shakes the covers off and comes over, his bare arms and chest covered in gooseflesh. He is wearing nothing but a pair of boxers which barely stay on his hips. His long, skinny legs remind Owen of a colt, strong and graceful, but still unsteady.

Tom looks out the back window of the trailer as he sits down. “You like it here?” he asks, still half-asleep. His hair is mussed in several directions. He reaches across the table for the coffee and pours a large cup.

“It’s all right. Nothing I couldn’t do without.”

“You like it better than having a regular home?”

“It is my home.” He tries to keep his voice even, like it’s a matter of little consequence to him.

“I guess so,” says Tom, not taking his eyes off Owen.

“You might even stay here long enough, you’d feel comfortable.”

But Tom is not a boy who can lie, even to make Owen feel better. “I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe.” He takes another sip of coffee before attacking the food on his plate with serious enthusiasm. There is a strained silence between them; the quiet is heavy and oppressive rather than comforting. Tom fidgets in his seat, and

Owen thinks he seems anxious, as if he has more to say, but can't bring himself to do it.

"Well, spit it out," Owen says impatiently, feeling a great ball of irritation well up inside him. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He scoots the food on his plate around and then quickly shovels in a bite and swallows. "Did she really have to kick you out?"

"Jesus," Owen says. "Is that what she told you?" A memory, unbidden, comes to him of Laura asleep on a blanket outside, the baby next to her. The two of them seemed to float on a patch of green lawn beneath the broad spread of the oak tree, the only oasis in the dry backyard. Warm sunlight filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead, and shadows swayed and drifted with the movement of the breeze, landing here and there before settling back into position, only to move again. Their life together had been like that, something he could never quite get hold of, or understand. It was as if they had been constantly in motion, but moving nowhere. Now there was this. Her version of events or his? True, she'd been angry and had told him to leave, but he didn't have to, he wouldn't have taken orders from her or anyone else. He left because there was no reason to stay. The feeling that he had been betrayed came to settle heavily in his chest, and he suddenly wanted to know if, even after all these years and the distance between them, his pain would be a kind of sadness for her, too. It would be a relief to know that the whole thing had not just been an illusion.

“We’d better get going,” Owen says abruptly, pushing his chair away from the table and standing up.

Tom stays quiet as Owen walks to the back of the trailer and prepares to shave, then follows him to the open door of the bathroom, and begins to talk to him like they do this all the time, as if this is nothing new. Owen can sense no awkwardness or reserve on Tom’s part, yet he himself feels uncertain, a bit insecure. Owen can remember times like this with his own father, but can’t pin down a similar moment when Tom was small.

“Will you take me around today?” Tom asks, “I’d like to see what it’s like here.”

“Can’t make any promises. We’ve got a lot to do before the show tonight,” he says, a bit more gruffly than he has intended. He purposely doesn’t turn to look at Tom so he won’t notice if this is disappointing to him or not.

They are in the main tent now, but Owen is having trouble getting Tom to do any real work. Tom cannot take his eyes off the man and woman who are gracefully swinging above, forty feet up from the sawdust floor, no net below them. The woman, whose name is Theresa, does two somersaults in the air and for a moment, both father and son hold their breath until she reaches the other flyer and locks hands with his. They continue like this for a while, moving back and forth between the towers, until someone gives a signal and Theresa somersaults to the

high platform, teetering forward just a fraction of an inch before she regains her balance and rights herself.

Tom whistles softly under his breath. "That's incredible," he says. "How do they do that?"

"It's hard work, that's all," says Owen, "just like anything else."

Tom frowns and shakes his head. "It's more than that, don't you think?"

"They're flesh and blood, no different than you or me," Owen says, and then shudders involuntarily, as he remembers the awkward, tangled heap of a body he'd seen over a year ago, a fifteen-year-old boy who'd taken a bad fall during practice.

"Still, I'd like to try that some day." Tom waves to the woman standing on the platform and she waves back, blowing him a couple of kisses. Owen would like to say something that might make an impact, could let the boy see the risks and dangers as well as the excitement, but Tom is now lost in his own faraway thoughts. They stand together like this for a moment or two longer, a faint residue of understanding keeping Owen next to his son. He knows they should get on with their work, but is reluctant to break the spell of the moment.

A sudden pounding of hooves startles Owen and he turns to see Miriam astride her brown and white appaloosa, riding directly toward them. He is gauging the horse's distance, judging the number of seconds it will take before he, or Tom, is flattened by the pounding hooves, when he sees the slight lean to the left in the animal's broad flanks. He is almost sure Miriam knows what she is doing, but it is this small uncertainty which makes his mouth go dry and his skin turn suddenly

cold, freezing him like a stone to the spot. The horse continues to the left, though, and just as she passes, Miriam whisks Owen's hat off his head. For an instant, she touches him and he feels her skin against his, warm and alive.

Miriam circles around and rides back, coming to a stop near them. She has her hair pulled back in a braid, and when she tilts her head and smiles, Owen can't help but notice the smooth line of skin from earlobe to shoulder, the graceful bend of her arm.

"Wow, that was great," Tom says, and applauds. "Dad never had a clue."

"I wish all my audiences were as enthusiastic," Miriam says as she throws Owen's hat to him. "Did you really think I'd run you down, Owen? I may be difficult, but I don't murder people if they help me with house repairs." She smiles, and then eyes Tom with curiosity, but it is not a mean-spirited look, the kind that asks all of the wrong questions, or assumes the worst.

"How'd you learn to ride like that?" Tom asks, and Owen gratefully turns from the two of them toward one of the main supports where an electrical box sits. As long as he is here, he might as well patch some wiring, a project he'd been meaning to get to for a week or so. He feels more comfortable now that he's busy, though he manages to stay close enough to Tom and Miriam that he can still see and hear them.

She shrugs. "I've been doing this pretty much since I can remember. My folks were in the circus, too."

Tom asks her another question, this time about her other horses, and finds out in minute detail exactly how much to feed them, how long she's had them, what tricks she can or cannot do because of the limitations of the ring and the temperament of the individual horse. They are perfectly at ease with each other, and Owen wonders what it is that makes them feel so comfortable at once—this is something he could never do—at least, it is impossible now. He glances up and notices, too, Tom's clear, expressive eyes, which seem to trace Miriam's silhouette against the backdrop of empty bleachers. A sudden discomfort, like the point of a knife blade, hot and thin, pierces the apex of his ribcage, and Owen is embarrassed to recognize his own jealousy. This is ridiculous, he thinks, and berates himself for being an idiot, as he packs his tools back into his leather bag.

“We'd better go,” he says, interrupting them. He turns away and motions to Tom to follow, though he cannot resist a final parting with Miriam, one he immediately regrets as too obvious. “I'll be working the lights for the show later,” he tells her, and Owen thinks he sees her glance at Tom before nodding her head in acknowledgment.

Arlen Brown, one of the props' crew, is flat out drunk again, just an hour before the show. The evening manager has asked Owen if Tom might help out, a request Owen feels he cannot deny, though he is somewhat apprehensive. He knows the way people talk around here if something isn't done right. Tom, along with several others, all of them dressed in black from head-to-toe, will scurry

around with benches and chairs and platforms, emptying the ring after one performer, and preparing it for the next. Though it is a relatively simple chore, it requires some concentration and skill, and Owen is not sure Tom understands what he is up against.

“Dad,” Tom says, after Owen has gone over the details yet again, “it’s not like I have to be a brain surgeon to figure this out.” He smiles, and leans on the wall of the booth, his arms crossed in front of him, a posture which seems to say he is both amused by his father’s overprotective nature and weary of it at the same time. “Don’t you think I can handle this?”

A sudden warmth floods Owen’s face, aware that his true feelings are somewhat mixed. He thinks Tom can do the job, if he just puts his mind to it. Whether Tom will make that commitment or not is another matter.

“I never said that.”

“I won’t mess up. I promise.” Tom lightly kicks the wall behind him with the heel of his boot, and looks straight into his father’s eyes. It seems to Owen that there is an unfathomable tenderness in those eyes, as if Tom understands everything about him, and he winces at the thought that he is so transparent. What harm could it possibly do to let himself trust in this boy, even if just a little?

Owen nods, as if he has been persuaded, and, as he works, feels himself begin to relax. His fingers are dexterous and graceful as he slides them over wiring and cable, checking here and there if the housing seems weak or a connection faulty. He can lose himself in his work more easily than anything else, and, in spite

of himself, admits that he finds the performances exciting as well. There is the way the colors sweep in front of his eyes, gold layered upon blue and red on yellow. Beams of light are swallowed by costumes and skin, and tossed back into the eyes of the audience. Applause rumbles up from beneath the booth where he sits and reverberates all around him until he sees only color and movement, and feels the emotion of the audience traveling lightly on a wave of sound. If he does his job just right, the performance below, the lights, the audience, his movements will become one, and there will be nothing separating any of them under that canvas shield.

“Do you think I could get a job here someday?” Tom says suddenly. He is looking nowhere in particular, as if he is conjuring up an image in his mind.

The words practically jolt Owen from his seat—this seems surprising, coming from Tom, who only this morning has said he wasn’t sure he wanted to stay. A sudden, powerful emotion sweeps over Owen, and he feels touched and grateful for Tom’s change of heart. Another feeling, something like the tug of conscience arises, too—Tom should finish school, first—but he quickly dismisses it. He imagines the two of them sharing time in the Windstar, having meals together. Of course, Tom is old enough to be alone—Owen himself had left home at sixteen. When Tom has saved enough money, he can get a place of his own, maybe Owen will even help him out a bit here and there. “It won’t be easy,” Owen says finally, “there’ll be a lot of hard work. You’d be surprised at how much they expect.”

“Don’t worry. I can handle it,” Tom says, moving closer to Owen and squeezing his bulky shoulder. “I’m not going to disappoint you.”

“Sure. Of course not.” The touch of Tom’s fingers is surprisingly tender, and Owen feels a wave of recognition shoot through him, a warning sign letting him know he should be careful—there is more fear and pain ahead, perhaps, than comfort and hope. He has let it happen before, simply wanting love and companionship as some kind of shield against the unkindness of the world, only to find its opposite instead. In this sense, Tom is wiser than he. Tom loves for all the right reasons, never demanding it in return, shaping and forming and twisting it to meet his demands. He gives of himself in a way Owen has never been able to do. There is, in some aspects, a maturity and adult awareness in his son that Owen can only marvel at. He wonders at what point in the natural order of things will Tom be the one in charge of him? Perhaps it has already happened, and Owen, without realizing how or when, has become the one who must be taken care of, a derelict in a frayed blue bathrobe, who is at once both deserving of sympathy and pathetic in the extreme.

“I guess I better go down there now,” Tom says, interrupting his thoughts. “It’s just about time.”

“Yeah, right,” Owen says, and then, after a moment’s hesitation adds, “good luck tonight.”

Tom nods his head and gives a 'thumbs up' before leaving. The door creaks as it swings open and then shut, and Owen feels an emptiness surround him which is at once terrible and familiar.

The performance goes well, everything from the clowns and their dogs, to the triple somersault on the high wire, to Miriam balancing easily on the broad back of her horse, hands outstretched, long hair flowing behind her. Owen pays particular attention to Tom, and watches as he flits here and there—he can vaguely make out the tall, thin outline of his son's body, even in the semi-darkness—and realizes with some pride that Tom is doing a good job, even recovering from someone else's mistake—a prop not removed when it should have been—with the calm consideration of a professional.

Finally, there is only the last business with the clowns left to end the show, and Owen allows himself to relax. A small, fluttering movement below—the flick of a horse's tail, possibly—attracts his attention, and he catches a glimpse of Tom standing close to the exit with Miriam. Owen turns toward the main panel in front of him, checking to make sure the settings are where they should be for the finale, and knows immediately that this is a mistake. He should not have looked away, and he feels a shock, like a wave of burning ice, move down his spine, the sweat beginning to make his shirt stick to his skin. When he looks back to the spot where Tom and Miriam had been just seconds ago, he finds they are gone.

There are not many people out by the time he is finished packing things away for the night, and he is unwilling to go back to the Windstar alone. He leaves the circus and makes his way, head down, hands in pockets, along the waterfront, back to the train depot and the sidewalks of Glasford. A street lamp flickers here and there, spreading his shadow intermittently across storefronts—one moment it is there, the next it is gone. The breeze picks up and he closes his collar tighter around his neck. The streets are quiet with only the low hum of an occasional car to disturb the silence and spray more light across his field of vision. He has been stupid, so stupid, he thinks. He should have known that Tom's wanting to stay had nothing to do with him. He doesn't know where Tom went, or Miriam, or if they went together, but feels an uneasy certainty about what will happen between them. After some time, maybe fifteen minutes, maybe forty-five, he's not sure, a man and woman, holding hands, walk toward him from the opposite direction, seemingly unaware of his presence. The woman, dark-haired and slim, walks with the assurance that a lover brings, striding confidently forward, her coat open just enough that he can see the black, clinging jersey she is wearing. She stops, looks up at the man tenderly, and draws his face to hers. They kiss long and passionately, the man enveloping her in his arms so that she seems swallowed up. Their interest in each other is like a great, shining orb that obscures and crackles the atmosphere around them, keeping others away. Owen feels light-headed and there is a sudden tightness in his chest, so that he feels as if he can't breathe, as if their exclusion of him is a damning force. He walks steadily forward, not altering his path, though

they are right in front of him now, and he begins to bear down on them. They are just five or so paces away, he can move at any time, or they can, because he knows now that he will not. He starts to pick up the speed of his step and perhaps the sound, now that he is closer, or a feeling that they are not alone, causes them to break away from each other slightly. Owen senses the sudden understanding dawning in the other's eyes, and the man pushes the woman out of the way, though he doesn't have time to move before Owen collides with him. The hit comes suddenly, and with enough force to send the man reeling backward and on to the ground. Owen keeps moving, though he hears them shouting and cursing at him, the woman crying softly. Their voices become fainter, and for the first time in his life, he realizes that the power in his own body has not been enough to make his world right again.

He presses forward, leaving town again to return to the familiarity of the circus, and walks straight through the avenue toward his trailer, but stops as he passes by one of the smaller tents and notices a light, not from the main overhead, but a smaller source, a lamp or flashlight, as it eases just under the edges of canvas. He walks closer, and from inside, he hears low voices, and a bit of movement, the soft whisper of intimacy between two people. Images he has tried to hold back all day flood his mind. He thinks of Tom and Miriam together, their arms and bodies intertwined, his mouth on hers, oblivious to the world around them like the couple he has just seen, and before he realizes what he is doing, he throws back the canvas flap of the tent and walks in, calling out Tom's name.

In the middle of the center ring is something stranger to Owen than if he had discovered Miriam and Tom together, as he has imagined. There are two or three lamps on the floor, connected with extension cords to outlets here and there, and Miriam, with broad, even strokes, gracefully brushes the massive horse in front of her, stroking his back in one long smooth movement. Tom stands behind an easel, sketching the scene. He holds the fat piece of charcoal like a wand, spreading the lines and crosshatchings and blurrings across the large sheet of drawing paper in front of him. It seems to take hold of his son in a way Owen hasn't noticed before. The deep intense look as his eyes scan first the page and then Miriam, the horse, the bit of background he includes.

"Hello, Dad," Tom says, glancing up from his drawing, his brows furrowed in visible concentration.

Owen stands next to his son, looking on in amazement as the picture before him takes shape. It is not at all what he has planned to do, but instead of watching Miriam, he watches his boy, the grand sweep of his arm, the broad strokes, the smaller ones, his blond hair and magnificent eyes. Owen puts his hand on the back of Tom's neck and gently squeezes the soft skin. He feels the movement of muscles between his fingers and under his palm, and the point of contact suddenly spikes like an electrical current up his arm and into his chest, making him tremble. It is not the slight tremor he has felt at times, straining against a piece of machinery or trying to loosen a bolt; he is shaking so hard he can feel the vibrations in his legs, as well as his arms and hands. Unaccountably, the fierce trembling stops, and a

mild hum like the whine of a pitchfork reverberates within him. Tom turns to Owen and smiles, then goes back to his sketching, his father's hand still resting on his shoulder.

FRANK AND NINA

She ran the several blocks to the bookstore, her breath visible, surrounding her like the autumn fog that drifted through leafless trees and settled its moist fingers on the tops of buildings and cars, raincoats and umbrellas. Though the people around her pulled their coats and suits tighter around their faces and peered out at the world with expressionless eyes, Olivia felt the damp air to be full of expectation, the reds and yellows of the season heavy on the ground now, their colors reflected in the gray sky overhead.

The door to the shop stuck slightly as she leaned into it with her shoulder, the whisper of a tiny bell announcing her entrance. Frank sat at the front counter, stooped over an open book, his rounded shoulders creating a hollow in his chest, the edge of his reading glasses poking out from the pocket of his shirt. He looked up from the book as she came toward him.

“Olivia. Home from school already? What a nice surprise.” He motioned for her to come around to the back of the counter, and when she did, he pushed another stool next to him for her to sit on. Of all the men her mother had married up to that point in Olivia’s life, Frank was definitely her favorite. He was an unusual man, tall and thin, but with a natural grace and elegance, like a dancer, thought Olivia, someone like Fred Astaire who could walk on walls and ceilings if he chose. His face was slender, with high cheekbones and narrow chin, but it was the easy, effortless way he seemed to work his way into their lives that struck her as most

significant. Sitting next to him like that, she could smell the tangy sweetness of his aftershave and almost feel the cool edge of his shirt against her arm, an intimacy which seemed strange to her in a man who was not her father. She knew they were both still testing the ground beneath them to see if it would stay firm or suck them in.

“You should’ve seen the fellow who was here this morning,” he said with a conspiratory wink. Frank had an odd way of talking, almost as if were an actor in an old movie, choosing words like ‘fellow’ and ‘young lady’ when nobody spoke that way anymore. It was one of the things Olivia loved best about him. He closed the book but kept his thumb in it to mark his place. “A gnome, if you can imagine, or someone so much like a gnome it would surprise me if he weren’t related in some way. A nice fellow, though I’m not sure the book he wants is the right one.”

Frank always described himself as a bookman—someone who loved the rare and unusual, the distinctive, in books. She saw the way he held them, weighed them in his hand as if testing to see if he could find it in his heart to love this one or that—a discriminating quality unusual in Frank, who most often saw fit not to question or probe. If it felt right to him, and only some did, he would slowly open the pages, carefully examining what she thought of as invisible details—things you wouldn’t see unless you knew what to look for. Frank said it was these hidden secrets—a printing error in a rare first edition, for example—which would be the difference between whether he made fifty dollars or five hundred. She believed him, at first, that this interest was just about business, how much money he could

make, but over time she saw this was just not so. There was the way his breath caught for an instant before he gently cracked the stiff binding open, the intense look in his eyes as he scanned the pages, which made her think it was something more, too—a curious feeling of secret enchantment, as if there were something these books could give him which nothing else could—an opening of the universe, undying love, impossible pleasure.

“What did he come in for?” she asked.

“The Chagall, of course,” he said. “The word has spread that I’ve got it.”

The book was Chagall’s *Les Vitraux De Jerusalem*, a rare catalogue of stained glass windows, a first edition, Frank had told her, one of just 300 numbered copies. He put a bookmark in between the pages he’d been holding open when she first came in, then reached under the counter and brought out a slim, brown leather volume. The letters on the book spine were done in gold leaf and there were grooves and ridges in the binding. She knew he wouldn’t have normally kept it out, but the man must have been a serious buyer. Frank carefully folded back the pages and felt the smooth paper between his fingertips. His hands were large and easily straddled an octave on the piano without straining the way her mother needed to when she played those same keys, and the image stayed with her as indicative of the way things were for them then. Before her mother had met and married Frank, she and Olivia had played out countless imaginary courtships, a preoccupation Olivia supposed they had from the old black and white movies her mother liked to watch. Olivia changed the stories in her mind so that her mother became the quick and

lively heroine, with her pale skin and dark hair, her thin arms and full lips, who just happened to meet men who were handsome and successful. Olivia thought her mother would have been the perfect wife for a man with strong, solid ambition, someone who could be boosted along by her mother's tremendous energy and drive, not someone who was content to let the world be. Possibly, her mother may have thought Frank was the type to dream big, and with her help, come out on top. Possibly, Frank had thought so, too. Nina's infectious enthusiasm could be overwhelming—it could've made him think there was more to him than he knew.

“Just think, this book was in Paris in 1961. Can you imagine how exciting it must have been? Chagall was more than 70, but he was still working all the time.” Frank sighed. “Apparently the fellow who was here this morning is an art historian from the University and was very glad to have found a copy of this. He wanted to buy it right now, but I'm holding out. A book like this doesn't come along every day. He's going to have to meet me fair and square on the asking price. You should've seen him when he was holding that book, Olivia. He was joyful, that's all you can say. Simply joyful.”

“Is it worth a lot?”

“It's hard to say, but, I think we're talking about,” he paused here and considered, as if thinking to tell her or not, “a lot, Livvy. More than you would imagine for a book.” She knew he worried about putting too much responsibility on her, and always said it wasn't for her to worry about prices and overhead. He stretched his arms above him and then brought them down behind his head.

“Here’s the sweet part. I bought that book for just eighty-five dollars at an estate sale.”

The light staccato of her mother’s shoes clicked softly against the wood stairs, and Olivia turned to see her coming down from the loft above. Today, she was wearing a gray wool suit, a light-blue, flowered scarf at her neck. Her mother had a passion for clothes. She knew how to dress, how to make herself appear as she wanted others to see her. There was something urgent and fierce about her, and yet, just at the edges, around the lines of her mouth and eyes, was a weariness that hinted at deeper sorrows. She had always been a beauty, and her mother must have learned from an early age that she could charm almost anyone. Both relatives and strangers talked about her almost as if she were a being from another realm, unlike the rest of them in any way. She was supposed to have done great things, mastered the world—or at least, marriage and domesticity—and been a source of envy for those whose lives had not turned out so well. Instead, it was her mother’s chubby, good-natured sister, Aunt Eileen, who had married the radiologist and now had three boys and lived in an expensive house outside the city. Still, Olivia sensed that Eileen’s world would not have been enough for her mother; there was something in her character that needed that feeling of adventure and excitement Olivia thought of as riding down a hill on a bicycle, hands raised just above the handlebars, and the wind whipping about your hair and coat.

Her mother had her arms full of notebooks—those she used for store accounts—and a pencil between her teeth. She paused at the bottom of the stairs

and took the pencil from her mouth. “Those books are only worth something, Frank, if you sell them. Sitting here, they’re worth nothing.”

“Nina, yes. How right you are,” Frank said, and scratched his head.

“What price will the gnome pay?” she asked, the corners of her mouth curving upward in a suppressed smile, a playful look Olivia hadn’t seen for quite some time.

Frank laughed. “I’m hoping he’ll pay whatever I ask.” He tried to put his arm around her waist but she scooted around the desk to avoid him, her skirt rustling against her legs as she moved away. In days past, he would’ve chased her around the store, if, as now, there were no customers around, and she would’ve run from him, screaming delightedly, threatening him with make-believe punishments if he didn’t behave. They would’ve ended their game by laughing, and maybe even stealing a kiss in the back before coming out. Just the thought of that world made Olivia’s throat hurt.

“Make sure you ask a reasonable price. We can’t wait too long,” Nina said, and put the papers she’d been carrying on the counter. When her mother turned to look at Frank, her gaze was resolute. The moment of tenderness between them had passed.

“I know.” Frank nodded. He wrinkled his forehead and looked at Olivia. “Always listen to your mother. She’s a lot smarter than I am.” Olivia was struck by the difference in his features when he wasn’t happy. His mouth was too soft, his eyes too large. It was the one time she really couldn’t stand Frank. For some

reason, it made her angry when he let his feelings be known, as if he expected his vulnerability to help him, when it was obvious it wouldn't.

Olivia went up to her mother and put her arm around her waist, giving her a quick squeeze. "Livvy," her mother said, turning toward her, "how are you? I haven't given you a proper hello yet, have I?" She raised Olivia's chin so that Olivia looked directly at her. Olivia saw the curve of her smile, the soft rise of light in her eyes, a tenderness and undying affection, which made her love her mother even more. She'd said more than once that she would jump into a vat of burning oil or run a hundred miles over hot coals, in fact, would do anything in her power to keep her daughter from harm, and Olivia believed her.

"I'm fine," Olivia said.

"Did you hand in your report on those horrible, awful, *terrible* explorers?" her mother asked, copying the same desperate intonation Olivia had used when studying.

"Yes," she said and laughed, wanting to add that Frank had helped her with the last bit of research, finding a book in his own collection with an account of Amundsen and Scott, but her nerve failed her. She wanted to make Frank look good, but she didn't want her mother to feel as if she were taking sides. "Yes. It's done."

"Good. I bet you're relieved," she said, searching distractedly through the paperwork in front of her. "Look, Livvy, let me get these bills done and we'll take a break together later, okay?"

The bell on the front door rang quietly, discreetly even, as if someone who didn't want to be noticed had just entered. A tall man in his 40's with gray eyes and a droopy mustache came into the shop. His skin was weathered, like he'd spent a lot of time outdoors, and he might've been handsome if he hadn't had the kind of face—implacable, serene—that lets as few secrets out as possible. He was neatly dressed, casual pants and cotton shirt, no tie, and stood by the door with a polite smile, a smile that briefly, but carefully, seemed to measure them up. She immediately felt Frank's awkwardness next to this man's self-assurance and though she would like to have stood up to this stranger, shown him that she didn't care in the least about his opinion, for her mother's sake, and Frank's, she didn't.

To her surprise, her mother greeted him by name. "Graham Foster," she said warmly, and extended her hand. "You were in a couple of months ago, I think. Nice to see you again." As soon as she heard her mother say his name, Olivia recognized him. He'd been in several times before, and bought quite a few books from them, but as soon as he had left that first time, Frank and Nina had argued. According to Frank, he was a dealer—someone who looked out for odds and ends solely to make money off them, not because they were intrinsically beautiful, or useful, or somehow important to him.

Her mother held his hand just a moment too long, Olivia thought, and let her fingers slowly loosen their grip. Graham's expression changed, his face softened, and Olivia's heart sank. Her mother had a terrible habit of falling in love with people who fell in love with her. She was hopeless this way, and Olivia

couldn't help but wonder if this weren't her mother's way of rescuing herself from despair, for every time they found themselves in trouble, her mother found herself in love. It had happened at least twice before. Once, it had even been Frank whose adoration had saved her mother from the lingering effects of a painful divorce.

"Frank," said Nina, her face slightly flushed, twisting a few stray hairs behind her ear. "Remember we sold Mr. Foster those two books on the Nile? Have you got anything similar on hand?"

"I remember," said Frank, looking straight at her mother, with a grim seriousness that Olivia didn't recognize, "and, no, we don't."

"I'd also be interested in the Chagall you have. That's it, isn't it?" asked Graham, stepping in their direction, and motioning toward the book between Olivia and Frank. "I've heard it's in beautiful condition."

Frank cleared his throat. "That's recently been sold. I'm just holding it until the buyer returns." His lips were tight and his face, rigid, though Olivia knew him well enough to notice the slight twitch in the corner of his left eye—a sure sign that he was upset.

"Are you certain about that, Frank?" Her mother, though seemingly composed, blanched, and she paused before saying anything more. "Why don't you check again?" Her tone was businesslike, but unmistakably hostile, and Olivia felt embarrassed for her mother and especially for Frank, having their difficulties aired before Mr. Foster like that.

"It's been sold," he said, and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Of course.” Though her mother answered quietly, there was a dangerous quality to it, like a warning had been sounded. She kept her eyes averted from Frank, and said, “Graham, why don’t we look at a couple of other things here that might interest you?”

Sophie, one of the many stray cats Frank took in, came in through the cat door at the front of the shop just then, and jumped up on the counter, narrowly missing the open book with her damp paws. For an instant, Frank’s face went white. “Damn cat,” he said. He studied the open pages carefully, and when it seemed he was certain no damage had been done, scooped the cat up in his arms, laughing, though Olivia heard a tightness in his voice which betrayed him. “Wouldn’t know a good book if it bit her.” He handed her over to Olivia. “Hold her for a bit, will you?”

Nina, who must have heard, must have been keeping sharp ears open the whole time, peeked out from behind one of the rows of bookshelves not far from them, and said, “Put her out, Livvy, before she ruins something.”

“She won’t. I promise she’ll be good,” she said, taking advantage of having someone else present, even as Sophie strained against her arms.

Nina just shook her head, but didn’t say anything more.

“Look,” said Graham, who’d come up behind Nina. He glanced at his watch, “I’d better get going. Let me know if something else like the Chagall turns up,” he said as he left the store. “Sorry to have intruded.”

“What was that all about?” her mother demanded of Frank when he’d gone.

“I’m sure that professor will be back for the book. He all but asked me to hold it for him.”

Olivia hugged Sophie close to her chest and listened as the cat purred against her face, the loud noise partially drowning out the argument around her, though she could still hear bits and pieces of what was being said. She felt a vague unease which had come to surface in her mind—her mother didn’t wait long for change once she’d decided it was needed. She felt as though they were all walking down the railroad tracks, which she’d done once with her best friend Annie, the rumble of the train moving up through their legs and into their throats, even though it wasn’t yet in sight. It was a horrible, tight, queasy feeling, almost as if she had expected to feel the impact of that train in their bones. It was the same now. She expected an awful fight, a tearful morning, an evening of silent reproach when tension hung in the air all around them.

The cat continued to squirm and when Olivia still didn’t let go, turned its body toward her, narrowed its eyes and swatted her face. The scratch, following this brief moment of wistfulness, when she had felt somewhere between her mother and Frank, and yet somehow a part of them both, seemed to her mutinous, deliberately defiant. She pinched Sophie’s leg, hard, in return and felt a sense of inexplicable relief. In response, Sophie dug her claws into Olivia’s chest and made a leap for the counter. The cat landed on one of the stacks closest to where her mother was standing, her front paws making the landing, but her back paws missing. Papers scattered everywhere as she tried to right herself, and Sophie,

seeming to sense the awkward position she was in, moved like lightning across the rest of the papers, spewing them in every direction.

“Damn,” said her mother fiercely, and then angrily pushed the few remaining papers onto the floor before yelling even louder, “damn, damn, damn.” Olivia scurried to help her mother, hoping in some small way to appease her, and let her know she was truly sorry. Frank stayed at the counter, bent over the Chagall, studiously avoiding her mother’s gaze.

She and her mother left the shop a little early and walked just across the street to their apartment. Her mother headed straight for her bedroom saying she had a terrible headache. Olivia followed her in, hoping to sit at her dresser and look in her jewelry box while she rested, something she was only occasionally allowed to do. She loved the glitter of white and yellow against the dark satin, the weight of metal loops around her forearm, the burst of color in her own face when she held the slim, silvery ring her father had given her mother many years ago. Besides the ring, there was another secret thing too. Another thing Frank didn’t know about, or at least, seemed not to take an interest in. For as long as she could remember, her mother had kept a locket in the bottom drawer of her jewelry box. The locket was in an envelope in the back and she would look at it whenever her mother would allow it. Inside was a picture of ‘Pug’, her real father, whose name was actually Earl Thompson and who used to play baseball for the minor leagues. Now he sold

insurance or something, she wasn't really sure—her mother always thought of other things to talk about whenever Olivia asked about him.

She reached for the envelope, put it in front of her and slowly unfolded it, being careful to smooth the creases out before opening up the flap, in order to minimize the crackle of the paper. She looked back toward the bed where her mother lay with one arm covering her eyes, then opened the locket and looked at the picture inside. Pug wasn't her mother's first husband, he was her second. Her mother had told her once that she had never been in love until she'd met Olivia's father. Then she would laugh and say how silly she'd been when she was younger. Looking at his picture, Olivia would never have chosen him as someone with possibilities ahead of him, though her mother had certainly thought so. He was average looking, with a big square nose and dark eyes. In the photo, taken during his days as an athlete, he looked somewhat doughy and content, not at all like someone who might achieve greatness. It wasn't his build so much as the line of his mouth which was soft and malleable, unpredictable; it was the line of that mouth which scared Olivia more than anything else. After they were divorced, she'd gone to court with her mother and they'd both had to sit in a room full of people they didn't know and explain why Pug should stay away. *At All Times. For One Year.* That's what had been written on the court order though it'd only been six months before he showed up again. Olivia had an image in her mind of her mother's strength, her arms pushing against the door so Pug couldn't get in. She had seemed stronger and taller than she'd ever looked before and Olivia thought

with some pride about the way her mother had defended them, though the truth was probably not so dramatic. They both knew he had only made a half-hearted attempt to get inside. He wouldn't have had any trouble with the door, or her mother, if he'd really wanted to harm them. When they'd finally bolted the door and heard him walk down the stairs, Olivia had hidden in the shadows of the front window so she could watch her father as he went away. It had surprised her to feel a strange heat in her throat and tears sting her eyes. He looked back up at them, though Olivia didn't know if he really could see her or not, and there was a wondering attitude, a question in his eyes, as if he'd never really understood.

"You're looking at that again?" her mother said in a tired voice, startling her so much she gave a little jump. Olivia hadn't realized her mother was no longer in bed. She came up behind her and gathered Olivia's hair in her hands. She played with it, twirling it into big brown swirls and brushing it out with her fingertips. She laughed. "You're just like him, you know that?"

"He's ugly," Olivia said, feeling as if she'd just been hit in the stomach. She checked the mirror for the line of her mouth—it was firm and straight, not at all like his, and she wondered what similarity her mother really saw. Was it just a vague connection, or were there family traits she'd inherited, too?

"No, he's not," Nina said and pulled the locket closer to her face. She stared at it for a long time. "I always thought he was very handsome."

"Why'd you call him Pug?"

"Because he was difficult. Pugnacious. It was a nickname I came up with."

“Do you think I’m like that?”

“Of course not. Don’t be silly.”

“You said I remind you of him.”

“Not completely. There are certain qualities you have that are similar, but not everything. Of course, not everything.”

“Like what?” she asked. Olivia folded the envelope back around the locket and placed it behind the earrings and bracelets in the lower shelf. She didn’t want to look at it anymore, suddenly fearing that she would notice parallels where she didn’t want them to be.

Her mother opened her mouth as if something had occurred to her immediately, and then stopped. When she’d thought some more, she said, “I’m too tired, Livvy. We’ll talk some other time.” She turned away and began to straighten the pillows on the bed, fluffing and re-arranging them.

Olivia swallowed hard, relieved she’d thought of nothing disturbing to mention, and took a strand of cobalt blue beads out of her mother’s jewelry case. She didn’t like thinking about her father. It made her feel mean and small to realize she hated him and loved him and missed him all at the same time. She put the beads over her head and twirled the end around and around her index finger, making sure she wasn’t too careful with them. “Why do you and Frank argue all the time?”

Her mother frowned and looked down at her hands, which were strong and slender. She shook her head and then turned toward Olivia, who was surprised to

see her smiling. “Wait,” she said, coming close to her and whispering in Olivia’s ear. She looked down the hallway and closed the door behind her, drawing the latch shut. “I have something to show you.” She went over to the closet and took out a long, flowing dress, the same shade of deep blue as the beads. A white sales tag was still attached to the sleeve.

“Isn’t it beautiful? What do you think?” Her mother slipped out of her skirt and sweater and gently pulled the dress down over her head and shoulders. “Livvy, zip this up for me, would you?”

She wasn’t used to seeing the skin on her mother’s back, and was afraid to say she was curious about it, as if that would prove somehow that she was really as awful as she felt, but she wondered if she would ever be beautiful like that, or if people would always whisper about her being Pug’s daughter—that you could see it in her. She could see the downy hairs on the small of her mother’s back, the curve of her spine, the small mole on her right shoulder.

Her mother turned and took Olivia’s hands in hers. “Let’s dance,” she said, and started bobbing up and down to the tune of the Blue Danube which she hummed softly. A soft wisp of lavender scent rose from the small hollow at the base of her throat where her collarbones met. She had her left hand on Olivia’s shoulder and Olivia had her right arm around her mother’s waist. They swirled around the room, skipped between the furniture, into the closet, back out. Their knees bumped together every once in awhile and she could feel the silk of her mother’s dress just as well as if it had been smoothed against her own legs. Her

mother unlatched the door and they spun out into the hallway, turning around and around. Olivia felt dizzy and somewhat queasy, but didn't want to say anything because she knew her mother would stop. Her face felt warm and damp and her hand clutched her mother's hand tighter.

"Hey, hey," said Frank, holding up a small brown paper package, "look what I've got." He came up the stairs two at a time. His legs were too long to take them one by one. "What's happening here? Are you two having a party?" Olivia thought there was something like hopefulness in his expression.

"You finished across the street?" her mother asked breathlessly.

"Shop's closed for the night."

"Join us then," she said and held her hand out to him.

He put the package gently down on the small table just at the top of the landing which was piled with things Olivia was supposed to take downstairs and never did. They all clasped hands and spun around, the three of them bumping into each other awkwardly as they circled around in the cramped hallway. Though Olivia wanted it to last, the three of them together, spinning around effortlessly, it was over shortly, her mother claiming she was out of breath, though Olivia saw the way her eyes drifted toward the package on the table.

"You look beautiful," Frank said to Nina, pressing his body closer to hers, his fingertips white against the blue back of the dress. "I want you. Right here. Right now." He was teasing her a little, Olivia recognized the tone of his voice, but

there was an edge to it she didn't understand, almost as if he were pleading with her to pretend, just a little, just for him.

"Don't be ridiculous," her mother said. She nudged him gently, as if she were trying to keep him away, though it was obvious by the way she moved her head back and leaned against the wall that she was enjoying the attention. Her mother always liked being noticed, though it was never in an egotistical way, really. Olivia felt it had more to do with having something that made her unique, gave her a face within the multitude. "What do you think?" she said, and twirled around. The light in the stairwell caught the edges of her dress and sparkles of blue twirled before them.

"It's lovely, Nina. Just lovely."

"It was expensive."

"You deserve something nice now and then. Don't worry about it." He tried to cradle the line of her jaw in his hand, but she pushed him away.

Her face darkened. Olivia recognized the warning signs, even if Frank didn't. In the entire time he'd been with her mother, he still didn't know the complexities of her heart, and the things he might still say to her that would make a difference, and though her mother didn't say that it was over, or that she didn't love him any more, Olivia didn't need to hear it—she knew her mother's deepest desires before her mother even knew them herself. "Don't worry about it?" Her mother looked at him and shook her head. "You really have no idea what's happening to us, do you?"

“Things will get better. They always do. Look, you’ll never believe what luck I had this afternoon. I didn’t go anywhere, it just came to me.” Frank went over to the package he’d put on the table earlier and gently unwrapped it. His fingers were trembling slightly. “Just after you left, someone came in and sold this to me for \$50. Can you believe it? A signed, first edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

“You bought another book.” Her mother’s voice was flat. It was a statement, not a question.

“We can sell this one for at least five times what I paid for it, I’m sure. The jacket is impeccable; the book’s hardly been opened. Can you believe they’d just had this sitting up in the attic? They would’ve taken it to the Goodwill, just put it in the donation bin, but one of the rummage sale ladies told them about me. I convinced the older sister to let me have it. The younger one finally went along.” He opened the book carefully and lightly touched the edges.

“Damn your books,” she said, grabbing it out of his hands and raising it over her head as if to send it flying down the stairs. She held the book by both covers, and opened it so that the pages were exposed. It looked funny and vulnerable in her hands like that, almost like a live thing.

Frank’s face went white. “Nina,” he said. His voice was a whisper. “Don’t. Please.”

After a moment, she closed the book and handed it back to him. Her face and neck started to lose color. She spoke softly but with an edge that sounded so

much like a piercing cry, Olivia was surprised not to see tears. “I don’t want to live like this any more.” She fingered the smooth material of the dress, lifting it slightly and letting it fall. She turned and went back into the bedroom without another word.

The next morning Frank brought down a leather satchel and put it on the breakfast table. He unhooked the latch in the front and carefully took out the book Olivia recognized as the Chagall. She turned to the last illustration in the book. There were twelve prints of stained glass windows which were to go in a synagogue in Israel—these represented the twelve tribes of Israel and her favorite was *The Tribe of Simeon*. It was quieter than the others, more peaceful, a deep violet blue color instead of the brilliant reds and yellows which were in so many of the others. She liked the horse and the goat, the pink rose shape made of fish and though she had no idea what it was about, felt that it was meant to be a good thing. Something for people to look at and be happy.

“Spend some time with it now, Livvy,” he said. “This is your last chance before I sell it to our friend, Mr. Foster. Let’s hope we can make a good deal on this.”

Her mother was apparently still in bed, though Olivia had no idea whether she was asleep or just not ready to face the day. She’d heard them arguing late into the night, her mother’s tears finally soothing Olivia and lulling her into a strange, partial sleep, full of half-dreams and anxiety.

“What do you say about coming with me this morning? That’d give your mother a chance to rest some more.”

“Sure,” she said. Olivia stirred the oatmeal in front of her cautiously. Frank usually didn’t take her with him on business and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he needed her there, not as support or company, but more as a reminder of why he was doing this at all.

They took the bus over to the Montclair neighborhood on Saginaw and 23rd Street where Graham lived. The sky was still hazy as they walked out into the cool, autumn morning, a blanket of clouds passing low through the city. There was a damp, gray layer of moisture on the sidewalks and streets and she watched as the toes of her shoes made a silvery arc around her foot wherever she stepped. Headlights flashed momentarily in front of them, then diffused in the mist and went past.

Frank told her the neighborhood was trendy—she supposed it was just becoming so, for there were still bars on the windows of most of the places, and when she could see in, little knick-knacks of the type that were in the houses of old women were proudly displayed—small ceramic elves, glass jars full of blue-tinted water, a collection of stuffed animals cozily posed together. Every now and then, a solid-looking gate, new siding, an expensive black car in the driveway announced new, more affluent owners. A handful of teenage boys hanging on the street corner looked at them as they passed and she gripped Frank’s hand tighter. “Where does he live?”

“Not too much farther. Shouldn’t be long now.”

They came to a pink stucco two-story with a black iron gate. Frank knocked lightly at the door and Olivia thought she heard a faint rumble like the scraping of a chair against tile. A dog barked and then was quieted with gruff murmurings. Graham opened the door and motioned with his head for them to come inside. She felt sad and embarrassed for Frank, who seemed tired and unkempt.

“Morning, Graham,” said Frank, shaking his hand and stepping inside.

“Hello,” Graham said simply, nodding to both of them, and she was grateful that he didn’t talk about her size or what grade she was in school or any of the other things adults were always saying to her. Short, simple things, that made it seem as if they cared. Graham’s shirt collar was open and wisps of dark hair stuck out over his white undershirt. He showed them into the living room, a place less like a room in a house than a storage area. It was piled from floor to ceiling with antique furniture, and fragile glass vases, china dishes of various patterns rimmed the room, and a series of black and white photos was stacked on the floor next to the entryway. “Have you got the Chagall?”

Frank set the box on the coffee table and Graham made a move as if to open it himself. Frank put a hand up. “I’ll show you. Be patient.”

Graham shrugged his shoulders and moved back a couple of steps.

“Bet you haven’t seen this in awhile,” Frank said as he took out a small, slim package wrapped in white tissue. He carefully unfolded it, revealing the

Chagall catalogue. “What do you think of that? Twelve plates of the tribes of Israel.” He lifted the cover and smoothed the first page back. It was a stunning yellow with brightly colored flying animals, a star, and words written in a language Olivia didn’t understand.

Graham took the book in his hands and handled the first several pages.

Frank winced. “Well?”

“What are you selling it for?”

“What are you offering?”

Graham smiled, in his way, barely showing his teeth. “Fair enough,” he answered. “I’ll look this over and give you a call later in the week.”

“You haven’t seen all twelve,” said Frank. “I can show you the rest.”

“No need for that. Besides, I have to do some research. Find out what price I ought to give you,” Graham said. He scratched his chest and left two of his fingers between the top couple of shirt buttons. Olivia heard noises coming from the kitchen and saw a blonde woman in a light-colored bathrobe walk by, a long, slender leg peeking out from the opening in the front.

Frank barely glanced at the woman, but when he looked away, he swallowed hard, like he was trying to choke something down. Graham, Olivia thought, would not be the type to worry about conventions—whether or not a woman was married would make no difference to him—if he wanted something, he went after it. Frank shifted from one foot to the other. He put his hands in his pants pockets and stared down at his shoes. She’d never seen him so

uncomfortable, and she knew from the slump of his shoulders, and the way that he looked at Graham—not quite meeting his eyes, a deferential pose, like that of a dog unwilling to fight—that he had given up. He spoke quietly, and she thought she saw his chin tremble. “I’d rather be here when you’re going through it.”

“I’ll be careful with your damn book.” Graham’s voice sounded harsh, but he clapped Frank on the shoulder all the same. “We’ve done business together before.”

Frank took a folded piece of notebook paper out of his wallet and set it down on the counter. “Sign here. This says I gave it to you in good condition.”

Graham checked it over to make sure and then signed it with a pained expression, as if, thought Olivia, he needed to point out to them how insignificant Frank’s request. He stood up and looked at them. “I’ll give you one hundred for a security deposit.” Frank started to put up his hands in protest, but Graham insisted, as if he wanted to do something for Frank that would make up for everything else. “Take it and don’t argue.”

On the way back home, Frank was silent for the first few blocks. He put a hand on her shoulder and then whistled the waltz melody they’d all danced to the night before. He began to walk so quickly, she practically had to run to keep up with him. He stroked his chin and put a hand in his pocket, buttoned his coat and unbuttoned it; he cleared his throat, whistled some more, and then spat on the sidewalk. “Damn,” he said. “Those books are like a disease with me.” He

stopped, held her by the arm and looked her full in the face. She thought he might be crying, but since she'd never seen him cry before she couldn't be sure whether they were tears or just dampness from the air around them. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Maybe someday you'll not think so badly of me. You might even understand." He dug around in his pocket and pulled out seventy-five cents in change. "The other money doesn't belong to me, or I'd give you more. This is enough for bus fare."

She wanted to tell him it would be okay, that they could go home now, find her mother ready to forgive him, and they could start over, just like a good book that you could read and re-read knowing that in spite of everything that happened, it would turn out well. Instead, the thought of saying anything to him made her throat feel all knotted up, because there was no way she could lie to Frank. They waited at the bus stop and talked now and then of what they would do that weekend or the next, and made plans for Thanksgiving, Frank promising to dig up a recipe for cornbread stuffing his mother used to make, though she knew, and supposed he knew, too, that this would never happen. When the bus came, he told the driver the stop she needed, and gave Olivia a quick dry kiss on the cheek. She took a seat at the back of the bus and looked out the window, just in time to see Frank walking back in the direction they'd just come from. She knew he was going back to Graham's, back to the Chagall, and knew how far it would take him from them.

When he turned the corner and she could no longer see him, she slid into a vacant window seat and watched as the city rolled by. People peered out of the tall

apartment buildings, and she caught glimpses of pink bathrobes and unshaved faces, the morning newspaper open in front of a seated figure. She thought of her mother back at home, just the two of them together again, and felt how it seemed suddenly right, like the fit of two puzzle pieces locking into place. The sun began to filter through the remaining clouds as the bus pulled up to the stop near the bookstore, and she saw brilliantly colored light spilling out from a crystal prism hanging against the front window.

BENEDICTION

It's August, 1932, and the flat, white heat of the Illinois sun brings out the worst in just about everyone, including Roy, a sometime gambler, sometime radio repairman, who wears a Sunday shirt every day and keeps his pants up with a belt instead of suspenders. Roy sits by the window with the newspaper pretending to look at the local news—who won what at the county fair last week—but his mind is elsewhere. He's going over a mental checklist on the results of the greyhound races from the day before though he's told his wife, Kate, he's looking at futures—a partial truth which doesn't make him feel as if he's lying. In fact, he feels almost virtuous until he remembers that he lost yesterday, this time on a dog that was supposed to have been a “sure thing.” Though he has made more promises to himself and to Kate than he can remember, the gambling still goes on. He's not really a professional, but he is pretty good at cards, and has won more than once at Tuesday night poker, though it still doesn't make up for the times he has come up short. When that happens, and it happens more often than he would like to admit, he has been known to take money out of Kate's purse in the weighty hours of the night when she is sleeping and he is not. Kate must know about the money, and yet she has never said anything to him about it, a fact that makes him feel worse rather than better.

His sleeves are rolled back almost to his elbows and expose surprisingly white, surprisingly soft forearms. They're the kind of arms you'd expect to see on a

banker, or a doctor, not a man who'd been raised on a farm and spent most of his youth baling hay—though that had been years before. He drinks the barley and chicory mixture he and Kate call coffee, as the sweat falls from his forehead into the corners of his eyes and down his cheeks. Roy takes a damp handkerchief out of his shirt pocket to try to stem the flow, only to throw it down in disgust seconds later. Damn this house and this heat, he thinks. Damn this life.

“Roy,” Kate says quietly, “if they’re not here for dinner today I want you to go look in on them. I’ve been thinking about it ever since we came home from their place last week. It just doesn’t seem right to leave her up there if we know there’s trouble.” Kate, standing at the sink, her back turned to her husband, peels potatoes and carrots for the roast they’ll have for Sunday dinner, and then starts the washing up from breakfast. Even in this weather, she maintains her standards.

He nods, as if he’s listening, though he would rather not think about whatever the latest problem is between Ellie and Leo. The continuing drama of his wife’s sister and her husband is too much for him. Ellie, who is younger than Kate by nearly nine years, is incomprehensible, not just to him, but seemingly to her own sister and the rest of the family, too. What is it she sees in Leo? There have been rumors that he left a wife and children in Chicago. Does Ellie know about it? Does she care? Ellie is not a fool, but she is vulnerable, the youngest of the Lange sisters and everyone’s favorite. She has an open, welcoming face that brightens whenever she speaks and a small, childish mouth, though Roy thinks her most attractive feature is her arms. Long and slim, they are finely-tapered down to the ends of her

fingertips, the bones in her wrists so small he could easily wrap his fingers around. Almost every night, he imagines himself enveloped in these arms.

As for Kate, she is much less an enigma than her sister. She has recently been elected president of the local D.A.R. chapter, involves herself in all of the bake and rummage sales at the Lutheran Church where she is known—albeit sometimes unkindly—for her organizational skills, and volunteers twice a week at the hospital in Bradley where she spends time with the children she'll never have. This childless state is possibly the only thing in her life she regrets. It is no one's fault, of course, just the way things are, though Roy knows this is a sorrow she does not burden him with. Usually Kate goes to the hospital by herself, but once, having other business in town, Roy stopped by to see her. He can still picture her sitting there, the sterile light of the hospital reflecting the dull, pale green of the walls, holding a child of four or five, a young girl with short brown hair hanging in wisps around her face—a face that had seemed very delicate and fragile, and possibly ill-fated. He had expected Kate to be devastated by the girl's tiny frame, her neediness and mortality. Instead, he found her calm and self-assured as she stroked the girl's hair out of her eyes and rocked her gently, the girl sleeping quietly against her chest, so completely relaxed her mouth was wide open and a trickle of moisture flowed from the corner of her mouth.

Still, thinks Roy, for all her gruffness and impatience, Kate is also the prettiest of the three Lange sisters. She has a small, straight nose which hooks just slightly at the tip and leaves the tiniest of shadows in the indentation of her upper

lip. Her mouth is full and soft, though not large, and she moves her body in a graceful, lazy way, seemingly begging to have someone wrap her in their arms and take her upstairs. Though this is the most likely explanation about how the two of them—Roy and Kate—ended up together, it is more than that. Certainly there is chemistry in their relationship, not that Kate would have admitted it, or Roy for that matter, but there is a strong attraction, one that has stayed with them over the years. It is far more than a momentary physical electricity—it is a look, a knowing comment, an acceptance of their imperfections and their common need, the need for argument and chaos and love.

“Roy, have you been listening?” Kate asks, though the tone in her voice, both accusatory and challenging, lets him know she is sure he hasn’t heard a word.

“Sure,” he says, his eyes blurry, struggling to put his mind back on the problem with Leo and Ellie.

“What do you think? I think it would be good for you to check on them. You know how that situation worries me,” she says as she scrapes eggs off a heavy, iron skillet. “You were worried that evening, too. I saw the look on your face when you both came indoors.”

“She looked like she’d been sick.” He shrugs his shoulders, trying to appear more relaxed than he feels. “Just thought I should ask her about it.” There is a growing unease in his mind. Maybe Kate will find out; maybe she already knows, and not just about Ellie’s predicament, but that he is in love with Ellie and it is a fact which pains him like nothing else he’s ever felt. He thinks, possibly, she is in

love with him too, at least in the way she loves all the wrong people, though it doesn't really matter. He doesn't know if it would be better or worse to have her love him back.

"Of course she's not well, living with that husband of hers. It's a wonder she's lasted this long. I hear from the Barlows he's been poaching again. Ned saw him the other day at dawn coming home with a sack of quail slung over his arm."

Roy has no doubt that Leo has been poaching. He's been caught before and even spent some time in the county jail for it. Still, there is something mean-spirited in the way Ned Barlow feels he has to tell Kate, and Roy takes offense. "Ned's an old woman, the way he has to tell stories. If the birds were in a sack, how'd he know what was inside?"

"Leo told him when he asked."

Roy shakes his head in defeat. "There's nothing you can do about it, Katie. Ellie's a grown woman. She can take care of herself."

"Do you really believe that?" she asks, irritation rising in her voice. "Do you really believe that girl has any sense whatsoever when it comes to the real world? Ever since Ellie was born we've been like this," she says and turns to show him fingers crossed as if to keep a promise, "and she's always needed me to help. Always."

"You know what I think." He has told her before that she makes it too easy for her sister. Always there, always willing to save Ellie from herself. It is something he hasn't really understood until just recently. Ellie is a woman you

want to pull from the tracks before the speeding train hits, the kind who finds herself in impossible situations and must always be rescued.

Kate turns and splashes around in the water in front of her, probably trying to find the knives and forks that have made it to the pile at the bottom of the sink. She moves too quickly, a sign she's upset. "Some people just find themselves in a bad place. You can't leave them alone because of that."

"I'm not saying leave her completely alone—just give her a little more freedom," he says and feels guilty as soon as the words are out of his mouth, accompanied as they are by thoughts of Ellie moving toward him in a silvery nightgown, the material softly draped against the curves of her breasts and thighs. If she were free, would she come to him? "She can't go running to you whenever there's trouble."

"Well, she hasn't been down here this time, has she? And you can't say there wasn't trouble."

"Maybe she figured it out herself." He says this even though he knows Ellie is incapable of acting on her own. Pretty, silly Ellie who has the uncanny ability to make you want to tell your life story, pour out your troubles, never stop talking. Roy, in fact, has told her things he's never told Kate—mostly things about the money he's lost at the track but even more personal things too, like the one and only time his father hit his mother and sent her reeling backwards toward the edge of the large oak dining table. To this day, he can still hear the sound of flesh and bone hitting wood. She badly chipped a front tooth and even after the bruises

healed, there was the constant reminder of this one brutal act; a silent reproach to his father every time she spoke or smiled. He used to feel bad about these confidences, as if he'd been unfaithful to Kate, in a way, because he couldn't share these same thoughts and memories with her—Kate's judgments always seemed to be set in stone. It was a kind of comfort having someone less reliable listen to your troubles, unable to say for sure where you'd been wrong or what you should have done differently. Ellie was, and still is, as mistaken as anyone. She is the confused lover, the difficult sister, the unhappy wife. Though Ellie has never asked for her help in extricating herself from dubious relationships, Kate has saved her more than once from men whom no one else would have. The kind of men a good woman should walk away from.

Kate turns around and wipes her hands on her apron. "We should've gone to see them when they didn't show up. I don't know why I let you talk me out of it." She vigorously smooths lotion onto her hands and forearms as if she could take her disapproval out on her wrists and skin. Kate unties her apron and hangs it on the back of the closet door where Roy, after much argument, has secured a few large hooks. As she comes over to the table where he sits, she puts her wedding ring back on, looking at the slim gold band for a moment before turning toward him. "If anything happens to her, I'll blame myself. Right or wrong, Roy. You know I will." She stares at him for a good while before turning away, but not until she's seen him shift uncomfortably in his chair. "Don't think I'm stupid, Roy Hannon, because I'm not."

“Nobody said anything about anyone being stupid,” he says, unaccountably feeling the anger rise inside him and turns back to the newspaper, pretending to read. Sometimes, he enjoys the arguments. He can forget about his disappointment at the track, his non-existent job prospects, the fact that Kate brings in more money than he does just by cleaning other people’s houses, and sink his teeth into a really good, bitter fight, the kind where they both let loose and ride each other’s faults without remorse. He prepares himself for such a fight now, feels his own eagerness bubble up inside and waits for the words to come streaming out at him, but immediately relents when he looks past the edge of the newspaper and sees her bite her lip and turn completely away from him—a sure sign she is fighting back tears. Kate hates to have anyone see her crying, but especially Roy.

He stands up from the table and pushes the chair back along the floor, making it screech with the contact. He feels a quiet tenderness towards his wife at these moments of weakness, and also an unfathomable animosity. Her tears have always had that effect on him. Possibly because she is not a woman who cries easily, and when she does, it is a reminder that he and Kate are, after all, merely incomplete and fallible. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re fine,” he tells her, a faint sliver of a question rising in his own mind before he can push it away. “I’ll go and check on them now.” He turns before leaving the house and sees her nodding her head in agreement.

The cabin where Ellie and Leo are living was abandoned about twenty years earlier when the Langes' cousin, Floyd Jensen, died. Floyd had been just nineteen when he passed away, and members of the family were still in disagreement over the exact cause of death. Some said pneumonia and some said polio and some, generally the peacemakers in the family, said it had been a combination of the two. For whatever reason, the house had been closed up since, and just as an important but suspiciously unlucky family heirloom is packed away for safekeeping in hopes that it will cause no more trouble, so too was the cabin put out of the minds of the entire family. Not until Leo asked about it, saying he and Ellie had discovered the place on a late afternoon walk, did it become part of the family history again—and a contentious one at that. Of course, no one believed that they'd found it just walking along in the woods, hidden as it was by an overgrowth of oak and maple. Most of the Langes thought he'd probably stumbled across it while prowling around for a place to keep a whiskey still. When Kate tried to confront Ellie with it, she merely shrugged and said it was Leo's business. More problematic than that, Floyd's two remaining sisters still considered it theirs. Now that it had been rediscovered, they found they wanted it back.

The night last week when Roy and Kate had gone to visit had been a cool, beautiful evening. The temperature had dipped, unusual for that time of year, and the humidity had dissipated for a few brief hours. The shadows were just beginning to grow long, but the day had not yet surrendered itself and there was a hollow ache inside him that Roy could not fully explain. There was a kind of sadness associated

with summer nights which he knew he'd felt before but hadn't made sense of then or now—a feeling that there was an end to beauty or that the mysterious nature of life would remain outside them all, pulling them forward for no other reason than because they existed. Kate kissed him on the ear and playfully tried to nudge him off the path.

“What's with you?” he said with mock-sternness.

“Nothing.” She laughed and rested her head on his shoulder. Roy knew she was looking forward to the visit. Ellie and Leo had been getting along well the past few weeks. Leo had been talking about looking for work in Peoria and had even helped Ellie fix up some of the cracks in the mud daubing of the cabin where last winter the cold had come through like invisible knives. But rounding the last curve, before they could actually see the cabin, they heard Leo's voice, loud and biting, angry at someone or something, and then Ellie's response, quiet, with just a hint of tenderness, a calm, soothing rhythm like mothers use to put their babies to bed. They gave each other a knowing look and Kate sighed deeply.

“Take a look at this,” Leo said as soon as they walked in, before anyone had a chance to say hello. “Just look at it. Read who it's from,” he said, shoving an official-looking piece of paper in front of Kate. Ellie sat at the kitchen table, her small, neat hands folded in front of her. She seemed not to be aware of them, and Roy felt suddenly discouraged. A rush of heat flooded his face and he felt his palms began to sweat.

“Cooper, Manning and Sutter, attorneys-at-law with offices in Bradley and Peoria,” read Kate, her lips tight.

“Damn right it is.” Leo had a thin face and nose, the skin stretched tightly over well-defined cheek and jawbones. In another man, it could have been handsome, but his color was sallow and his eyes watery. He had the pallor of someone who has been sick for a long time, but as far as Roy knew, the man was healthy. Leo paced back and forth in the small, cramped living area of the cabin, stirring up the dust of the cabin floor as he did so. He never looked at them when he talked, but instead, talked past them, as if they didn’t exist, as if he didn’t care whether they were there or not. Roy had known from the first he didn’t like him. He was a dangerous fellow, it oozed from his pores like the sharp, queasy smell of drink, and yet, there was something pitiful about him too; Roy often felt that Leo was genuinely unhappy about himself.

“If they think they’re going to take this away from me, they’ve got another thing coming. No one wanted this piece of junk ‘til I found it. They left it here to rot away, we fixed it up and guess what? Surprise, surprise, they want it back. Now, if they want to pay me for all of the work I already did on the place and give me some land to build my own home-sweet-home, well, then I might just talk to them. There’s got to be something in it for me. They can’t expect me to walk away from here with nothing, just like I came here.”

Kate, who Roy knew could never listen for long to one of Leo's tirades, scanned the letter and immediately handed it to Roy. "Ellie," she said, turning to her sister. "Let's go outside for a bit. I could use some fresh air."

Leo nodded and Kate and Ellie left, but not before Kate gave Roy a look which said she expected trouble. Trouble that he, Roy, should do something about.

"What do you think of that?" Leo said to Roy. And immediately, being alone with him, Roy felt uncomfortable. There was barely room enough for a bed, a table, a rusty wood cook stove and a few straight-back cane chairs. The room seemed smaller without Kate in it, a phenomenon he couldn't readily explain, though he thought it had something to do with the security her presence provided them all. She was so sure of herself, so certain to know the right way of doing things. He'd only been inside the cabin a few times before and each time the closeness of it made him feel as if he couldn't breathe, a stupid, foolish weakness he hated himself for.

"Asshole lawyers. Always trying to make a buck out of someone else's hide. When I was a kid in Maine, we went through the same sort of rigamarole, only that time it was the Feds. They claimed my old man was evading taxes." He took a flask out of his jacket, twisted the cap off and took a long swallow before handing it to Roy. "We lived out in the hills and when they showed up, he just refused to pay. Told them if they had the money to come out where we was and find us, they had more money than they needed." This calmed him down, as if the memory were his own triumph.

“Don’t work yourself up, Leo,” said Roy, taking advantage of his brother-in-law’s momentary composure to have a second draught from the flask. “The family is reasonable. You can probably work something out.”

Leo’s thin face stretched into a grin and he laughed. “No sir. There’s nothing to work out. If anything, they’re the ones that owe me money. I’m not giving them a dime. If they want me out of here after all my hard work, they need to pay me,” he said, jabbing a thumb at his chest, “not the other way around. I’m the one that’s done all the work. There’s got to be something in it for me, that’s what I say.”

“Suit yourself,” said Roy. The alcohol suddenly hit him hard and he began to feel relaxed for the first time in days.

Kate came back into the cabin with Ellie, gently steering her toward the bed. She looked worse than she had when they’d first arrived.

“Ellie,” said Roy in surprise, trying not to appear too concerned, though he felt certain the edge to his voice was noticeable. “What’s wrong? You’re not feeling well?” He thought he saw a flicker of desperation appear in her eyes, and then quickly disappear.

Leo cupped his hand around her cheek and chin. “She’s been feeling bad,” he said, gently lifting her chin until she looked into his eyes.

“Not too bad, really,” Ellie said. She shook her head slightly and Leo’s fingers lost their hold on her skin, brushing gently against her throat as he moved

his hand away. The color rushed to her face. She looked at Roy, then down at the floor.

“I think Ellie should rest for awhile. Leo, you and Roy go outside, so we can have some quiet,” said Kate authoritatively. “I’ll fix us some dinner while she sleeps.” She raised her chin in the direction of the open flask. “Take that with you, too.”

Outside, the night was still fresh and Roy was glad to be out in the open, away from the enclosure of the cabin. “Let’s go look at that garden,” Roy said, knowing this was the only thing Leo loved which he could truly share in.

Leo led him around to the side of the cabin, a cleared area where pine branches had been cut to let in sunlight and a tall wire fence kept the deer out. It was a big plot, almost a quarter of an acre. Rows of corn stood along the back, followed by a dozen tomato plants, cucumbers trained to grow up a lattice work of string rather than low to the ground where the vines covered too much earth, pole beans, bush beans, watermelon, chickpeas. It was an ordinary garden, nothing special, but it was exactly this quality which made it extraordinary, for this was the only thing that Leo could do simply, without taking it on as a campaign. Seeing the neat rows and well-tended plants, Roy always felt a little hopeful. It had to be said that Leo was a smart man—he had the capability to lead a relatively normal life. He’d actually finished two years of college, most of it spent working in the greenhouses on campus, according to Leo. College—now that was something not many people did. He could’ve gone all the way, could’ve gotten the degree in

agriculture, but he'd done something mysterious and had been expelled. Ellie said Leo had spoken his mind to the wrong person, but Kate thought it had to do with alcohol, or recklessness. In any case, this was usually a good place to talk to Leo—the garden had a soothing effect on him—but that night, it only seemed to remind him of his discontent.

“Look at this,” Leo said, “just look at this.” He kicked the garden fence with the toe of his boot. “Bet they’ll say this was here before too, but you’ll be my witness, Roy, you and Kate. Nothing was here before we started cleaning it up.”

Roy nodded in agreement but couldn’t remember. Had it been? He was sure Kate would know. That sort of thing interested her more than it did him. He still had hold of the flask and took one more long drink before handing it back to Leo. He could feel the warmth of the liquor spread through his chest and arms and down into his legs.

Leo took Roy to the far edge of the garden and knelt to weed out a few stray thistles that had just begun to ease above the surface. Taking out a large pocketknife, he slid the blade open and jabbed it into the ground, describing a circle around the offending green leaves. Gently, he probed beneath the surface with the cutting edge and lifted the plant bit by bit until he could slide the taproot out completely, not leaving a bit of its milky, white stem in the dirt. When he finished with one, he went on to the next.

Roy looked at the long knife blade and the root stem shimmering in the dusky light of the evening and thought Leo was not so much a contradiction as a

question mark. No one seemed to understand the way his mind worked and it was more than being an outsider or coming from an unknown family background, it was the fact that, to Kate's family, he didn't act the way people should. Leo lacked the smooth, placid nature of the Langes, the ability to keep his feelings in check, or the blustery anger, soon dissipated, of Roy's own family. When he was wronged, or felt he was, he hurt. He was almost like a child in this regard—too damn sensitive, thought Roy, Leo should've learned this lesson long ago. Roy walked back again to the edge of the garden nearest the house, and sat on the wooden tool box Leo had built, watching in fascination as the remnants of daylight slid behind the low valley hills and the white moon, stately and powerful, rose up into the sky.

The screen door slammed and Roy looked over in surprise as Ellie stepped out of the cabin. The soft yellow light of the kitchen gently framed her figure and he inadvertently sighed—softly though, and after a momentary panic, felt confident neither she nor Leo had heard. She walked slowly toward him, her shadow painted by the moon onto the side of the house, and smiled. She seemed to him a vision, as if this might be the closest to perfection on earth he could ever achieve. Ellie reached up close to him and, stunned, he thought she would try to touch his face. He imagined kissing her cheeks and eyes, running his hands over her breasts. Instead, she reached for the latch parallel to his shoulder and unfastened the rope binding. "Mind if I join you?" she asked, and he sank back, disappointed, knowing she was unaware of his preoccupation with her.

“Feeling better now, are you?” he said and took a few steps away from the toolbox, wanting only to be rid of the sensation of her body close to his, and yet wanting nothing else.

“Reasonably so. It’s the kind of thing that comes and goes—you know, waves of nausea, and then I’m fine. It’s worse with the cooking Kate’s doing, though. I just can’t stand the smell of anything fried.”

Roy frowned. “You don’t seem very concerned.”

“Should I be?”

“Well, you’re sick. I guess I’d be feeling a little down, that’s all.”

Ellie leaned back against the fence and laughed. “I’m pregnant, you idiot.”

Roy stopped and looked at her. Her face was tilted up, her lips incredibly close to his, but he felt as if he were looking at her from a terrible distance. He suddenly felt completely alone.

“Well, congratulate us. Don’t you think it’s exciting?” Though she was still smiling, there was a challenge in the tone of her voice almost as if she expected his disapproval.

“Great news. Wonderful. I’m glad for you,” he said, stumbling over his words. He thought of Kate, standing in the kitchen, cooking up dinner for a sister who didn’t need her help and never had, and felt an overwhelming urge to run to his wife, wrap her in his arms and hold her there. Kate would feel badly, no question about it.

“Liar,” said Ellie, “you’re a great, fat liar.” Even in the half-light of the moon, he could see her face darken.

“Does Kate know?” he asked, and, when she shook her head in response, said, “You should tell her. It’ll be better coming from you.”

“I just can’t,” said Ellie. “It will be so hard for her.”

Roy raised his eyebrows, but didn’t directly contradict her. “I imagine she’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

She looked at him with a curious expression, as if he had said something puzzling, and she found she needed to study it, like a bird with a piece of metal, not knowing what to do with it. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

Roy wasn’t sure what to make of this. She was truly a picture of misery, her fear of wounding Kate as sincere as his own. He tried to say something more, tried to tell her everything that was on his mind, how he loved her, how Kate would get over it, they could all take care of the child, but whether it was the alcohol or his own delusion, his tongue seemed thick and warped and he couldn’t construct the words he needed. Instead, he imagined them frozen in a gigantic photo, taken from above, Leo in the garden weeding in the moonlight, Kate fixing a dinner she thought people wanted, Ellie standing next to him but farther away than all of them, and himself, a sad caricature of someone in love.

It has only been a week since that evening, Roy thinks, though it seems like much more time has passed. He intends only to go part of the way up the long,

steep hill toward the cabin, but the cool, fresh air that blows down from the shady trees onto the pine needle path draws him further in. Soon the faint noise from his own house has been left behind and there is nothing but the silence around him. He hears the slow, steady crunch of leaves and small stones beneath his feet, the whisper of wind fluttering between branches, but he hears nothing from the cabin. This seems strange to him because sound carries well out here and he is used to hearing the swirling of metal spoons against tin pans, or Ellie's laughter rising on the wind and Leo's response, always dry, laconic, as if it costs him enormous energy to answer, though he can talk well enough about his own ideas. A heaviness settles itself into the space just below his ribcage, but he pushes away any uneasy thoughts as being completely wrought by imagination. They are probably just out on a walk, or making love somewhere on the carpeted, moss-strewn forest. Ellie's face, her lips parted, comes to mind, an image he hurriedly dispels.

As he comes closer, he sees that the geraniums are hanging over the boxes, their stems and leaves beginning to turn brown, the reddish flowers drooping. The green leaves of the tomato plants have started to wilt and the earth around them is dry and beginning to crack. A thin layer of dust, like a fine powder, coats the tops of leaves and plants, posts and string. He steps forward quickly, anxious now to reach the cabin, afraid of what he will find. What has happened to them? A fluttery movement comes from within, and he thinks he has seen the pale outline of Ellie's face, but it is only a curtain shuddering in and out of the open window on puffs of air.

He steps inside the cabin and sees the blood first, a few dried streaks marring the pinewood slats of the floor. Though he breathes as deeply as he can, he feels that he cannot take in enough air to fill his lungs and suddenly feels light-headed. His mind is filled with images of white throats and long, thin blades, Leo's strong, bony hands and determined face. He grabs the back of a chair to steady himself and sees the feathers scattered about here and there, some of them on the floor, some stuck to the table. He exhales gratefully, and the feeling of relaxation is a gift. Leo must have gutted the birds here. Probably he was in a hurry and didn't have time to take care of things the way he normally would have. Roy looks around, but the place is empty. Anything that could be thrown into a suitcase or pack is gone. The furniture remains but there is nothing that makes it seem that anyone has been living here, not a photo, a mirror, a dish. It is as if Leo and Ellie have been erased from the world, as if they had never existed.

Roy leans against the cook stove, his mind spinning. A bit of light directly across from him catches his eye, and going forward to look more closely, finds an envelope placed on the windowsill above the sink, Kate's name written in Ellie's hand. He holds the letter for a moment wondering if he should read it, and then, feeling a surge of bitterness well up inside him, puts it in his pocket. There is no need for Kate to read this, it will only cause her intense pain, and he cannot bear to put her through more than he already has. Nothing that Ellie can say will be reason enough for leaving Kate's sisterly care, and he wonders if he can at least provide comfort, or if that, too, is an illusion. Even more unsettling, she has left him with

the job of telling Kate, or not telling her, about the baby. Roy massages the back of his neck where the muscles have begun to tighten and pinch and he feels a heavy weight just above his right eye.

Roy walks back down the hill, and sees Kate's tired, drawn face at the window. Possibly, she has read his own expression of dismay, because she turns away from him and goes back to her stitching the moment he enters the house. She concentrates intently on the pillowcase in front of her, carefully embroidering one blue flower petal after another. The work is fine and even, and there is the graceful way she pulls the thread taut, keeping the pressure even with every tug. Only the slight tremor in her fingers gives her away.

"What's happened?" she asks quietly, not taking her eyes off her sewing. She shakes her head when he tells her they've left, and lets the embroidery fall gently onto her lap. "It's not true. I don't believe it," she says. But her voice is flat, and distant, and he knows she recognizes the truth of what he is saying.

Roy eases the sewing away from her, and neatly places it on the table next to where she sits. Taking her by the hands, he guides her off the chair, and gathers her in his arms, pressing her close to him, and kisses the top of her head. As she relaxes against him, he can feel the rapid pulse of her heart against his chest, and notes the way her body folds into his naturally, like they have been doing this all their lives. He whispers to her that everything will be alright, there is nothing to fear. Slowly, he paints a picture with his words—one of still, evening skies, and calm water, a lake as smooth and sleek as polished stone. He and Kate are floating

in the middle of this world, golden sheets of light falling behind the hill, their craft headed toward the opposite shore, their course steady and deliberate.