

WORDS ON PAPER: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CREATIVE
PROCESS IN SIX STORIES

A THESIS

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DEDICATION

In memory of
Sylvia May Phelps Mercer

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ABSTRACT

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Many writers, writing out of a love of language, a need for expression, a desire to be heard, choose fiction as their vehicle for universal truth. In drawing upon personal experience as a source of that truth, writers discover and/or experience: the creative process, the art of writing, insight into a subjective past, and enrichment through the creative act. As a demonstration of that process, this thesis employs autobiographical elements as a source for original fiction purporting to evoke recognition of truth in the reader.

Preparation included reading essays by Margaret Atwood, Eudora Welty, Joyce Carol Oates, and Alice Munro on fiction as a literary art form. Additionally, the written testimony of writers such as William Faulkner, Frank O'Connor, James Thurber, Robert Penn Warren, Truman Capote and others, revealed how and why writers write, their sources, methods, struggles, and successes. In reviewing the technical aspects of writing, particular attention was paid to style,

point of view, narration, form, and construction, keeping in mind purpose and application. Applying researched information and creating the fiction in this thesis resulted in greater knowledge and understanding of the creative process and the writing art.

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CHARACTERS

Molly Hardin Murdock	A child, later a woman
Sarah Phillips Murdock	Molly's mother
Annie Lee Phillips	Sarah's sister and Molly's aunt
Eve (also called Baby)	Sarah's sister and Molly's aunt
Duncan	Eve's husband
Harriett, Thomas, Henry	Eve and Duncan's children and Molly's cousins
Hardin	Sarah's brother and Molly's uncle for whom she is named
Rose	Hardin's wife
Cent	(Millicent), one of Sarah's sisters
Mat	(Matilda), one of Sarah's sisters
Mack Russell	Molly's husband
Jason, Joe, Thad	Molly's children
Marta	Molly's stepmother

CHAPTER I

Why did I write: what sin to me unknown
Dipped me in ink, my parents' or my own?
(125-25)

Pope, Epistles to Dr. Arbuthnot

Why do writers write? Where does writing--the writing of fiction, specifically--come from? What prompts the impulse to make a story? Is it a sudden passion, as Sherwood Anderson says of the short story (Ross 30)? Is it the natural outgrowth of the oral tradition of storytelling? Is it a kind of therapy in which the writer creates a giant, ever-expanding mirror in order to look at herself and others, to see more clearly the workings of the human mind and heart? Most writers will probably agree that writing fiction is all these things. It is also a love of language, a need for expression, a desire to be heard. But ultimately, writing occurs because writers cannot help themselves; they write because they have to.

Margaret Atwood attempts to show that writing is more than self-expression. Writing, she says, is ". . . opening yourself, discarding your self so that the language and the world may be evoked through you. . . . Writing is . . . a truth-telling . . . a reverse incarnation . . . the flesh

becoming word" (348). She goes on to say ". . . of course all writing is based on personal experience . . ." (342) and points out that the writer is ". . . both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others" (348). Eudora Welty agrees. "If [my stories] have any special virtue . . . it would lie in the fact that they . . . are stories written from within" (Collected Stories x).

Aspiring writers of fiction are always advised to write about what they know. This does not mean that what they know and write about will be art, or even interesting, or that anyone will want to read it. But it does mean that they will begin with truth, where all good fiction begins, and which, if they are successful, their fiction also reflects. Truth, not in the sense of events happening in just that way or people saying just those words, but in the larger sense of universal truths. In The Lonely Voice, Frank O'Connor quotes Yeats' advice to a young dramatist: "Set your play first in tenth-century Byzantium, then in fourteenth-century Florence, then in modern Ireland, and if it remains equally true of all, write it" (216). Surely the same can be said of all forms of fiction; the truth contained within the art of fiction is not about time and

place and people, as such, but about the abstract realities of love and loneliness, betrayal and belief, decency and destiny, made concrete through the fictional creation of people and place and time.

In her introduction to Scenes From American Life, Joyce Carol Oates recalls a newspaper that boasted, "We Print Only the Truth--No Fiction" (vii). In using this illustration to point out that "the two are hopelessly mixed together, mysteriously confused" (vii), Oates quotes Picasso: "Art is a lie that leads to the truth;" and, she adds ". . . we understand by this paradox that a lie can make us see the truth, a lie can illuminate the truth for us, a lie--especially an extravagant, gorgeous lie--can make us sympathize with a part of the truth we had . . . avoided" (vii).

We may comprehend, then, an important function of fiction created by writers whose purpose is art. Eudora Welty believes that "the art that speaks [the truth] most unmistakably, most directly, most variously, most fully, is fiction " (Ten Texas Writers 111). Margaret Atwood goes even farther: "I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community . . . one of the few forms left through which we . . .

may see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves" (346). Atwood also sees fiction as growing out of the ". . . that moment when the tribe or the family is sitting around the fire or the dinner table and the story-teller decides to add something, leave something out or vary the order of telling in order to make the story a little better. Writing on the page is after all just a notation . . ." (335). Eudora Welty reinforces the idea of the oral tradition evolving into written stories when she writes, "Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories" (One Writer's Beginnings 14). Whether or not the short story grew out of the story-telling tradition, story-tellers as varied as Mark Twain, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Alice Munro have made it the vehicle for their art, and not incidentally, their truth.

The premise that writers write fiction to discover and illustrate truth through their own experience is demonstrated here through my own writing. By actually creating fiction based loosely on people and places I have known and experienced, I show that personal experience is a source for fiction, that the resulting fiction contains insight into the human condition, and that I, the writer, am enriched by the creative act through greater vision into the

human heart and mind. Margaret Atwood notes, "When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing--if you follow it--will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen" (15). Again Welty agrees, "Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life" (One Writer's Beginnings 90). My purpose, then, in creating fiction from my own knowledge and experience is twofold: to discover the meaning of personal experience while learning how the writing process leads to internal realization and vision.

In undertaking this project, I found that, due to the lack of distance and objectivity, writing from one's own experiences is incredibly more difficult than creating stories out of sheer imagination. It is much harder to see beyond the substance of one's own life--the events and personalities and traumas--in order to create fiction that in turn represents the reality of the human condition. However, through imaginative alteration of reality (less than a fourth of the events of each story is based upon actual, personal, experience; the other three-fourths are "made up," created through the writing process), I have

attempted to create art that is, as Oates says, "the record of an artist's psychic experience, his attempt to explain something to himself; and in the process of explaining it to himself, he explains it to others" (vii).

The business of writing is itself discovery in that the writer does not always recognize, ahead of time, the final point of a particular story. Too, the story or characters may gain control of the writing and proceed in a totally different direction from the one the writer intended. This phenomenon has been addressed by scholars who seek to understand the art of writing, and who agree, more or less, that writing first takes place in the subconscious. In that my purpose was to create a coherent whole, I have chosen not to include two additional pieces of short fiction, both of which were originally intended to be a part of this project, because the direction they took no longer fits. Such are the revelations--and problems--discovered through the writing process.

Each of the six stories here is similar in the theme of fear and loneliness brought about by a child's dispossession or displacement, and sense of abandonment. Each story is also connected to the others through the protagonist, who moves from child to adult as the stories progress. However, even though the stories are woven together through

character and theme and the whole is similar to a novel, each story is complete in and of itself; each story may be read and understood without information provided by the other stories.

I have deliberately varied the styles of the stories, partly because I chose to experiment with different styles as a means of learning more about the writing process and also because the content of some stories seemed to indicate a specific style. For instance, the second story, "Wonder Woman," is written in first person, present tense in order to show the child's state of mind at the moment of the story. The first story, "Baby," and the third, "Annie's Dress," are told from the first person point of view in past tense because there is a sense of looking back at events that are being related. The fourth story "Salt Cellar," and the last, "The Blue Box," are told in first person present tense as a way of suggesting the immediacy and drama of the events taking place. The sixth story, "You Can't Smell the Rain," is the only story told in the third person past tense, a voice deliberately chosen to reflect the distance and lack of intimacy between the married couple portrayed in the story.

The stories appear as Chapters II through VII. "Baby" concerns a young child's feeling of being displaced and lost

and her actual as well as symbolic rescue. "Wonder Woman" takes place a few years later and continues the theme of displacement with the child realizing that actual rescue is no longer possible. "Annie's Dress" focuses on the child's recognition of the adult world during a life-changing event. "Salt Cellar," which takes place several years later, portrays a young woman's recognition of unexpected love and loss. "You Can't Smell the Rain" turns on a young couple's simple disagreement, a symbol for their growing alienation. The final story, "The Blue Box," acts as closure for the other stories and resolves the sense of abandonment that the child has felt throughout her life.

Through the writing of these stories, I came to realize much truth about my own past and those who shared it, which seems to bear out the theory that, among other things, writing is discovery. Perhaps Eudora Welty says it best. In using one's own life experiences in an attempt to create art, one must, she writes, ". . . have an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there--to the memory nothing is ever really lost" (One Writer's Beginnings 90).

CHAPTER II

BABY

The house is gone. In its place is a long windowless building--the main office of the General Telephone Company. All the houses on this block are gone except one, a small white frame house with all its shades drawn, the kind of house old people live in. I remember it as the Alworths' house but surely they cannot still live here; they were old then. Or did they, like all adults, seem old, invincible, powerful, because I was five?

The center of town has spread out, lapping over its former shape like a fat woman in stretch pants. Office buildings have taken the place of the houses along our street, four blocks from the town square. The Victorian gingerbreads and big oaks, even the imposing bulk of the First Baptist Church are gone from this part of town. Their foundations have been scraped away and paved over to provide parking for the office buildings.

I rarely come this way anymore. I live on the other side of town now in a planned development carved from the woods and fields where Vesta's men and boys once hunted dove and quail and rabbit. But today I have come from the

hospital, down a four-lane cross-town boulevard that used to be the narrow side street east of our house.

We moved here in 1943. The war was on everybody's mind and tongue but touched us mostly through shortages. My uncles were either too old or had too many children to be drafted and my cousins were not old enough. The house we lived in had two front doors, one at either end of a long porch. My mother, grandmother, my mother's sister Annie, and I lived on one side of the house and my aunt Eve, who we called Baby, my uncle Duncan, and my cousins Harriett, Thomas, and Henry lived on the other side. We all moved in together so Baby could take care of me and look after my grandmother, who had had a stroke. My mother, who was divorced, and Annie, who had never married, had jobs; my mother worked at the steam laundry and Annie worked at Duke & Ayres Five and Ten Cent Store.

A few months after we all moved in together, my grandmother died in her sleep. In all respects her life had ended three years earlier, when my grandfather died in the railroad hospital over at Marshall and we had to move out of the section house. She died in July and they brought her home to Baby's living room where she lay in her coffin in a blue dress I had never seen her wear. Years later I could not remember my grandmother, who had cared for me since the

day I was born, separately from my mother; they were melded together in my memory, like those laminated cards and I could not pull them apart. My grandmother was lost in a way, sealed forever within the living presence of my mother.

But my mother's memories were intact. When she was older than my grandmother had been when she died, she recalled those last days.

"She would call out for you . . . 'Molly?' she would say, 'Where's Molly?'

"But you wouldn't go in the room where she lay in bed. I think you were afraid. She lay in there, not knowing anybody or anything, calling for you . . . it was pitiful."

My mother's nostalgia made me feel as if I had carelessly laid something down somewhere and forgot to go back for it and had therefore, lost it. How could I have forgotten my grandmother, who loved me?

All my aunts and uncles came to the house. The men sat around Baby's table and drank coffee and talked about the war. In the kitchen the women washed dishes and talked about the funeral and rationing and any member of the family who was not there.

My mother was the eldest of her family. Besides Baby, my grandmother's last child (except for a stillborn boy), and Annie, there were the twins, Millicent and Matilda, who

were supposed to be called Millie and Tillie, but who we called Cent and Mat, and a brother, Hardin. They all lived in Vesta, or in Dallas and Fort Worth, forty miles away.

Cent, one of the twins, was nervous and high strung and a hypochondriac. She had every disease she read about in the newspaper and was forever searching for a doctor who would take her seriously. They said she had nearly put my uncle into the poor house when there wasn't a thing wrong with her, she was strong as a horse, look how she cleaned that house from top to bottom every day, you could eat off her floors they were so clean, nobody could be sick and work that hard, she just needed to get hold of herself.

The other twin, Mat, who was the prettiest of all them, I thought, was married to a gambler, a drinker, a man who liked to dance and go to parties. They told about the time Mat gave him a quarter to go buy a nipple for the baby's bottle (my cousin Ned, away in the Merchant Marine by the time I heard the story).

"He took the quarter and got into a poker game!"

"Didn't come home for three days! Mat was worried sick."

"And didn't have the nipple then!"

For all his faults, he was secretly my favorite uncle. He had flaming red hair and would dance a jig when we asked him, and he was always cheerful.

My mother's only brother, for whom I was named, was supposed to be my favorite uncle. All the sisters adored him, but my mother and Annie especially would not hear a word against him. He managed a wholesale grocery company and had a big house and a 1941 Oldsmobile sedan, bought just before the war started. We thought he was rich. After the war, he bought a horse, a Tennessee Walker he named My Blue Heaven, after the song. On Sunday afternoons he would ride him over to our house and make him "walk." Then Annie and Baby and sometimes even my mother would get on and go for a ride. We were only allowed to ride double with an adult; Hardin said if we rode by ourselves we'd ruin his gait.

They buried my grandmother in the Eye Double Oh F cemetery, next to grandfather and The Baby. The cemetery was not strange to me. I had been there many times with my mother and Annie; we always took flowers on Decoration Day. My grandfather, who was a member of the Independent Order of the Oddfellows, had bought a entire block when the cemetery was founded. He later sold half of it to a family named Gates, who, over the years, had managed to put up several large tombstones while our graves--my grandfather's and The

Baby--were still bare and unmarked. This sorely grieved my mother and whenever we went to the cemetery, she would look down at our plot then around at the graves with shrubs and flowers and marble headstones.

"I'm just ashamed," she would begin in her oblique way, "I'm sure everybody in town thinks we just don't care."

"Well, in my opinion nandinas planted in each corner of a plot are plain tacky," Annie would say, defensively. She read most of my mother's remarks as blame directed toward her.

My mother hadn't been talking about planting nandinas, as Annie knew, and as my mother never failed to point out. Planting nandinas would have been too easy; what my mother wanted and agitated for was a cement curb around the plot and headstones--public proof that they had done the right thing by their dead. The fact that they couldn't afford to do either of these things never kept her from yearning for them or fretting Annie about them.

She went on, in the same vein, "Other people manage. Why can't we? It's just a crying shame! When people come over here to visit their own graves and see ours, there's no telling what they're saying about us!"

They would stand at the edge of the grass--above their father's grave--in agreement but at cross purposes as they

always were, until finally Annie, exasperated, would cry, "My God, Sarah, how do you think we would pay for headstones and a curb around the lots?" Annie's raised voice was the signal for my mother to close her lips tightly and look over her shoulder to see if anyone had heard. She hated it when Annie blasphemed as she did frequently and she dreaded scenes, even the ones she caused herself; she had a horror of public spectacles. It was a phrase she often used. "Don't make a public spectacle of yourself," she would tell me. Fear of what the neighbors would think made her go around the house closing windows when a quarrel erupted at home, and it was disgraceful to be seen in a public dispute. The scenes at the cemetery usually ended when Annie, humiliated into silence by my mother's sudden glance over her shoulder, turned and stalked off through the rows of graves, leaving us to follow or not, as we liked. We usually walked home that way, Annie ten feet ahead, her heels slamming against the sidewalk, my mother calmly following, as if by unsettling Annie she had somehow settled something within herself.

After the service at the cemetery, when people stood around in little knots talking, and my mother had finally let go of my hand, I went down the row to a headstone that had a picture on it. Attached to the stone was an oval

photograph of a girl in a white dress with a big bow in her hair. She was not related to us, just some girl who had died, but when we came to the cemetery I always went to see her picture. Her name was Opal and she died on her seventh birthday in 1914. Beneath her picture "Our Precious Jewel" was written in the marble. Opal's picture, thirty years later, was still clear and unfaded but had cracked all over so that tiny lines ran out from the center in every direction, as if a spider's web had been laid delicately across her face.

When I started back, I saw three men standing near a pile of red dirt. They were just standing there, rolling cigarettes and watching my mother and my aunts, who were bent over pulling flowers out of the arrangements, flowers they would press between the pages of the Bible.

"They're the gravediggers," Harriett whispered, behind me. "See their shovels?"

Harriett was older than me by two years. Since we had been living in the same house, she bossed me the way she bossed Thomas and Henry. I knew she was about to tell me something else about the men or ask me why I had been looking at Opal's picture, and I didn't want to talk to her. At that moment my mother looked up, saw me, and called for me to come there. I hurried ahead of Harriett and as I got

even with the men, one stepped away from the others. But he was only turning out of the wind to roll another cigarette. I watched as he sprinkled a line of tobacco on the paper, curled his fingers around it, and lifted it to his mouth. He looked up just as I reached my mother, who only said for me not to walk on the graves, which I already knew.

Living as I had with my grandparents, my mother, and Annie, I was a quiet, somewhat precocious child, "good" in the way some adults and most children find disgusting. When we first moved in with Baby and Duncan, Thomas and Henry taunted me and snatched my toys. They told me the yard belonged to them and I had to stay in the street or on the sidewalk; they tried to run over me with Duncan's wheelbarrow when I stopped to watch a bug crawl through the grass; they chased me and tore off my sashes, and, out of Baby's hearing, called me a sissy, a crybaby, and some names I'd never heard. A Quaker among Turks, I didn't know what to do but fall back. I retreated to my own side of the house, where I sat in front of my mother's dresser, watching my reflection in the big round mirror, listening to the shrill voices of my cousins at war on the other side of the wall, and playing with the bottles on the dresser. The little bottles of nail polish were the children and a tall bottle of lotion with rounded shoulders and a pink top like

a head, was the mother. I played the way an only child learns to play, alone except for my imagination, safe from my cousins' savagery. But I was not supposed to be in our part of the house while my mother and Annie were at work and Baby always came looking for me and said I had to go back with her.

My mother said I shouldn't pay any attention to Thomas and Henry, and reminded me that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." Eventually, when Thomas and Henry got used to having me around every day, they gave me up and found other victims for their torment.

But while I was getting used to living in the house with my cousins and they were getting used to having me there, I also had to get used to minding Baby and Duncan.

Duncan was tall with brown eyes and brown hair that he combed straight back from his forehead. He worked at Vesta's power plant but when he was at home he drew plans on blue-lined paper--plans for houses, tables, cabinets, things he thought of building some day. In the back yard he did build a slide, swings, and a seesaw. For the frame he welded together lengths of round black sewer pipe that rusted and stained our hands and knees and clothes a bright orange when we climbed on it. He finally painted the pipe

with silver paint that glittered like tinsel and got so hot in the sun that we couldn't bear to touch it.

Duncan sometimes told us stories, wildly impossible variations of stories we already knew, about children getting lost in the woods or finding pebbles that turned into gold. He used my cousins' names instead of the real names and mixed the story up so badly that we had to stop him every little bit and remind him how it really went. Finally he would get weary of our interruptions and, over our protests and promises to be quiet, he would get up and go off to draw on his blue-lined paper.

Baby was tall, taller than my mother and had wiry dark hair instead of my mother's fine, almost blonde hair. She had very pale skin, white as the belly of a fish, and dark blue, almost violet colored eyes--"just like Grandma's," my mother would say, meaning her own grandmother, who had lived with them when they were children. In pictures this grandmother, named Lou, had thin, narrow shoulders and a pointed face, like a cat. Her hair was snow white, parted down the middle and she wore old-fashioned round dark glasses. She was blind, my mother said, and had to be led everywhere, even to the outdoor toilet. My mother and her sisters and brother remembered her as spiteful and mean, hateful to their mother, who was her daughter. From the way

they talked, I thought no one had cared when she finally died. But when I said this to my mother, she said, "Why, what a thing to say! Of course we cared. She was our grandma, wasn't she?"

Baby didn't tell stories. But she would cut chunks off the salt pork she kept to cook with pinto beans and help us tie them on our strings so we could go crawfishing in the creek near our house, and when we brought the mud-yellow crawfish home and left them to die in a dishpan behind the house, she didn't scold us, as my mother did. She took us to Club Lake, where we played in the water until we were tired and hungry and pink, and then she opened the picnic lunch she had brought--pimento cheese sandwiches and deviled eggs and a thermos jug of cold lemonade. When she had sugar rations, she made fudge and divinity candy. She helped us make popcorn chains for the Christmas tree. She showed us how to stand on our heads and taught us to dance the Charleston. When a hairy big tarantula fastened itself to her long housecoat while she was gathering clothes off the line, she didn't scream or jump, but calmly let the housecoat fall off, trapping the spider underneath, while, in her slip, she went to the shed to get a hoe. And when a quarrelsome neighbor told us to stay off her sidewalk, she took up for us.

She did these things, things my own mother never did. But I hated her. I hated her and I was scared to death of her.

I sit in the car, staring at the gray slab of the telephone company, and a memory surfaces, whole and complete:

Harriett and Henry are in the kitchen with Baby. Harriett is helping but Henry is there because he wants to be. Thomas and I are bent over my new coloring book at Baby's big round oak table in a corner of the living room. Thomas is coloring a dog yellow on one page while I color kittens gray and black on the facing page. A crash--breaking glass--from the kitchen. "Goddamn you! God damn you to hell!"

Harriett begins to cry, loud, choking sobs broken by the sharp sound of a slap. Henry flies through the kitchen door and dives past us to cower on the floor beneath the table.

"What happened?" whispers Thomas, looking under the table at his brother.

"Harriett dropped the milk bottle," Henry whispers back. "She was helping Mama make gravy," he adds as if more explanation is necessary.

More noise from the kitchen--cupboard doors slamming, a dust pan rattling on the floor, a broom or a mop thrown?

"Clean it up! Clean it up right now! And there better not be a sliver left on the floor when you finish!"

Thomas sits like a stone, his Crayola frozen above the coloring book. Henry makes himself small under the table. We hear glass rattle into the wastebasket. Then Harriett is in the kitchen doorway, her face wet and splotchy. She sees us watching and hurries toward the front door; by the time she reaches it she is running. The screen door slams and we see her through the window, hurrying around the side of the house to the back yard, sobbing, her hand to the side of her face.

"Come on," Thomas whispers to Henry and me. "Let's go outside."

When Baby bragged that her kids never talked back and they never ran from her, my mother and her sisters looked at each other and then away. If Henry bit Thomas, Baby bit him back, harder. She would punish my cousins coldly and deliberately, making them lie across their beds while she whipped them with a heavy leather strap we called a razor strap (but that I later realized was one of Duncan's belts), raising red welts on their legs and backsides that later turned into purple bruises. And if they didn't cry, she

whipped them until they did; or if she thought they cried too long, she whipped them to make them stop.

She never touched me--apparently my mother had made that clear--but she seemed to take pleasure in terrifying me in other ways. It was not hard; she had a venomous tongue.

"I don't have any use for spoiled brats who think they don't have to do anything I tell them. You may think I can't make you mind, but you'll find out. Just wait and see if you don't believe me."

I did believe her. I didn't understand all she said or what I had done to make her angry, but she was an adult, and I knew I had to be good or she would do something (I wasn't sure what) to me. But I also knew I didn't do the things Thomas and Henry did and I wasn't expected to help the way Harriett was, so I thought, by being very careful, staying unnoticed and unprovoking, I would be safe. Even so, when I was in her presence I felt the leaden weight of dread in my chest.

One morning after my mother had left for work we were in Baby's kitchen waiting to eat breakfast when Duncan said he thought the bacon was burning. Baby, who had been beating eggs at the sink, whirled and snatched the heavy black skillet off the stove, flung the screen door open and with all the strength in her arm, hurled the skillet across

the yard. Then she turned the bowl of eggs upside down in the sink and slid the biscuits off the plate into the trash can. She then went out of the kitchen without a word. We sat at the table, afraid to move. When she didn't come back, Duncan got up from the table, took his lunch pail and went out the back door.

We left the house the same way, staying away from the side of the house where we believed Baby to be. We found the skillet lying in the yard like a round black eye looking up at the sun, the grease a splatter of dusty freckles in the dirt--the cats had eaten the bacon. Later that morning, when we thought it was safe, we carried it back to the house. Baby was in the kitchen making fudge and whistling, just as if nothing had happened.

We stayed outside all day in the summer. We played with paper dolls and marbles in the deep shade of the front yard in the morning and in the afternoon we pushed our matchboxes along the rutted sandy roads we made in the dirt of the side yard. We crawled under the porch and lay on our backs with our hair in the cool black earth and looked up at the underside of our house, at the webs and nests and intricate tracks made in the wood by unseen, unknown insects, marveling at how cool it was under there in the heat of the day. We found things--the stub of a pencil, a

bathtub stopper with its blackened chain, a rusted pie plate, many nails, the head of a broken hammer, a penny-- and wondered how they got under the house. When the threat of black widow spiders overcame our fascination with the underside of the house, we borrowed Duncan's nails and drove them into boards, stacked empty cans and played store, threw locust skins on Duncan's trash fires, and in the evening dusk, played Wood Tag and Red Rover Come Over and Little White House Over the Hill.

When my father was in town, he came and took me to visit his parents, who lived on the other side of town. When my mother knew he was coming, she would begin her list of cautions:

"If he should start to drive out of town instead of to your grandmother's house, you make an excuse to get out of the car. Go up to somebody's house and ask to use the phone and call me. I'll come and get you."

"Why would he be going out of town, Mama?"

"I didn't say he would, I said he might. If he decided to just take you away with him. Steal you. It happens all the time."

"Steal me?" I had never thought of anyone being stolen. The idea made me laugh.

"It's not funny. He's married again now and from what I hear she can't have any children. They might decide they want you." She was somber, her voice grave, as it always was when she spoke of my father.

I never believed my father would steal me but my mother worried so about it that I decided I wouldn't go with him anymore.

"He is your father, after all, Molly. I want you to go and see your granddaddy and your grandmother, too, even after what she's done. Just be careful, that's all I'm saying. Be careful and don't trust him too much. I did and look what it got me."

She let him take me away with him, even when he hadn't paid his support for months. Perhaps she wanted to prove she was bigger than he was; or perhaps it was a way of maintaining a link, or perhaps it was simply her goodness, her belief in the golden rule. I was never asked if I wanted to go; I went because it was expected. I was then the only grandchild on that side of the family, but my father's mother was not particularly loving toward me, although she was never unkind. She may have blamed my mother, who was older than my father, for his infidelity, or she may have simply been a rather cold person. As I got older I began to believe that was it. My grandfather was

always glad to see me and I him, but my visits with these grandparents usually consisted of dinner eaten quickly and silently around my grandmother's dining room table, followed by a long afternoon sitting in the living room while adults talked to each other and paid little attention to me.

But whether or not they were enjoyable to me, my trips away from home with a tall, rather mysterious man who often brought gifts--a chalk rabbit at Easter, an Indian doll from New Mexico for my birthday, firecrackers on the fourth of July--must have been, I realized years later, hard on my cousins, who were left behind. Thomas, particularly, would stand on the sidewalk and watch until my father's car was out of sight, as if he believed until the last moment that we were coming back for him. No one ever bothered to explain the circumstances to him.

Baby and Duncan usually went out on Saturday nights--nightclubbing with their friends, my mother said, in her tight-lipped way--so Harriett and Thomas and Henry began going to town with us. For as long as I could remember, my mother had gone to town on Saturday afternoon. She paid bills and bought groceries and sometimes she got a cold wave or a shampoo and set at Mrs. Bessie Plyler's Beauty Shop. But whether she had any business to take care of or not, my mother would have gone to town; it was her single social

event, her only outing. Although she had been divorced for over five years, I could not remember her ever going out with a man; as far as she was concerned, that part of her life was over.

We walked to town, only four blocks away, and circled the square, looking in all the windows. If it was a Saturday after pay day, we got a hamburger and chocolate malt at The Grill and then went to a picture show. My mother loved the pictures, as she called them, and we saw one almost every week. Later, when we were older, my mother would install my cousins and me at the Dreamland to see the cowboy picture while she went to see love stories or musicals at the Texas next door.

On Sundays we attended Sunday School in the basement of the First Baptist Church, a block behind our house. I carried my dime for the collection plate tied in the corner of a handkerchief which my mother pinned inside the pocket of my dress. At first my mother went with us. Although Annie read the Bible and could quote from it, she never went to church, just as she hardly went anywhere except to her job at the dime store. My mother said when Annie was young she wouldn't even go to town to buy her own shoes; that Baby bought Annie's shoes when she bought her own and brought them home for her to try. Neither Baby or Duncan ever went

to church, either, and after a while, when my mother stopped going, the four of us went alone. When Sunday School was over we climbed the stairs to the dim, echoing church itself, and sat in the balcony and sang the hymns and listened to the sermon, and came home confused about our sins. When Harriett was eight she joined the church and on a Sunday night we all went to watch her be baptized. After the preacher spoke and we sang, they opened a curtain behind the pulpit and there was Harriett, standing inside a window with a blue wall behind her. She had on a loose kind of white robe instead of the dress she had worn to the church and she looked stiff and strange. When the preacher asked her some questions, she nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. He put his hand behind her back and one over her own folded hands in front and she closed her eyes and leaned back against his hands. But instead of holding her up, he let her fall. When he lifted her up again, she was wet. The robe stuck to her and her braids hung down on either side of her face and she looked like she was going to cry.

They said Harriett had been Saved, and my mother asked me if I didn't want to join the church and be baptized, too. Instead I told my mother I didn't want to go to Sunday School anymore. She tried to change my mind but she didn't make me go and after I stopped going, Thomas and Henry did,

too. Then, only Harriett went dutifully to church and Sunday School, as long as we lived in that house.

Toward the end of the summer after my grandmother died, Duncan's brother and his wife came to visit. They came in the night and got Duncan and Baby out of bed.

"For pity's sake!" my mother said and I woke up, the yellow porch light shining in my eyes and Baby laughing on the other side of the house, and somewhere a door slamming. She said it sounded like Edward and Ivy, that they had been looking for them all day, and for me to go back to sleep.

I turned over so I could see the tall window beside the bed. Anything could get in through that window. Make sure it's locked.

I raised up on my knees to see if the hook on the screen was fastened. My mother shifted irritably, said,

"What are you doing? Lie down and go to sleep."

For awhile after my grandmother died I couldn't go to sleep at night. I wanted my mother to stay with me but she wanted to go into Baby's side of the house and talk, or listen to the radio, or sit in the kitchen and read.

"Think of something nice," she would tell me.

"Something pleasant. Think of Christmas."

But what I thought of was the cemetery. I thought of the men I had seen rolling cigarettes, their shovels on the

ground beside them. I remembered their pale foreheads and their dirty hands and the way they licked their cigarette papers closed. I thought of them as still out there in the dark, under the tree, watching, waiting . . .

Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the lord my soul to keep if I should die before I wait . . . wake . . . I pray the lord my soul to take . . . I couldn't remember when or how I learned the prayer but I often said it over and over when I couldn't go to sleep.

I said it now, three times, staring out at the dark beyond the screen, listening to Baby and the others on the far side of the house . . .

Duncan's brother was tall and looked like Duncan except he was neater, smoother, as if he'd been colored inside the lines and Duncan was outside the lines, the way Henry colored, the strokes spiky and messy. His wife had bright red hair and said "you guys" and called the commode the john and the porch a stoop. She talked and laughed a lot, and told funny stories about the people they knew and the places they had been. She said she loved Texas and would like to live here. When she smiled her teeth were large and white and even; they reminded me of little dominoes lined up. I had never seen anyone like Ivy; she reminded me of the women

I saw in picture shows, the ones in the serials who wore long black dresses and smoked cigarettes in holders.

They moved around too much, she said, when Thomas asked why they didn't have kids. They had a house in California but they lived all over and it was no way for kids to live (she said kiddos). She turned her mouth down as if she were sad, but then she laughed and patted Thomas' cheek and said, "You guys will have to be our kiddos, okay?" I moved closer, hoping she would notice me.

They brought Baby a hula skirt and a basket made like a fish that had a bottle of whiskey in it. They brought Duncan a glass with a picture of a hula girl on it. When Edward filled the glass up with water the girl's grass skirt disappeared and she was naked underneath. He passed the glass around for everyone to see and Baby laughed so hard she choked. Then when she saw us watching, she said "You kids go out and play."

We sat on the front steps. Thomas had a piece of chalk and began drawing German signs on the sidewalk. My mother disapproved of this so I stood up and began rubbing the chalk lines out with my bare feet. Thomas tried to move me off the drawing, then gave up and moved on down the sidewalk. He said his uncle Edward was a spy and he drew another, larger sign. Harriett said he was not a spy, that

he worked for the government, and Thomas said she didn't know everything and that anyway Edward and Ivy were taking them to the circus. Harriett didn't argue or tell him he was crazy, as she usually did.

Somewhere there is a snapshot of the four of us made that day. We are sitting on the porch steps, a quartet in black and white, barefooted, forever young, frozen in time by Ivy's Kodak. Henry's hair is standing up wildly, like straw; Harriett has a tooth missing in front; Thomas is sitting with his legs stretched out, his arms folded, much as he sits now when relaxed. I am sitting on the end, slightly apart from the others; my hands are on my knees, forefinger and thumb of my right hand pressed together in a kind of tense O. I am serious, unsmiling, looking straight on at the camera.

That afternoon when my mother got home from work, Baby and Duncan and my cousins all went off with Edward and Ivy in Edward's car. My mother said they had not gone to the circus, but to see Duncan's and Edward's sister in Fort Worth.

At bedtime when they still had not come home I knew my mother must be mistaken; they had gone to the circus, without me. It was Thomas' fault, I decided; he was mad because I had rubbed his German sign off the sidewalk.

I was in the bathroom washing my feet before getting into bed--my mother was strict about that--when I saw a leaf pinned to the bathroom curtain. I climbed on to the commode and took out the two straight pins that held the leaf to the curtain. The leaf was the size of my hand, dark green with thick curved edges; it had a smell like the Chamberlain lotion Annie rubbed on her legs at night. When I turned the leaf over I saw that it had red lines that spread out along the back like the fingers of a hand.

I tore the leaf across. Then I tore it again. I tore it until it was in tiny pieces, then I threw the pieces in the wastebasket.

My mother said, "Molly? Wake up, Molly. Baby wants to ask you something."

I blinked in the glare of the overhead light. My mother was beside the bed. Baby and Duncan were behind her. I could see Harriett and Thomas, too, in the doorway.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It could not be morning; it was still dark outside. I heard the Ipana toothpaste song on the radio in the kitchen.

Mother sat down beside me on the bed. She looked toward Baby, then she said, "Molly, did you take a leaf off the curtain in the bathroom?"

I felt suddenly cold. I pulled the sheet up to my chin.

"Well, Molly?"

Baby moved nearer the bed, towered above me. My knees started to shake under the sheet. She said, "It was my leaf and I want to know why you took it down and tore it up?"

Baby's leaf? Thomas and Henry were always bringing something into the house that didn't belong there, like sticks or cans of dirt. She always got mad about it.

"I thought Thomas or Henry had put it on the cur--"

"It wasn't Thomas or Henry who pinned it on the curtain," said Baby. "It was me. Ivy brought me that leaf from Hawaii." She took a breath. "And you just took it down and tore it up. We found the pieces in the wastebasket."

I felt trapped like the tarantula she had pinned under her housecoat and then killed with the hoe. I hadn't felt sorry for the spider then. My mother cleared her throat, shifted her position on the bed in a way that made me think she was going to get up, go out of the room into some other part of the house and leave me there with Baby, alone.

But she didn't. She said, "Molly, why did you tear the leaf up?"

I couldn't tell her because I didn't know myself. I had no reason for what I'd done. It had something to do with Thomas and the circus and hating to have to wash my feet, and some dim thought that getting rid of the leaf was what Baby would have wanted me to do, the way she dumped out the stuff Thomas and Henry wagged in--

My mother was still speaking. "You know what you did was wrong, don't you? You had no right to tear up Baby's leaf, or Thomas or Henry's leaf, for that matter. I can't imagine what made you do such a thing."

"She'd better learn not to do such things--" Baby was loud and mocking.

"My God!" It was Annie, coming in from the kitchen. "I never heard so much racket. Can't this wait till tomorrow?"

"No, by damn, it can't!" Baby turned toward Annie, flinging her arms out so that I thought for a moment she was going to grab Annie the way she did Thomas or Henry, before they could get away. Her voice was harsh.

"Why did you put a leaf in the bathroom, anyway?" Annie said quietly, as if barely interested, the way she asked if supper was ready, or if anyone had seen her cigarettes.

Baby was practically screaming when she answered and I saw my mother glance at the window beside me. I knew what she was thinking.

"It's my own goddamn business if I want to put a leaf on the curtain in my own damn bathroom! And what difference does it make why? The question is why did Molly tear it up!"

"The neighbors will think we're killing each other," said my mother. She looked at me. "Molly, tell Baby you're sorry."

I tried but I couldn't. Not that I wasn't; I was.

After a moment, Baby said, "She's not going to say it." She was quieter but her voice was hard, each word like a rock hitting me. "But I'll tell you what, Molly. You stay on your own side of the house from now on unless you're supposed to be on mine. Come on, Thomas."

At some point Duncan had left the doorway. Harriett was gone, too. Only Thomas had stayed. He looked at me and followed Baby out the door.

That fall my mother sent me to kindergarten, partly, I realized later, to remove me from Baby's care.

Because I went half days, my mother decided I could ride the city bus home from the school, which was on the college campus where she worked. She showed me a roll of

tokens, small silver coins pierced in the center with a star, and said I would give one to the driver every time I got on the bus, which stopped on Main Street near the Baptist Church. She rode the route with me several times to be sure I knew where to get on and where to get off and how to walk the short block to our corner where I could see our house. She asked the bus driver, a short fat man who could barely get his stomach under the big steering wheel, if he would watch out for me and he assured her he would. And so each morning I rode the bus with her and each day at noon I rode home by myself.

One day a substitute driver was on the bus when I got on to come home and because he didn't remind me of my stop or because I was daydreaming, I rode past it. Suddenly the scene outside the window was unfamiliar. Where was the Baptist Church? When had we passed the ice house? Not a building, a tree, or a house had I ever seen before. The bus rumbled on up a street that was strange to me and I knew I had to get off. I reached up, pulled the cord. When the bus stopped I went down the steps. I watched the bus drive off, leaving me alone on the sidewalk with no idea how to get home.

Not knowing what else to do, I started back the way the bus had come. I walked half a block to a corner, stopped,

looked down the street. Strange houses, strange yards. I began to cry.

"What's the matter? Are you lost?"

I hadn't seen him there on the pole but when he called to me I stopped and looked back. He climbed down, unbuckled the spikes from heavy-soled boots that laced up around his pants legs. Tools dangled from a leather pouch around his waist. He was tall with dark hair and a kind, sunburned face.

"I saw you get off the bus. Are you lost?" he asked again.

"I missed my stop," I said. "I don't know how to get home." I was ashamed of my tears and wiped them away.

"Do you know your address?"

I did. He grinned.

"You're not very lost, after all. Come on, I'll show you." And he took my hand and walked with me down the sidewalk. Beyond the trees I saw a familiar gray bulk in the next block, and I let go his hand and ran to the corner, relieved to recognize the First Baptist Church.

He made sure I knew where I was and how to get to my street, then he watched while I crossed the narrow side street. When I was safely on the other side, I looked back and he waved.

I never told anybody I got lost coming home from school, or about the man who helped me. But I remembered it--remembered him--for a long time after that.

* * * *

Baby is pale, paler than usual, and she looks tired. She's lost weight, seems small against the pillow behind her head.

"I appreciate you coming like you have, Molly, every day. I know it's not easy for you to get away."

"It's all right." I say. "I'm here because I want to be, you know that."

"The kids will be here tonight."

"I know." She's told me this already. But she's tired, not thinking. "What time?"

"Harriett and William will be here about seven, they said. I don't know about Thomas and Henry. They're both flying in. They're supposed to call from the airport."

My cousins live in distant cities. They come at intervals, stay as long as they reasonably can. But if they do not come when she thinks they should, Baby calls. Harriett lives in Oklahoma. She became a Catholic and married a former priest; they have four boys and two girls. Thomas is married and has three children and his own

computer business in Houston. Henry is a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, stationed in Florida.

"Is that the will?"

"Yes," I say, placing the blue jacket on the bedside table. I work for an attorney and I have prepared the will and brought it to the hospital to be signed.

"I'll be glad to pay for that, now."

"It's all right. I typed it on my own time."

She adjusts the pillow behind her head. "Annie and your mother were here earlier."

"Yes, Mother said they were coming to sit with you for a while. Has anyone else come?"

"Oh, people come and go all the time. Sometimes I'm dozing and they wake me up and tell me I need to get some rest." Her laugh becomes a cough, a loose rattle. She's smoking too much.

"Did I tell you Rose called yesterday?"

"Mother said she called today."

"Oh, that's right. I'm crazy." She's been here, at the hospital, for so long she's lost track of the days.

"Rose said she knew what I was going through. But I don't know what makes her think that."

Rose is Hardin's widow. Hardin died on Mother's Day in 1960, at age fifty. He owned a chain of convenience stores

in Wichita Falls and early that Sunday morning he had gone to one of his stores and was stripping the outer wilted leaves off lettuce heads when he had a heart attack.

Sounding irritable, she explained, "Hardin was just alive one minute and gone the next. Not like Duncan."

It is Duncan, not Baby, who is sick, dying, in fact, in the bed next to the chair she sits in.

Duncan's skin is stretched like yellow parchment over his bones, and he looks hollowed out, empty, like the locust skins we found clinging to tree limbs and threw on his trash fires. He is asleep or sedated; it's hard to tell which now. It is a matter of time, the doctors say.

He found the bulge near his abdomen one afternoon four months ago, when he stretched out on his bed to read the paper. Appendix, the doctor said, and operated. He was wrong.

They were not ready, either of them. Duncan at fifty-eight thought he had plenty of time. They--all of us--were shocked and angry and indignant, as if somebody had made a mistake. Now everyone, including Duncan, just wants it to be over.

"Maybe Rose meant she knew how it would be, you know, later." As soon as I say it I wish I hadn't. Nobody has said "die" or "dead" yet and I don't want to be the first.

But Baby appears not to have heard me. Or maybe she has finished with Rose.

"Mat and Ned Jr. came by last night. Cent said she would be here this weekend. I appreciate them coming, don't think I don't, but if one more person rubs my back I think I'll scream."

She has never liked to be touched. Is not a toucher, herself. I see Harriett kiss her hello and goodbye and Thomas and Henry give her a hug, but they make the move to do it, not Baby. I have never seen her embrace one of her sisters; she was not even demonstrative toward Duncan and everyone knows how she feels about Duncan.

"I've simply got to go home and get some more clothes. As soon as Harriett gets here, I'm going to go home and take a shower."

"You don't have to wait for Harriett. I'll stay."

"Thanks, Molly, but you've done enough, coming every day the way you have, making the will . . . when do you think we should get him to sign it?"

"Tonight or tomorrow. When he wakes up." What I mean is when he is next lucid. We have taken the precaution of a will just in case; because Texas has laws that protect children's inheritance. Baby will not have much, anyway; the house and car, a small amount of cash. She'll have to

keep working at the school. All the money they made in overseas service is gone, blown or unwisely spent on investments and ideas that never paid off. The years they were separated from my cousins because there was no place for them to go to school in Saudi Arabia--the teenage years when Harriett and Thomas and Henry lived with my mother and me--all seem wasted, with nothing to show for them.

I wonder if Baby ever regrets those years.

On impulse I say, "When was the last time you drove down Pearl Street?"

"Oh, I never go that way. There's nothing left from when we lived there."

"One house. I went by there today."

"Did you? Why?"

I don't want to appear sentimental or nostalgic; she is neither. "I just happened to drive by," I say, offhand. Then, without knowing I'm going to, I say, "Do you remember the time I tore up the leaf?"

She lights a cigarette and slips her lighter neatly back under the strap on her leather cigarette case. The movements of her hands are deft, quick, and so familiar I would know them anywhere, even if I couldn't see her face.

"The leaf?" she says, blowing smoke out. Smoking can't hurt Duncan now; they don't even remind her to leave the room any longer.

"It was a leaf Ivy and Edward brought from Hawaii." I hesitate, realize I'm still afraid of this memory, after all these years. But I remind myself I am grown up; she cannot--would not--hurt me now. "You had pinned it up on the bathroom curtain and I took it down and tore it up. You were really mad about it. You told me I couldn't come on your side of the house anymore."

"I remember Ivy and Edward being there several times but I can't remember a leaf or getting mad about it--?" She looks at me questioningly, mildly puzzled. She seems preoccupied.

I am stunned. How can she not remember? All these years I have felt so guilty--no, beyond guilt--so self-loathing, sinful, bad because of that leaf. It was such a dark episode in my childhood that I have never spoken of it--not to my mother, not my husband, no one--since that night.

And she doesn't even remember it.

It was so stupid and silly, all so stupid and senseless, I want to laugh.

"You must have hated me when you were little. When we all lived there together."

I am even more surprised. She has never even hinted at such a thing before; never suggested that she felt an ounce of guilt or regret or conscience for her treatment of me. Or of anyone.

"I know you thought I was mean, and I guess I was. But you'll have to admit I made you mind me."

"I didn't hate you," I said. I've denied it so long; what's the point in admitting it now? And maybe it isn't a lie; maybe I didn't hate her. Anyway, I don't hate her now. But I can't deny it all.

"But I was deathly afraid of you," I say, and the laugh trembles out of me.

She helped me plan my wedding because that kind of thing made my mother nervous. Then later, she and Duncan stayed with us for six weeks when they were home from overseas, before our first son was born. She cooked supper every night because I worked, and after we ate we sat at the table and played fierce games of Hearts or 42. Baby always wanted me to be her partner.

I am grown now. I can see from her perspective how it must have been. She was no more than--it startles me to realize it--twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, taking

care of three children, nursing her mother, the one constant ally of her life, watching her die. Then taking me on, another burden. She couldn't have refused; it was unheard of in that family, not to help each other.

When she was seventeen she caught pneumonia and nearly died. She was sick a long time; it was in the days before penicillin. They took turns sitting up with her, night after night. The first day she was allowed out, she went to the store. My grandmother was always sending her to the store. They said she sometimes sent her three or four times in one day.

She went through her senior year of high school with only one dress, washing and ironing it every night. And the only coat she had was an old sweater that had belonged to Rose. "And it was bitter cold that winter. I nearly froze to death," she has said, remembering. Then the bitterness leaves her voice and she says, as emotionally as she has ever said anything, "But I couldn't have gone at all if it hadn't been for Sarah. She paid for my supplies and even bought my yearbook. She knew how much I wanted to graduate and she was determined to see me do it. I couldn't have done it without her help."

They all had their separate roles, their identity. My mother, the good one, the kind one, who didn't say mean

things about people, the one who went to work and helped the others get decent clothes so they could go to school, my mother, the self-sacrificing one, the tragic one, whose marriage broke up, who suffered the disgrace of divorce. Annie, the intellectual, who took violin lessons and read serious books. Hardin, the only boy, the Hope, the bearer of the name, the successful one. The twins, Cent and Mat, one strong and well, one weak and nervous . . .

Baby had been the spoiled one, the brat, the baby, a cross that all the others had to bear. She was the one who took a bottle until she was six, filling it up herself from the icebox. She was the one like Grandma Lou--spiteful, hateful, mean, the tattletale one. In many ways, the despised one.

It is almost dusk outside, the sky fading from blue to gray, an hour that has always made me melancholy. We have been silent for some minutes. It is not an uncomfortable silence, merely reflective, as if we have each sunk deeply into our own thoughts. As heartsick as I am about Duncan, I now feel curiously calm, as if I have found an answer to something that has been troubling me, although I am not even sure of the question. I look over at Baby. She is watching Duncan but she turns her head, sees me. We smile.

CHAPTER III

WONDER WOMAN

My mother leaves my father before I am born, so I never live with him. Then my grandfather, who I do live with, dies. Then my grandmother dies. Then when I am five we move into the house with my aunt Eve (who we call Baby), my uncle Duncan, and my three cousins and we live there until I am nine. Then my uncle sells the house and we all have to move again. It seems like we're always having to go somewhere else.

Duncan sells the house because he has bought what used to be a gas station next to his brother's air conditioning business and they are going to turn it into a house. The gas station is two-story and round with a top that has battlements, like a castle. Duncan and his brother build a square addition on to it and paint the whole thing silver, which they say will waterproof it and make it cooler. Upstairs in the round part is Duncan and Baby's room; near their bed is a ladder that leads to a trap door in the ceiling. The door opens on to the roof which is flat and covered with tar that gets sticky in the summer. My cousin Thomas says if there is ever a war we can climb up there and shoot the enemy from the battlements.

I love the roof. You can look down and see all the neighborhood, into people's backyards, see them walking along the road below without them ever knowing you are watching. It's like being invisible; you can see them but they can't see you. And if you look out you can see far into the distance, beyond the railroad tracks almost to town and beyond. If it weren't for the trees you could see our old house.

We are forbidden to go on the roof unless my aunt Baby is going up, too. She likes to sunbathe up there, where she can get a tan all over, she says. She never really gets a tan though; she just blisters and then the skin on her back and arms peels off in long papery strips. My mother says in the first place Baby shouldn't be lying around on her roof stark naked where anybody flying over in an airplane could see her and in the second place she's too fair to tan anyway.

The bottom part of the round house is the kitchen. It has a fireplace and on either side of it are little windows that open out like doors; they remind me of pictures of windows in nursery rhyme books. Duncan builds Baby a cabinet for dishes that has a curved back so it fits against the round wall. Over the sink he builds a pass-through window that opens into the new living room, so you can put

food through if you have a party, he says. Beneath the stairs he builds a desk and bookshelves with a secret compartment that you can't find unless you know where to look.

I love everything about the round house and would love to live there, but my cousin Harriett, who is two years older than I am, hates it. She hates it because it is round and silver and doesn't look like other people's houses--all the reasons I love it. She also hates this part of town which she says is across the tracks.

It's true that the railroad tracks are less than a mile west of the round house but I don't understand why that makes Harriett hate everything so. I wish she liked her new house as much as I do; I would like living in the round house and having my own room. Harriett's room is in the square part they built on and is upstairs; Duncan is building her a window seat where she can sit and read or draw and look out the window, and have everything just the way she likes it.

People say won't we miss each other? my cousins and I, after living together for five years. But I hardly have time to think about missing them before I find out that my uncle Hardin, my mother's brother, has bought two lots a block away from the round house and that my mother, my aunt

Annie, and I are going to live in our own house that will be built on one of the lots.

My uncles build the house after work and on weekends. It has two rooms across the front, a living room and a kitchen, and a bathroom on the back. My mother and I will sleep in the living room and my aunt Annie, in the kitchen. Someday, when we can afford it, I can have my own room, my mother says. On the lot next door Hardin has a barn and a corral built for his horse, a Tennessee Walker named My Blue Heaven. During the months it takes for my uncles to build the house, my mother says we will stay with Hardin and my aunt Rose and Annie will stay with Duncan and Harriett and my cousins in the round house. Neither Rose or Baby has enough room for all of us to stay together in one place, she says.

My middle name is Hardin; I am named for him because he is my mother's only brother. He got in trouble once when he was young for stealing apples with some other boys. Afterwards it was as if he had escaped some deadly disease, my mother said. Everybody was so glad to have him home, safe, not ruined forever by bad companions and he was so repentant and grateful to be forgiven that he could never again do any wrong. The only critical thing I ever heard them say about Hardin was that he traded my grandfather's

railroad pocket watch, which he got when my grandfather died, being the only boy, for a new wristwatch. My mother and the others had a hard time getting over their father's watch going out of the family.

The thought of living with Hardin and Rose pleases me. They have a big house that always feels cool even on the hottest days, a yard with rose bushes and grass, a dog named Pug, and an icebox with a freezer on the bottom where they keep popsicles. They also have a piano in the living room that plays by itself. I especially look forward to the piano. They have a daughter, Mary, who is married, and a son Dusty, who is sixteen and plays football at high school. Dusty gets his picture in the paper a lot and is, according to Baby, "stuck on himself."

Mother and I move into a small back room that was Dusty's when Mary lived at home (he has the front bedroom now) and that still has some of his clothes hanging in the closet. Rose does not move these out and so we hang most of our clothes in a metal cupboard on Rose's "utility" porch next to the washing machine. On one wall of our room there is a mirror framed in leather with curved polished cowhorns above it. Hanging from one of the horns is a powder horn that belonged to somebody way back in our family, my mother's grandfather who was part Indian, I think. A red,

yellow, green and black Indian blanket is folded across the end of the bed.

Hardin is crazy about horses and cows and Mother says he would buy a farm except neither Rose or Dusty would live on it with him. Hardin bought Dusty a horse once but Dusty wouldn't ever ride it and finally Hardin sold it. It's funny how people who can have things don't seem to want them and those that want them never seem to get them. I used to want a horse so much that finally Annie said, "I wish you'd stop asking for a horse. I want an airplane, too, but I don't expect to get one."

Rose's house is always very clean and neat and everything she has looks new. Hardin is the manager of a wholesale grocery company and every other year he buys a new Pontiac. I think they are rich, but Mother says Hardin just has a good job. Rose is very particular about her house. She doesn't scare me the way Baby does, but she is forever telling me something they don't do.

"We don't take a bath while the washer is running."

"We don't play with Pug like that; it makes him wheeze."

"We never go into Dusty's room."

And worst of all: "We don't play the piano so long at one time; it wears out the rolls."

Rose is short with tiny feet that puff up over the rim of her shoes. Every day after lunch she takes a nap and on Saturdays I must be very quiet, for she can hear tiptoeing. At night after supper we sit in the big back bedroom where she and Hardin sleep. She and Mother sit in chairs like the wood in our room--maple--with padded seats and little printed skirts. Hardin sits in a big padded chair beside the radio. I sit on a stool or lie on the rug in front of the stove and listen to them talk. I can play with Pug as long as I don't make him wheeze; I am somehow not held responsible for the drooling and slobbering he does all over Rose's rug.

Since we moved in with Rose and Hardin I have been reading the lost and found ads in the paper every night because my cousin Harriett has lost her dog, Tiny. One night I read two ads that sound like Tiny and, taking Rose's scissors from her sewing machine in our room, I carefully cut the ads out and put them in my notebook so I can show them to Harriett the next day at school. I'm in my place on the floor when Hardin, later than usual, comes in.

"Where's the paper?" he asks, and finds it, folded, on the bed behind him. He opens it, turns a page, says, "Who the hell did this?"

Nobody says anything.

He says, "Goddamn it! Who cut the paper up like this? Rose, you cut something out of the paper?"

Rose and my mother, who are in the kitchen, come to the doorway. "No," says Rose. "I haven't even read it yet."

"Well, I'd like to know who in hell did this." He holds the paper up for them to see the two small rectangular holes. "Has Dusty been in here?"

"Dusty hasn't even come home from school yet. He's at practice." Rose, who can't tolerate criticism of Dusty from anyone, even Hardin, is a little sharp.

"Well, somebody sure as hell did it." Hardin rattles the paper back together, holds it open before him, frowning.

"Molly?" My mother speaks for the first time. "Did you cut something out of Hardin's paper?"

If she hadn't said "Hardin's paper" I might have told the truth. But saying Hardin is like saying God's name. I am named for him; he's supposed to be crazy about me and me about him. The truth is he ignores me most of the time; I like Blue, his horse, which he is forever showing off on but never lets us ride, better than I like him.

"Well, what's cut out of it, Hardin?" demands Rose, trying to get to the bottom of it once and for all. "Let's see."

She lays her cuptowel down on the arm of his chair and takes the pages out of his hands. "Why, it's the want ads, looks like the lost and founds. Why would anyone want to cut out the lost and founds?" She looks inquiringly at my mother, who looks at me.

"Molly, did you do it?" My mother asks again and I sit up crosslegged on the rug. Pug pants beside me, a long stream of silver drool hanging from his blacklipped mouth. I shake my head.

Rose hands the paper back to Hardin and looks at me for the first time. "Molly," she says. "I didn't cut that paper, your mother didn't, and certainly Hardin didn't do it. Dusty hasn't been here. That doesn't leave anybody but you, does it?"

I shake my head dumbly. I've gone too far now to own up; I can see it in my mother's eyes, too. She knows and is ashamed for me, of me. She looks puzzled and hurt by my refusal to speak.

"Molly, did you cut the ads out for Harriett?" She looks at Rose. "Tiny's run off and Harriett was having a fit when we were there Sunday. You know how she is about that dog."

"Hell, it doesn't matter," says Hardin, gruffly, and shakes a wrinkle out of the paper. "Let it go."

"But it does matter," says Rose. She looks at me and her eyes are not unkind. "Molly, we're glad to have you here staying with us and we don't care if you cut things out of the paper after Hardin's read it. But you have to ask first."

I didn't know, I scream inwardly. I didn't know he hadn't read the paper. I wouldn't have done it if I had known.

"Just admit you did if you did, Molly," says my mother, "and we can forget about it."

"I didn't," I say, knowing they know.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"Molly, you must have done it. There's not anybody else. Just tell the truth."

"I didn't do it." Trapped, I cannot go forward or backward. It's too late to tell the truth and they will never leave me alone until I do. I can see Rose's face and over the top of the paper, Hardin's. I see their disgust, contempt, hatred.

"Molly." My mother's voice when she is fed up, just before hurt and disappointment.

I shake my head again and to my horror tears spill out of my eyes and roll, stinging, down my cheeks. The three of

them stare at me and Pug, beside me, digs his hard nails into my leg. He whimpers as if in sympathy and rubs his slobbery face against me.

"Just forget the whole goddamn thing!" says Hardin, folding his paper noisily.

There is a brief silence and then Rose says "Pug!"

For a moment I think she has meant to say "Hardin!" and has called Pug's name by mistake. But then I see that she is waiting for the dog to lift his thick heavy body off the rug and follow her to the back door. When he gets there she puts him out.

"If you cut the ads out for Harriett," my mother says, her voice tight, "just say so. Hardin isn't mad. Are you, Hardin?"

"Hell. Forget it," he says again. He gets to his feet and goes out into the kitchen. I can hear him opening the freezer and I know he is taking out the carton of ice cream. I wish for yesterday or even an hour ago. I would do everything different--I wouldn't touch the paper; I wouldn't care if Harriett ever found Tiny. We would have supper and sit in the bedroom for a while talking and then I'd be in there with Hardin right now and he'd be asking "Want some ice cream? What kind, vanilla or chocolate? How about a little of both?"

And we'd sit at the table and eat ice cream out of Rose's white bowls and he'd tell what happened at the wholesale that day. He talks about the men who work for him--the ones who are salesmen or the ones who load trucks. Sometimes he's disgusted with the ones who load trucks because he says they're dumb or lazy. Once he told how he warned one of them to get working or get walking, he didn't much care which. Sometimes one will do something funny and he'll tell that, like the time he gave his wristwatch to a boy who worked after school and told him to take it out and set it by the clock in the warehouse. Later he asked where his watch was, and the boy said "Why, I set it out there by the clock, like you told me." When Hardin talks about his work, he talks to me the same way he talks to Rose or my mother.

"Rose! Sarah! Did you hear me? I don't give a goddamn about the paper!" Hardin is suddenly in the doorway, ice cream bowl in his hand.

"But if there's anything in this world I can't stand, it's a liar," he adds.

I jump up and run past Rose and my mother to our room. I am more miserable than I have ever been and it's all my own fault. They leave me alone for a while, but finally my mother comes in. She sits beside me in the dark, brushes my

hair away from my face. She is not kind or angry, just resigned and distant.

"Nobody's mad, Molly. But if you'd just told the truth when Hardin first asked, we could have avoided all this." She stands up, pulls the string to turn on the ceiling light. "This is Hardin and Rose's house. I want you to remember that."

In the two months we remain in their house I am treated the way I have always been treated by Rose and Hardin. But I know they despise me; I know I don't belong here or anywhere. Sometimes I wish I could leave and go some place, some other place that was just mine. I think I would like to live in a cave that went far back under hills and mountains and had secret passageways and hidden doors. Or I would like to live in a house high up in the trees, like Tarzan's, that you had to swing on a vine to get to. Or a house built on sticks over the water like I saw in my geography book at school so you could just jump into the water anytime you wanted.

I become a shadow in Rose and Hardin's house, ducking out of the rooms they come in, eating without speaking at mealtime, waiting on the front porch after school until my mother comes home because I don't want to be alone in the

house with Rose. I play with Pug, believing he is the only one who wants me there.

On Sundays I read the funnies that come with the paper. Wonder Woman is my favorite. I am intrigued by the idea of her invisible airplane. I imagine riding in one, high above the houses and people, watching, seeing everything, but invisible myself. I think how I would like to be able to turn invisible any time I wanted to, the way she can when she gets in her airplane.

One Sunday when I know everyone has finished with the paper I cut the figure of Wonder Woman out and paste her on cardboard, like a paperdoll. The next day she goes with me to school, riding safely in the pocket of my jacket, the way she does in her airplane. I take her to school with me every day after that; sometimes I pretend we are flying away together in her invisible airplane. She is a secret until one day someone in my room spies her and then other funny paper people appear--Dick Tracy, Terry and the Pirates, Prince Valiant, Dagwood and Blondie, Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae, even Mrs. Worth. Everybody in my room brings someone until finally the teacher, aggravated, takes them up and tells us not to bring comics to school again.

But she doesn't get Wonder Woman, who has a place inside my notebook. I am careful not to show her at school

again but she goes with me, as long as we live with Hardin and Rose, and sometimes we fly. We fly above the streets and the cars, above the school and the teacher and the other kids, above Hardin and Rose's house. We fly so high into the sky and clouds that we can look down and see everybody below. But nobody can see us; we are safe inside her invisible airplane.

CHAPTER IV

ANNIE'S DRESS

I had lived with my aunt Annie Lee all my life. She was grown up but still at home when my mother left my father and moved back to live with her parents, before I was born. When my grandparents died--my grandfather when I was two; my grandmother when I was five--Annie Lee and my mother and me were left together. We had been together ever since.

The spring I turned twelve Annie Lee told my mother she was going to marry Howard Kellogg.

I didn't think much of Howard. It wasn't that I didn't like him; I just didn't think about him except when he came to the house to get Annie Lee. The worst thing about him was that he told jokes that weren't funny and I had to laugh, or at least smile, to be polite, and the best thing about him was that he had an army jeep. Sometimes my mother and I would go somewhere with my aunt and Howard and I got to ride in the back of the jeep. It had a cloth top and sides and plastic windows that zipped in and out. We had to climb up into it, not like getting into the back seat of a car, and when Howard drove over the rough spots in the road I bounced around on the back seat and had to hang on to the metal posts that held the roof up to keep from falling out.

It was peculiar in a way, Howard having a jeep. My aunt had quit Leslie Browning partly because when the war was over he bought a jeep and drove it around town. She said he didn't have any right to own a jeep, not having served in the war or anything. Howard, on the other hand, had been a warrant officer in the Army Air Corps even before the war.

Howard had been valedictorian of his high school class (he and Annie had gone to school together and our family had known his family all their lives) but he couldn't afford to go to college so he joined the air corps straight out of high school, more than ten years before we ever got into the war. He had been stationed on the same air base in Arizona as Jimmy Stewart and had his picture made with him. He was forever taking the snapshot out of his billfold and showing it to somebody.

Everybody thought Howard would make the service his career, but after the war was over, he came home, bought himself four acres of land outside of town, built a house, and took a job with the post office, delivering a rural route. He ran into Annie Lee in Duke & Ayres, where she was the assistant manager, and the next thing we knew they were going out. They had been going together for about a year, on Saturday nights and sometimes on Tuesday nights, and at Christmas he gave her a gold and silver compact (which she

unwrapped and then wrapped up again so he wouldn't know she had opened it early). But Howard was short and bald and not a bit goodlooking and she didn't talk about him or act silly the way girls--my cousins, anyway--did about their boyfriends. But then my aunt Annie Lee was not exactly a girl. Really, she was an old maid. She was thirty-seven years old and I guess everybody, including me, thought she wasn't ever going to get married.

My mother said when she first moved back home, Annie Lee was twenty-five years old and had never had a job. She stayed home, took violin lessons from Mr. Crowe, and helped my grandmother in the house. She didn't go out very often, my mother said, but liked to stay in and read books and play the violin. If she wanted company, she talked to Papa (my grandfather). When he died she didn't speak a word to anyone for four days.

After my grandfather died, Annie Lee went to work at Mr. Marchbanks' grocery store, then, after the war started, she got a job at a Skillern's Drug in Dallas (she stayed with my aunt Millicent but came home after a few weeks because my grandmother got sick. My mother said she wouldn't have stuck it out down there anyway, that it was too far from home to suit Annie Lee). When my grandmother

died, she went to work at Duke & Ayres and had been there ever since.

Sometimes she could bring stuff home from the store--comic books or magazines that nobody ever bought; she had to tear the top half of the cover off before she could take them out of the store to prove they weren't stolen or anything. Once she brought home some Valentine decorations--red cardboard hearts and cupids and a sack of those little pink and white candy hearts with "Kiss Me" and "Be Mine" and "Sweet Heart" written on them. When I asked what in the world she was going to do with Valentine decorations, she said she was thinking of having a party. But she never did. Probably she and my mother had a fight about it. My mother never wanted you to bring anyone over; she said the house was too small for company. We only had two rooms and a bathroom. My mother and I slept in the room that was the living room and Annie Lee slept in the room that was the kitchen and if Annie Lee had company, my mother and I couldn't go to bed.

My mother and Annie Lee were always fighting about something. Usually it was about Annie Lee staying up all night. When my mother got home from work (she had worked at the steam laundry since she was nineteen years old), she cooked our supper (I had to make the salad and the ice tea

and set the table, and after supper, take the scraps out into the back yard far beyond the reach of the porch light and throw them out--all of which I hated). It was Annie Lee's job to wash the dishes, but every night when she got home--the store closed at six but by the time she balanced the registers and walked home it was nearly seven o'clock--she would lie down and go to sleep.

My mother would say, "Now don't lie down there, Annie Lee. Your supper won't be fit to eat. Come on and eat with us."

And my aunt would say, "I'll eat in a minute. I'm just resting."

Then about ten o'clock, when we were getting ready to go to bed, Annie Lee would wake up, make a pot of coffee, eat her cold supper, and begin washing dishes. Then she would have to wash her hair and get the ironing board out to iron a blouse and do a thousand other things. It drove my mother crazy. If she was already in bed, she would sit straight up, fling the quilt back, turn her pillow over, twist around in the bed and start talking to the dark.

"I fail to understand why some people can't have a little consideration and go to bed at a decent hour instead of staying up all night, burning lights and making so much noise that other people can't get their rest."

She would carry on like that for some time, while Annie shaved her legs and tweezed her eyebrows and smoked one cigarette after another in the kitchen. Finally my mother would flounce down in the bed and turn over to face the wall and pull the covers up around her head.

The lights and the noise never bothered me but I was understood to be inconvenienced along with my mother, and if I dawdled in bed the next morning as I was prone to do anyway (I was a sleepyhead), my mother would observe, for Annie Lee's benefit, that "Anybody would be tired when they're kept up all night by lights shining in their eyes and the radio playing and water running until all hours."

But no matter what my mother said, my aunt went on sleeping through supper and then fooling around in the kitchen until after midnight. Most of the time she kept silent during my mother's speeches, waiting for them to run themselves out. But occasionally she flared back and there would be a fullfledged argument. They would dredge up old hurts and injustices and bad feelings until one of them shouted something that the other could not--or dared not--answer, and then a heavy, miserable, silence would fall over the house, so thick I could hardly breathe through it.

I was used to their arguments, which occurred regularly, almost by pattern, but I hated and dreaded them.

For this reason--because they could not get along--I thought my mother might be glad Annie Lee was getting married. But she was so quiet about it--there was usually no doubt whether she was happy or not happy about something--that I had to ask.

"Of course I'm happy for her," she said. But her mouth was set in that disapproving, displeased, all too familiar line, and I knew that for whatever reason, she was not happy to see my aunt getting married.

I guess Annie Lee knew it too because she didn't talk about it much; they both just went on as if it wasn't going to happen even while Annie was making her plans. But other people seemed to think we talked about nothing else.

"I guess you're excited about Annie getting married, aren't you?"

"When is the wedding?"

"Will you be a junior bridesmaid?"

"I know you'll miss her when she moves away."

Family friends and acquaintances, and neighbors, past and present, assumed I was in on things. But the truth about my relationship with my aunt was that she ignored me when she could and spoke to me only when I did something she didn't like, such as the time I pinned pictures up on the wall over my desk. She had had my uncle Duncan build the

desk for me for Christmas; it had sections for my drawing paper and my books and a tall section where my costume doll that she had given me was supposed to stand. Not having my own room, I thought of the space over the desk as my "room," and arranged it to suit myself. But when Annie Lee came home and saw the pictures, she tore them all down. She said that even though I slept in that room it was still our living room and pictures cut out of magazines on the wall made it look tacky and cheap, and that was not how things were done. Another time she flew into a rage and knocked some records my father had given me, with a record player, for my birthday to the floor because, she said, they were just a bunch of clutter. Later she went to town and bought me some more records, but she couldn't find the one by Tex Ritter that had "Rye Whiskey" on it, which I especially liked.

Because they weren't talking about it at home, I found out most of what I knew about the wedding from my cousin Harriett, who lived a block from us. Harriett's mother, Eve, another of my mother's sisters, was next to Annie Lee in age and was going to be her matron of honor; Harriett's daddy, Duncan, would be Howard's best man. But when I mentioned this to my mother (I thought she, not Eve, should be the matron of honor), she said it wasn't going to be that

kind of wedding--that Eve and Duncan were more like witnesses, the couple who would stand up with Annie and Howard.

Because no one talked directly to us about it, Harriett and I had to follow a word here and a name there, like pebbles dropped in a fairy tale, to find out how everything was going to be. We learned that Annie and Howard were getting married the third Saturday in August at eleven o'clock in the morning and that only Eve and Duncan and my mother and I would attend the ceremony itself, while everybody else waited at Eve's house to have cake and punch. Some of the family had their feelings hurt about it--Harriett cried when she found out she couldn't go--but Annie Lee said she couldn't have the whole family (my mother and Annie Lee had four more sisters and a brother, and I had peach orchard cousins) trying to crowd into the preacher's study where she and Howard would be married. I also found out what was wrong with my mother; she was worried about paying off the note on the house. My uncles had built our house and she and Annie Lee had been paying for it together; now she would have to shoulder all of it. My mother was always worrying about money.

Harriett knew a lot more about weddings than I did and even though she couldn't go, she was excited about it. The

more everybody talked, the more I got caught up in the excitement, too. I had never been to a wedding but I had seen them in picture shows. I knew I wouldn't be a junior bridesmaid, whatever that was (I didn't even mention it to my mother or Annie, who would have said I dreamed it up), but I did begin to be anxious about what I would wear. I pictured pale organdy with a stiff full skirt but my mother said I would wear my sixth grade graduation dress, which was pale blue dotted swiss. I did get new white shoes; she charged them on her bill at LaMode.

My mother was wearing a navy blue dress she already had; she said she couldn't afford to buy anything new. Eve was getting a new beige linen suit; the jacket had a peplum. Everybody except me was wearing a hat. They tried all their hats on me but they all looked too wintery or too old for me or too ridiculous and finally my mother said I didn't need a hat anyway. I didn't mind about the hat. I was happy and excited. Looking forward to the wedding was almost as good as Christmas, or Easter Sunday.

Then I found out about Annie Lee's dress.

It was brown. Dark brown.

I knew she wasn't having a long dress and I had heard talk about a suit, but I thought whatever her dress was like, it would be white. Wedding dresses were always white.

Harriett and I couldn't believe it.

"When would I ever again wear a white wedding dress?" Annie Lee asked, when we demanded an explanation. "This way I can wear it to a cocktail party or a dance. If you're going to spend this much on a dress I think you should be able to wear it more than once."

She was having it made and when I finally saw it I had to admit it was not bad, for a brown dress. It was sheer dark chocolate chiffon over a matching silk underslip and it had tiny tucks on the full skirt and on the bodice and a wide ribbon sash. She was wearing white shoes and gloves and a white hat and carrying a corsage of gardenias on a white Bible.

But it was still brown.

I was so disappointed in Annie Lee's dress that I lost some of my interest in the wedding. But before I knew it the day had come. We got up early and got bathed and powdered and dressed and then Duncan and Eve pulled up outside and we got in their car and drove to the church where Howard was supposed to meet us.

We were all Baptists but none of us really went to church anywhere. I didn't know why my aunt and Howard had picked the High Street Baptist Church across town but that's where we went. The church was brown brick with white trim,

not unlike my aunt's wedding outfit. We parked in back and went in a side door and down a cool, dim hall--it was climbing toward ninety outside--and up some steps. Duncan and Eve led the way; they seemed to know where to go. When we reached the top of the steps, a tall grayhaired man stepped out of a doorway and greeted us and led us through an office and past a kitchen into a room that looked kind of like a living room, with drapes at the window and leather chairs, except it had a desk in the middle and a globe of the world in one corner. Through the window I could see the street that ran in front of the church; across the street was a school playground and I realized it was Stonewall Jackson Elementary School, one of the other two elementary schools in town. We had all gone to Robert E. Lee Elementary School on the east side of town.

The preacher, whose name was Brother Weedon, shook hands with everybody, even me, and asked us to have a seat. My mother sat in one of the leather chairs and picked up a Life magazine on a table beside her and started flipping through it while Brother Weedon talked about the weather and said what a fine day it was for a wedding, it was hot but we were lucky it didn't rain, and made a joke about having to cut his grass later that day. Then he looked at his watch and said it was about time, and asked Eve and Annie Lee and

Duncan to stand up in front of his desk. When they were where he wanted them, he went to a side door and opened it and there was Howard. He came in and shook hands with the preacher and Duncan and then stood next to Annie Lee. He reached for her hand and then dropped it and I saw that his own hand was shaking.

I sat up straight, my hands in my lap, and felt my heart begin to pound. The preacher read a few scriptures from the Bible and then he began to say the wedding vows.

". . . for marriage is an honorable estate . . ."

I looked over at my mother and couldn't believe what I saw. Instead of paying attention to what was going on, she was looking at the Life magazine! While I stared, she turned a page, all the while as if she was sitting in a doctor's waiting room instead of at her own sister's wedding.

"We are gathered together to unite this woman and this man . . ."

I looked at Annie Lee and Howard, who were now holding hands. Annie had taken one of her gloves off and Howard was holding her bare left hand in his. I could see the fine dark hairs on the back of her hand; Annie's hands had always looked like they should belong on a man.

"Howard? Do you take this woman . . ."

I suddenly felt close to Howard and sorry for him. He was shy and kind of silly and my uncles laughed at him behind his back. I was sure he loved Annie Lee but I didn't know how she felt about him.

I was afraid to look at my mother again so I kept my eyes fixed on Howard's and Annie Lee's hands, directly in front of me.

"Annabelle Lee, do you take this man . . ."

It sounded odd, hearing Annie's whole name; we always thought of her as Annie or Annie Lee. She had not been named for the poem by Edgar Allan Poe, which was spelled differently, but for my grandfather, Lee, and for two of my grandmother's sisters, Anna and Belle. My grandmother may have read Poe's poem; she was a great reader, they said, particularly novels, but she named her children for her relatives, which was the way it was done in our family.

"Howard, repeat after me. 'With this ring, I thee wed' . . ."

I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw that my mother had closed the Life but still held it on her lap as if she might open it up again at any moment. Then the preacher was saying "You may kiss your bride" and it was over. I looked at the watch I had gotten for graduation and saw that the whole thing had taken less than five minutes.

They were all laughing and kissing and shaking hands. My mother stood up and let Howard kiss her. I stood up, too, but when he looked at me, I knew I just couldn't. Everything had happened too fast. All those months and weeks of planning--and it was over, just like that. I realized I had expected things that were missing--the wedding march, and a veil for Howard to turn back when he kissed Annie Lee. My dress and my mother's hat and Annie Lee's brown dress--everything seemed suddenly dumb and awful, as if they hadn't known how to do anything and had got it wrong, a wedding for people who didn't know anything or have anything. And my mother! Instead of solemnly watching her sister get married, she had read a magazine through the entire ceremony!

Before Howard could reach me, I squeezed past Duncan and got out of the room and waited in the hall for the rest of them to come out.

When we were walking to the car (Annie Lee went with Howard in his jeep but we went back with Duncan and Eve), I asked my mother why she had looked at the Life instead of watching the wedding.

She looked at me as if she didn't know what I was talking about. Her expression was distant and not friendly;

it was the way she sometimes looked at strangers, or at people who were not family.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Reading that magazine the whole time they were getting married. If I had done such a rude thing, you would never have let me hear the end of it."

I was treading on dangerous ground and I knew it, but I couldn't just let it go. It was so unlike her. My mother was shy and when she was uncomfortable around people or felt self conscious she could behave in ways that embarrassed me. But she was never intentionally rude. In fact, she went out of her way not to be rude.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "I was there. I saw it all. I heard it all."

She said it as if she had witnessed a crime or an execution. Maybe Annie getting married reminded her of my father and the way he had cheated on her. Or maybe she was still mad about the house. Or maybe she had known all the time what I had just realized, that Annie's wedding was stupid and silly and she had read the Life so she wouldn't have to watch. Or maybe she really didn't even know she had leafed through a Life magazine through the whole wedding!

Whatever was the matter, I couldn't--wouldn't--get anywhere by arguing with her. She either really didn't

realize what she had done or had done it for some reason she was not going to tell me.

We got in the car and went back to Eve and Duncan's house, where we had white wedding cake (at least Annie had bought a white cake) and punch, and where Howard embarrassed me by grabbing my face between his hands as I walked past him in the kitchen, and kissing me on the mouth. I went straight into Eve's bathroom and scrubbed my lips and regretted feeling sorry for him. I told myself I didn't care whether Annie loved him or not or whether anybody loved anybody.

* * * * *

The following summer Annie Lee had a baby girl. She was in labor a long time and then they had to do a Caesarean. The baby turned out to be profoundly deaf; they never had another child.

That same summer Eve and Duncan and my cousins moved to Saudi Arabia where Duncan worked for a company that pumped oil out of the desert. My cousins sent me an Arch of Triumph paperweight from Paris. In Arabia, my aunt Eve had a maid.

The fall of that year I began junior high school. In the spring there was to be an end-of-school dance and I came home convinced I wanted to go. At first my mother tried to

talk me out of it--she understood it was semi-formal and where would I get a dress like that? Then they thought of Annie's dress, packed away in tissue paper since the day of her wedding. When I tried it on they said it fit well enough if I pulled the sash in a little tighter. And so I wore Annie's wedding dress to my first school dance.

I went with my friend Doris, who wore her sister's pink satin dress that was too long, too big and too bare and that hung unevenly around her ankles. The moment I saw her I knew going to the dance was a terrible mistake. Trying to be dressed up, we were instead two thirteen-year-old girls wearing dresses meant for women. I knew we looked ridiculous and foolish. Most of all, we looked wrong.

But, for whatever reason--our desire was stronger than our pride or perhaps our momentum simply carried us--we went on to the dance, where we stood against the wall and stared at the other girls in their white net and pale yellow organdy dresses with ruffled tops and full skirts that swayed when they danced with boys who looked strange and unfamiliar and somehow frightening in blue suits and white dinner jackets.

We stayed longer than either of us wanted to, then we walked back to Doris' house. My mother met me as she had

said she would and we walked home together in the soft
summery darkness.

CHAPTER V

SALT CELLAR

I am numbered with the dead, "as cold as any stone"
. . . the chair is a stone; my back hurts. It is Friday
night, it is late, I haven't eaten since lunch; I am hungry
. . . my list grows.

Hospitals are always cold at night, cold as the grave,
and I come and go at night--like death. Only the nurseries
are warm, in hospitals, and I'm not sure this hospital has a
nursery. Does life begin at Baylor, are babies born here?
Of course there's a nursery, somewhere. Deep in the
corridors and mazes below there must be rooms where yellow
ducks march across a blue curtain and pink lambs frolic.
All hospitals have nurseries.

But on the ninth floor nothing marches, nothing
frolics. They seem barely to breathe here, these patients
who are sedated by a conscientious hospital into little
deaths and shelved until morning. Perhaps my grandmother
knew something, after all, when she insisted that I be born
at home because people only went to hospitals to die . . .

Why so beleaguered tonight, especially by thoughts of
death and dying? The influence of Blake, probably; a volume

of his poems--from my night school English class--lies now beneath my chair.

The niece--her name is Jackie--is not troubled. She sits now in the room's only easy chair, rummaging in her purse for breathmints and tapping her foot to Elvis' "Jailhouse Rock" coming from the radio in the nurses' station down the hall. Imagine Elvis drafted--just like any other rich and famous young rock and roll singer. All the stations are playing his records tonight, in tribute. Daddy has been sent for coffee; she--the niece--has said she'd like a cup. He must go in search of a machine that works because the one on this floor is out of order. He knows this and I know this but neither of us tells Jackie. He just goes, because she wants coffee. Poor Daddy. Unwilling to say no. The reason he could never be faithful, perhaps?

He called a week ago, said, "Hi, Babe, how's everything?" Just like nothing ever happened. Not his making trouble with Charles, not the scene with Mother, nothing. Just like him, Mother said.

"Marta's not feeling too well," he said. "She's at Baylor. I thought you could come down after work Monday to see her. I'll pick you up at the bus station."

Marta is his wife, my stepmother, the woman he left my mother for, before I was born.

He was meeting her in the park. Mrs. Faulkner saw them and told me about it. When I asked him, he admitted it. I told him I didn't want him to see her anymore. I said he couldn't expect me to put up with that. But he wouldn't promise. So I walked out, I went home to Mama and Papa.

Then last week, "He wouldn't have called if he hadn't wanted you to come, Molly. I think you should go."

So every evening at five when I leave my job at the switchboard, I walk down the street to the Trailways Station and buy a ticket for the 5:25 to Dallas, thirty-five miles away. I wait with the old women and the kids, among the boxes tied up with string and the paper sack suitcases. Daddy picks me up at the station on Jackson Street and we go somewhere to eat. But sometimes he forgets to feed me, like tonight, and we come straight to the hospital. We come up in the elevator and into the room and he says, "Molly's here, Babe, Molly's come to see you. Don't you want to wake up and see Molly?"

But she is "unresponsive." Not unconscious, they are careful to say, the implication being that she may come around at any moment. I know that's what Daddy thinks. Exactly what's wrong with her, I'm not sure. I'm not even sure they've told Daddy.

They were married when I was four. Mother said it took so long because she was Catholic and couldn't get a divorce. Mother showed me a picture once, of a woman standing beside a car. Was that her? she wanted to know. She had found it in Daddy's suitcase when he came home from working on a construction job. He had said it was the daughter of the woman who owned the boarding house where he stayed. It was a small picture, the woman and car far from the camera; I didn't think it looked like Marta but it would have been made a long time ago, before I was born; I couldn't say for sure. Mother took the snapshot back without a word. But she still has it, in a box, with her other suspicions.

Your daddy's coming, he wants to take you to see his mother and dad. I'm going to let you go, but, Molly, if he should start out of town or if he takes you anywhere except to your grandmother's house, you get out of the car, scream, get somebody's attention, get to a telephone and call me . . . I know you don't understand, you're too little . . . never mind . . . you don't know him like I do . . . if he thought he could hurt me . . . they don't have any children, I don't think she can have any, what if they decided they wanted you? . . . she had a baby once, when she was married before, but it died . . . I don't know why it died . . .

honey, listen to me . . . if he took you off I'd never see you again . . .

She is small in the bed, smaller than I remember, her legs drawn up, lying on her side. I haven't seen her in three years--not since my high school graduation. I almost hadn't recognized her that night; I had never seen her so dressed up. She had on a sleek black dress and wide brimmed black hat and white gloves. She had been crying.

Always overweight in a rounded, pretty kind of way, she now looks pregnant, her stomach a mound beneath her full breasts. Mother said she used to be a redhead but for as far back as I can remember her hair has been white, prematurely white. Yellow streaks it now, in the widow's peak above her forehead and where it flares out, too long on the pillow. Her face, without makeup, looks yellow, too, but it's probably the light; they keep it dark in here.

Sometimes I have the eeriest feeling she's not even ill, that behind her closed eyes she is waiting, listening, laughing, ready to jump up. I remember once when she had the flu and Daddy was taking her temperature. While he was out of the room she held the thermometer up to the lamp; then when she put it back into her mouth it was too hot and burned her. She laughed, telling that on herself. She was always joking around; she liked to laugh.

Sometimes I feel embarrassed here, as if I've wandered into a strange church and don't know whether to stand or kneel, or how to pray. I have never been around sick people much. Grandma died at home after having a stroke but I was only five and Mother kept me out of her room, as if she could keep death away from me. I have never seen anyone die.

"Do you think he's been kidnapped?" jokes the niece, Jackie. I saw her photograph for years in their living room. She was Marta's favorite niece. Now she is an older, heavier version of that teenaged girl with the dark eyes and long throat and madonna face. She's not at all like Marta, whose eyes are blue--sky blue. German blue, Mother says. Jackie lives in Kansas. She came by plane today, and is, as she puts it, killing two birds with one stone--visiting Marta and looking up an old girlfriend who lives in Highland Park. I wonder if they told her before she came that Marta was "unresponsive," and couldn't even say hello. Jackie has a husband and two frilly little girls at home in Kansas; I've seen their pictures in her wallet. She is glad to meet me at last, she says, because "Marta always thought so much of you. She always talked about Molly. I remember that time you went to Amarillo to visit them . . ."

I remember it, too, not willingly. I was twelve that year. Daddy had written and asked if I could come for a visit after Christmas, while I was out of school. Why Mother let me go I never understood. Her old fear had never really left her, I was to learn. But "He has a right to see you, Molly," she said. "After all, he is your father." She put me on the train in Fort Worth and I rode all the way to Amarillo by myself to stay a week. At first it had been all right. The train trip was exciting and the Airstream trailer house they lived in was different and fascinating. But by bedtime I was homesick and miserable. Marta made me a bed on the divan in the living room; the trailer had only one bedroom. Alone--they were the length of the trailer away behind a closed door--I lay in bed and looked through the window at the moon, full and cruel. The new flannel pajamas, one of their Christmas presents, felt stiff and scratchy; I hated them. It would serve my mother right, I thought, if they did kidnap me. I could not go to sleep and as I stared into the darkness my eye fell on a tiny clear glass bowl among other glass objects on a shelf near the divan. The bowl was an inch or so across, octagonal outside, smoothly round inside. The moon seemed to shine directly on it, filling it with light. I reached out, picked it up. It was so small and perfect, like a doll's

dish or a fairy's bowl. It's probably expensive, I thought. She'd probably feel terrible if it got broken. I turned it in my hands, lying on my back among the pillows, watching the moonlight catch its beveled shape. They might hear if it got broken but what if it just disappeared? I climbed stealthily out of bed, pulled my suitcase out from behind a chair and eased it open. I raised the lid and took out a pair of socks. I dropped the tiny bowl in the toe of one and rolled them up again so that it was buried deep within the bulge of white cotton. I hid the socks in a side pocket of the suitcase, closed the locks with a soft snap, and climbed back into bed.

As the days passed so did most of my homesickness. A girl my age who lived in the park became friendly with me and we spent almost all our time together. Her name was Deanna. She was petite, pretty, and vivacious, not at all shy like me, and under her red sweater she had breasts. She was everything I longed to be; and she liked me, seemed to like being with me. On my last night Deanna and I ate huge pieces of Marta's chocolate going-away cake and made fervent promises to write to each other every day. After she went back to her own trailer, I blurted, "I wish I was just like Deanna!"

Marta was clearing away plates. She looked up, surprised, and said "Do you really? Why?"

I was so startled--why wouldn't anyone want to look like Deanna--that I couldn't say anything.

"You shouldn't want to be like Deanna or anybody else. One of these days Deanna will look just like Mammy Yokum, short-legged with knobby knees. But you're going to be tall and have nice long legs. You'll be able to wear anything and look good in it. And with your blond hair--Believe me, when Deanna is dumpy and fat, you'll be gorgeous."

I had never believed I had a single good feature and I was certainly not ready to think I could be gorgeous. Then why had she said it? She was not like my mother, who said "pretty is as pretty does" when I said I hated my nose and that my feet were too big.

I still wanted to look like Deanna but I couldn't forget what Marta had said. She had given me something to think about.

That night I dreamed I was home. I must have been dreaming for I said, "Mama, I'm cold." And she said, "I was afraid you might be. I brought you another blanket." And I felt her tuck it in around me.

Daddy, at my elbow, hands me a cup. He gives another to Jackie.

"Where's yours?" she asks, sipping delicately.

"I didn't want any coffee," he says, and moves to look down at the woman in the bed, as he always does.

"Oh, well. If I'd known that I would have gone myself. You should have said something."

"It's all right. I didn't mind."

He did though. I see it in his face, that closed, smoothed over look. Why can he never be honest with women? The coffee is terrible, an inky black liquid that tastes of paper and oily metal. I excuse myself, go down the hall to the restroom, and empty the cup into the sink.

I had gotten up before anybody else that next morning, the day I was to leave Amarillo, afraid Daddy had already put my suitcase in the car. But I found it by the door, and as quietly as before I took the socks out, unknotted them, my fingers shaking, and slid the little bowl out into my palm. I put it back on the shelf behind a lamp, hoping that if she had missed it she would think it had been there all the time.

I linger as long as I dare in the restroom, leaning against the tile, watching myself in the mirror. Such an insignificant little act, my intended thievery; I should have laughed it off years ago. What would Daddy say, I wonder, if I went back now and confessed that I had almost

stolen a tiny glass bowl out of his house when I was twelve? He would probably call a nurse to take my temperature.

A nurse is in the room when I return. Daddy stands beside the bed while she makes adjustments to the patient, but Jackie is still in the armchair, relaxed and cozy. The nurse shares a smile between Daddy and me. "She looks just like you," she declares. "I would have known without being told that she is your daughter."

We've heard it many times before. I don't know about him but I never quite know what to say. I'm often tempted to look offended and say "I beg your pardon. I've never seen this man before in my life." But blood does not lie, as Mother says. We cannot deny each other, Daddy and I.

My stepmother is now on her other side, her legs drawn slightly higher, the way a child sleeps. The nurse moves aside for me and I know that Daddy has misrepresented things. Again. So I walk to the bed. What to do but look? I reach out and lightly touch her hand, lying at her side. It is cool and soft, too soft. I hastily take my hand away. I never liked the feel of cats because they seem boneless, without substance, the way her hand feels now. But it was a strong hand, a confident hand. Funny how I remember her hands, playing solitaire, the way she snapped the cards before laying them down. I remember the way she held a

pencil, peeled eggs at the sink, the way her fingers with their chipped red polish, curled around a cigarette . . .

When I was fourteen they moved to Dallas. She and Daddy had finally bought a house in Amarillo--the house she wanted and dreamed of, with a front porch and a big back yard. Then, suddenly, we heard they were in Dallas, living in the trailer again. Daddy was driving a truck for the Frito Company. Later Mother told me there had been trouble over a woman--she'd heard it from my grandmother--some schoolteacher in a little town near Amarillo. Marta left him; he followed. Whatever really happened, they were back together in Dallas.

One Friday afternoon, soon after we heard they were in Dallas, Daddy came by the house in the Frito eighteen-wheeler. He was on his way home from his tri-state route and wanted me to go with him and spend the weekend with them. After that he came by often on Friday afternoons, and I spent many weekends in Dallas. When summer came I was back and forth all the time.

Of course you want to go there. Why wouldn't you? They can afford to take you places, give you things . . . he sends you money now that you're old enough to spend it yourself but he sure never sent it when you were little and we were having such a hard time getting by. Don't tell me

she's the one; she does what he tells her to. . . . Why didn't I make him pay? Because I was afraid he'd try to take you away from me, that's why . . .

"Molly."

His voice makes me jump.

"Did you remember to tell your mother you wouldn't be home?"

"What?" I say, stupidly.

"Molly, Molly," he chides, gently. "Wake up, daughter! Did you tell Sarah you'd be staying in Dallas with me tonight?"

I haven't said I'd stay. He assumes I will because he asked me on Monday. When he wants something he behaves as if there's no question. It usually works, especially with women.

"Daddy, I didn't bring--"

"We can pick up whatever you need. Tomorrow we'll get you some things for the weekend, whatever you want--" He sees my reluctance, circles, and has me. "She may open her eyes tomorrow, Molly. Don't you want to be here when she wakes up?"

What can I say?

"Don't worry about Sarah," he says, settling it. "I'll talk to her."

I once asked my aunt Annie, Mother's sister, why my mother had married my father. He was younger than she and they had little in common.

"He had a way about him that made you feel you were the most important thing in the world when he was with you. He was interested in all you said and did. I was just a kid when they married, but I was taken in by him, too. And he was crazy about your mother, wouldn't leave her alone until she said she'd marry him."

The nurse comes in again before we leave, bending over the bed, checking, listening, feeling. Jackie says she will stay a while; she's not at all tired. She has left her chair and is beside the bed, watching what the nurse does. I think the nurse's smile is strained, her professional cheer slightly askew, like a bad hairpiece. But it is late, her shift is almost over; she is tired, who can blame her? As we go out of the room I glance into the cage of blankets and see my stepmother sleeping peacefully, even snoring genteelly.

Of course I should stay if he needs me, says Mother, on the phone. As we leave the hospital the lights of Dallas are like rhinestones on a dull black dress, the sky without stars, bleached out by the glow of the city. Riding through Dallas beside Daddy I take out the memory of Charles, which

I have purposely held back, and examine it, to see if it still hurts. The pain is more remembered than felt. But at seventeen it had been sharp.

We drive past White Rock Lake. Daddy taught me to drive on the road around the lake. Marta had said one day, "Why don't you take her out and teach her to drive?" He was a wonderful teacher, never flinching or becoming impatient. I am grateful still, remembering a friend who lost her nerve so badly after her mother screamed during a driving lesson that she has never learned to drive. Charles and I used to park at the lake. We met on one of my Dallas weekends, at a party I had attended with my cousin, who also lived in Dallas. He was nineteen; I was seventeen; we were both shy; we became one another's first "serious." We wrote letters and saw each other on weekends for almost a year . . . Does Daddy think of Charles, does he ever question going to their house that night to confront Charles' mother about our "involvement," my "innocence," Charles' responsibilities and intentions, talking about his concern, his plans for me, insinuating and insulting until she, a shy woman transplanted from South Carolina to Texas, asked him to leave her house. The irony was that he had no reason to be afraid; we were entirely innocent of whatever he imagined. What Charles could not forgive was Daddy going to his mother

instead of to us; in the end it was enough to sever our fragile beginning. Which was Daddy's intention. Of course, of course. Am I really just now realizing it? I turn to look at him behind the wheel, talking aimlessly about some new city building. Charles had realized. And Mother must have, too. Why hadn't she said something? She rarely let such an opportunity pass . . .

Daddy swings the car to the right and we are home.

The trailer seems empty. Not simply as if no one is there, but empty, hollowed out. Daddy reaches around to turn on the light and wall lamps bloom over the divan. All is quiet except for the low growling purr of the refrigerator and the ticking of a clock in the kitchen. Behind me Daddy sighs. We step inside.

"I'll get some sheets," he says, and disappears into the bedroom, leaving me in the center of the living room, the ceiling close above my head. Everything is the same, the collection of glass--my eyes search for the tiny glass bowl--the lamps, everything. Jackie's picture is where it's always been and beside it one of me at sixteen. Marta had bought a coupon over the phone; it was a promotional offer from a good studio downtown. We went down on a Saturday in the Fall. It was too early in the morning and I hadn't wanted to go, but she was so eager I couldn't get out of it.

At the studio the photographer flirted with me. I was surprised but when I looked over at Marta, who was watching, she was smiling. Texas A&M was playing in the Cotton Bowl that day and when we came out of the photography studio we got caught in parade traffic. It was one of those brightly honed autumn days when the air is clear and things seem distinctly outlined with a hard edge, as they are drawn in comic books. We watched the cadets in their maroon and white uniforms march through the shadowy, cool canyons of downtown Dallas and we felt the drums and the sharp sound of brass instruments against our ears, and I suddenly knew something. Standing on the curb beside Marta, the sunshine on my face and in my eyes, blinding me, I knew I would remember that moment, that day, in which nothing particular happened except that I had my picture taken, for a long time.

The photograph had turned out well, too, although it had always embarrassed me. The photographer had posed me leaning slightly forward so that my long pale hair fell like a drape, shadowing part of my face and making me look somewhat mysterious and much older. It fairly screamed "Look at me!" Marta loved it. She had shown it to everyone up and down the trailer park that winter.

Daddy is dishing up ice cream in the kitchen. I no longer feel hungry, or even very tired. Memory has stimulated me to nervousness; I feel as if I've had too many cups of coffee. I stand at the sink, sipping water, watching him eat too fast as usual, and I wonder what he's thinking. Inscrutable, charming, mysterious Daddy, the master manipulator. What happened between you and my mother? I want to know. He stares into his ice cream and I know that even if I asked he would not--perhaps could not--tell me.

I wear one of Marta's gowns to bed. It is a full length blue nylon that falls off my shoulders. But it is silky, as soothing to the skin as cream; it feels good. When Daddy is in bed, snoring behind the sliding door, I climb into a nest of pillows on the sheet-covered divan, my old bed, and tuck my feet beneath the billowing gown. I am swamped with memories now that I am here, in this place, this place I casually came and went in, with no thought of how I affected them, or them me, this place I thought had no hold on me. One Sunday we spent the day together, she and I, closed in by a persistent, steady rain. Daddy had gone out early, to see to the loading of his truck, he said. I woke with cramps and she brought me Midol. My mother's generation had called themselves "sick" and took to their

beds if the pain was bad enough, but Marta said there was no sense suffering if we didn't have to. I had never talked to her about such things before, but she was so matter of fact, that we began to talk. She said I would probably not have severe cramps once I had a child, at least that had been her experience. I remembered the dead baby but was afraid to ask about him. She said she could hardly wait until I was married and had children. They would babysit, she said, while my husband and I went out. "But don't bring them if they have runny noses," she said. "I can't stand kids with snotty noses!" She laughed, teasing.

Later that day I slept and awoke again to see her still sitting in her chair, drinking a beer and looking out at the rain. I saw the little bowl on the shelf beside my head. I reached out and picked it up.

"You remember that time I came to Amarillo, when I was just a kid? I was kind of scared of you then."

"I know," she said. "I was kind of scared of you, too."

We laughed. I wanted to tell her about the bowl. But it was still too fresh, still too shameful to confess. She watched me turn the tiny bowl between my hands.

"Do you know what that is?" she asked. "It's a salt cellar. They used to put salt on the table in little bowls like that before there were salt shakers."

"Really?" I said, intrigued. "I've always liked it--I thought it was a doll's dish or something--"

"It belonged to my grandmother. I think she brought it with her from Germany. It's old." She watched me put it back on the shelf. "Would you like to have it? Would you want it? If you do, you can take it when you go home."

But I hadn't taken it. Maybe I still felt too much guilt, or maybe--whatever my reasons, I put it back, left it among the vases and old lamps.

It is there now, shrouded in dust. I pick it up, and as I cradle it in my palm, the phone rings.

We are both quiet on the way back to the hospital. I'm not sure what the voice told Daddy. I don't think I want to know.

I knew he'd do something like this. He didn't want you when you were a baby, didn't want me, either. But now he wants you, now that you're grown up he wants you to come and live with him, with them, after graduation. She can get a better job in Dallas, Sarah, he says, you're being selfish, unreasonable . . . I always knew he'd try it, try to get you away from me . . . and you act like you don't know anything

about it, you must have known, he said you all talked about it . . . she called me a millstone around your neck, said I wanted to keep you tied to my apron strings . . . A millstone! If she'd left him alone all those years ago we might still be a family, the three of us . . .

That had been three weeks before graduation. I hadn't expected them to come. But backstage taking off my robe, surrounded by classmates shrieking with excitement, I had looked up and there they were, all dressed up, her crying, carrying a box wrapped in white paper with a silver bow. They had bought me a very nice portable radio which I unwrapped on the floor beneath the feet of the milling graduates. We hadn't said much; my friends were waiting; we were on our way to a party.

And so I left them standing there, in the basement of the church.

She has been straightened out in the bed, on her back, arms down to her side. The blanket is folded to just below her waist, rails are up on the bed. Jackie is there, holding one of her hands and I can see that she has been crying, although she is now composed. A nurse is there also, a different nurse, and when I look into her eyes a line from my textbook comes into my mind: "For Mercy has a human heart, Pity a human face . . ."

I look down at her. The closed eyes are beginning to sink; a hollow line appears above the rounded orb. The chest rises and falls slowly, too slowly. The pregnant look is gone but the fullness is still there, the way some women look who have just given birth. Daddy makes a noise but I cannot help him, not now. After a moment Jackie puts her arm around him and takes him out.

The doctor is a youngish, overweight man. He comes in, reaches, takes her wrist in one plump soft hand. "She's been a sweetheart," he says, looking up at me. "When she first came in she thought she'd come to the hospital to have a baby. Then she thought Molly--are you Molly?--was having a baby and she was here to help. One whole day she talked to you and the baby, before she became comatose."

I don't understand. She was unresponsive; Daddy said--

"What's wrong, what's happening to her?" I ask.

But he goes on talking as if I haven't said anything. Perhaps I haven't.

"It's too damn bad. Her liver is just gone. We were too late to do anything, really, but make her comfortable." He pats her hand, says, "Well." When he walks away, I am alone.

* * * *

Daddy will call tomorrow, he says, after he's had some rest, to make arrangements. He no longer seems to care if I stay. But before he drives me to the bus station I want to go back to the trailer. Inside I look around, at the rather shabby divan, the odd collection of glass, the thin layer of dust over everything, and Blake's "To Tirzah" comes into my mind: "Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth / Must be consumed with the Earth / To rise from Generation free; / Then what have I to do with thee?"

I don't ask for what I take; it is not his to give. But this time, instead of dropping it into the toe of a sock, I wrap it carefully in a layer of tissue. I'm sorry I never told her about the other time; she would have laughed.

Mother is waiting when the bus pulls into the station at home. As she maneuvers the car into the stream of Saturday traffic, she leans forward to peer through the windshield. Her eyes are not good.

"Mother," I ask, after I have told her and she has said the right things. "Why didn't you ever marry again?"

"Oh, I don't know," she says absently, pushing her glasses up her nose, glancing in the rearview mirror. "I was afraid, I guess, afraid I'd marry someone who wouldn't care about you. I didn't believe anyone could love you the way I did."

She turns the corner and we are on the road that leads
home.

CHAPTER VI

YOU CAN'T SMELL THE RAIN

"It smells like rain," Molly Murdock Russell said, smiling and taking a seat beside the hospital bed of her husband, Mack. He stared back at her without answering.

It began early in their courtship, when he was young, dark-haired, and sweet tempered and she was fair, slender, and gullible. It was spring when the trees and grass are a bright, chlorophyll green. They were having a picnic in the green countryside when she felt the wind quicken and looked up from the fried chicken and potato salad to see clouds on the horizon.

"It's going to rain," she said, in her innocence. "You can smell it."

"You can't smell rain," he said. He was sitting crosslegged on the other side of the red and white checked tablecloth and the neat white shaft of his crew socks between blue jeans and brown loafers made her heart ache.

"You can smell the moisture in the air," he said with great authority, "but you can't smell the rain itself."

Later in their lives when it came up, she would say "What's the difference, tell me that?" And he would say,

with his maddening logic, "The difference is you can smell the moisture but you can't smell rain."

They married after going together for two years. They married suddenly and everyone naturally assumed they knew why. The truth was she awoke on the day he was to leave for two years of Army duty in a distant land and was frightened by the future. He had asked her to marry him when he first came home on leave but she'd said no. Not now, she said. Wait. His asking had come as a surprise, as if she'd never thought of it, but of course she had. They had even talked about it, casually, as if it were far in the future, the way parents of toddlers talk about the empty nest or the way people in their forties talk about retirement, knowing they have plenty of time to think about it, get used to the idea. Did she even want to get married? Did she want to get married to him?

But on the morning of his departure, two years seemed a lifetime. For two years they had dated only each other; what did she think was supposed to come of that but marriage? And it wasn't as if there was anyone else she wanted to marry. There had been a young man before him, but he had moved to another state and she would probably never see him again and anyway he had never even said he loved her. Everyone she knew was married or getting married. She

was twenty-one and she still lived at home with her mother. And what if they didn't get married? What if in the two years he was gone she met someone else? Or he did?

She thought later that someone should have warned her about making decisions in the morning; they all knew she was not a morning person and never had been. But no one had advised her; they hadn't even tried to talk her out of it.

When they went to tell her mother, who worked until noon on Saturdays, she told them to ask Eve, her younger sister, to help them. Eve and Duncan had lived abroad. They had been to New York City. Eve would know how to go about it, she said.

While he went to the county clerk's office to get the marriage license, Eve called their cousin the doctor and asked him to fix it so they wouldn't have to wait three days for their blood test results. Then Eve took her to buy a dress. They couldn't find a real wedding dress, the kind she'd always meant to have, but they found a white brocade street length, princess style, with a short matching jacket. Eve and the clerk said it would do very well for a November wedding. She would wear her cousin Harriett's veil, as her something borrowed, and Harriett would wear the blue lace Molly had worn at her wedding. Luckily he didn't have to find a suit; Eve said he could wear his uniform.

They were married that evening at eight o'clock, in the Methodist church, with candles and flowers left from a wedding the night before.

His mother and younger brothers and sisters came. His mother wore a plain dark green gabardine dress that she had trouble describing later when she filled out the form for the newspaper write-up. His father had gone fishing and did not attend.

All her aunts, uncles and cousins came. Eve had called them all, even those who lived in Dallas and Fort Worth. One cousin was his best man, others were the ushers. Her father, who lived in Dallas, had also gone fishing and couldn't be reached, so her uncle Duncan, Eve's husband, gave her away. As they started down the aisle, she heard him whisper, "Are you sure you want to go through with this?" She knew he was joking; it was far too late to back out. The music began and she stepped forward. Later she thought she had imagined it; that he probably had not said any such thing.

They honeymooned in Harriett's house in Fort Worth while she and her husband spent the weekend with Eve and Duncan. Harriett suggested it as a way to save money; she knew they'd had to trade his bus ticket for a plane ticket.

Two long days later he flew to Washington state to be shipped to Alaska and she went back home. She went to her secretary job where she wrote him long letters on pink and white checked stationery with matching self-seal envelopes, then she switched to paper with blue forget-me-nots, a flower she had never actually seen, then to paper with red roses in the corner. His letters to her she tied up with the ribbons that were wrapped around the stationery she bought. At night she and her mother ate soup and crackers or pot pies off trays in front of the TV.

Two years later he came home.

Their first child was conceived only after months of counting and temperature-taking. After all the time and worry, she was both ecstatic and relieved; she had been afraid she could not have children. He was silent and withdrawn.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "We've been married over four years, you said you wanted a baby--I'm nearly twenty-six years old."

"I want the baby. There's not anything wrong, I'm just tired." It was all he would say. But he was depressed; anybody could see that. He would lie for long hours on the bed staring at the ceiling or sit in the gloomy dusk without talking to her.

He became himself again shortly before the child, a boy, was born. Months later he told her he had been afraid of the responsibility, of the financial burden, of being a father. She said it was all right. But she never forgot it.

Their life together began to take shape. He worked and she stayed home with the baby, the way the women in her family did, the way her mother had wanted to stay home with her but couldn't because she was divorced.

She had everything she had wanted, a good husband, a healthy baby. She didn't understand why she lay awake at night and prayed not for happiness but for contentment.

He worked nights, the graveyard shift, twelve midnight till eight in the morning. It was a good job and he had worked hard to get it. Before he went into the Army he had had a string of jobs, sacking groceries, greasing cars, pumping gas. When he came out he was determined to prove himself. But he had trouble sleeping in the daytime and woke up irritable and unrested. She began to feel responsible for his sleep.

One day in the winter before their second child was born--she had miscarried the year before--it snowed, great downy wet flakes that fell all day, covering cars and hedges, trees and roofs with mounds of heaping white. She

thought it looked like the icing on the candy house in "Hansel and Gretel." She went early into their son's room and found him asleep, a small lump in the big bed he so recently occupied. When she touched him, he put his thumb more firmly into his mouth. She lifted him up, warm and damp in his sleepers. His hair smelled like feathers. She spoke softly to him until he was awake. She often felt pity for him, because of the new baby. But she had been an only child; she was determined not to have one herself. When he was fully awake she took him to the window to see the snow.

When he came home from work, she and the boy were having a breakfast of cinnamon toast and hot cocoa. The boy, who had been poking at the marshmallow floating in his cup, threw up his hands to greet his father and overturned his cup. The cocoa ran across the table in a brown and white puddle. He gave the stain a wry look and took off his jacket. Snow glistened in his dark hair, his nose was red, and his eyes were bright with cold. Like Santa Claus, she thought, and as if he knew he shook snow from his jacket down her neck and put his cold hands to the boy's cheeks, laughing when he squealed. She was surprised; he hated winter and cold weather. They were opposite that way; she loved the chance to wear wool slacks and heavy socks and sit

beside a fire and read. She dreaded the scorching Texas summers when everything dried up and turned brown.

When he suggested they drive over to see the park, she was even more surprised, and a little wary. She had learned to live with his tiredness, his dour looks, his withdrawals. Good moods and pleasantries during the week were unexpected and therefore suspicious, even threatening, as silly as it seemed. The security of sameness had become very important to her.

But she dressed the boy in his new red jacket with the hood and put on her own long dark coat that made her look like a fat seal. The snow was heavy when they stepped outside and there was no wind. Sound was muffled. It was like being in one of her dreams, where strangers, people she had never met, came and went suddenly and without announcement, doing things or saying things she could never quite understand, all silently. It was not true that people didn't dream in color; she was always aware of the color in her dreams. She remembered all her dreams and used to try to tell him about them. She had always been fascinated by dreams, her own and other people's.

The park was as beautiful as he'd promised, the deep snow unmarked except for some tiny mysterious tracks. The creek ran clear and cold between deep banks, its faint

splash the only sound. As they looked out the windows of the truck, two cardinals flashed across the park, bright scarlet against the pristine white. She pressed her forehead to the cold glass of the truck window to hide a sudden vertigo. Everything seemed to spin and turn, forming a neat, tight coil like a rope, deep inside her.

Then he shifted gears and she felt them backing up. And she was all right again.

He played with the boy in the snow when they got home, helping him build a snowman and make snowballs. She took their picture, looking through the lens at her son's peaked red hood, and at his father's pinched, laughing face. After they went in she stayed outside for a moment, putting her head back to look up into the driving snow, coming at her like soft pellets and at crazy angles, shooting down from the endless white sky. She put her tongue out, as the boy had, and felt the flakes gather and melt; there was no taste to snow. After a minute she turned and went inside.

Two days later the baby came, while snow was still on the ground and frozen over. Nurses worked double shifts because the next shift couldn't get to the hospital. The baby was born at five and by midnight they were putting shock blocks under her bed and changing her IV bottle to a bag of blood. By morning she had had two units of blood and

several of glucose. The needle slipped out of the vein sometime in the night and when she awoke her left hand and arm were strutted and swollen like a fat white sausage. When she looked in the mirror she did not recognize the pale puffy face of the woman who looked back. She learned from lugubrious, garrulous nurses that she had been going into shock from loss of blood, that her mother had had hysterics in the hall outside her room and that he had never left her side.

She went home from the hospital five days later. Her mother came to help. She had been home almost a week when there was a terrible storm that dumped sleet and freezing rain over the town. As the wind raged, her mother began to fret about her own house, across town, where she had not been for several days. What if the wind had blown open the door and extinguished the pilot lights on the stove? What if her pipes had frozen and burst? What if her electricity was off (it was in some parts of town) and everything in the refrigerator ruined? It was inconceivable that her mother drive across town on the icy streets to check on her house. She herself could not yet drive. He was working overtime and would not be home for hours.

Anxiety blew through the house, as cold as the wind outside. Darkness came and from where she lay resting in

the bedroom she could hear her mother's voice in the kitchen where she was fixing the baby's formula. Fretting about the storm, she was like a dog worrying a cat, chasing it around and around inside the house, never letting it escape or even rest peacefully for a moment.

He finally came home and was sent out again to check on doors and pilot lights and electricity. By the time he returned to say all was well, it was too late; she had fallen away into her own darkness. They sent for the doctor, who said it was nerves and gave her an injection. But a minute crack had appeared and in the days that followed it widened into a pathological gap. Every day broke over her like a monstrous wave that she fought her way through until night came, when she could escape again in sleep. Intellectually she knew she was suffering postpartum depression but she had no belief in it, no confidence that she would ever get through it. Because she was convinced a psychiatrist would have her committed, she did not insist on seeing one. She read confusion, fear, dismay, and finally, disgust on the faces of those who did try to help her--family, friends, her medical doctor. Guilt obsessed her. Deep down she knew she was crazy.

When the baby was three months old he bought a house without consulting her. She knew he and her mother had

talked about it, that they believed a new house would help, would give her something to plan for, think about. They couldn't know that the last thing she needed or wanted was more responsibility, that what she wanted was to be taken care of herself, like a child. But she said nothing. She tried to make no decisions; she especially tried to make no decisions that she would be held accountable for later. When he took her to see the house, she walked through the empty rooms and tried to show interest.

They moved in April. The new yard was a sea of black mud that was soon tracked into every crevice of the new white floor. She hated the long living room, the narrow aisle kitchen and the bathroom with no window. There was no place for her books, stacked on the floor in the living room. She hated the sameness of the other houses on the street; she hated the flatness of the landscape, where cows had once grazed. She hated the sky, which was too big and wide and glaring; there was not a tree in sight that had been in the ground longer than six months. And she hated her neighbors--young mothers of children the age of her children--whom she thought of as a brainless lot wanting to form coffee klatches and sell her Avon and talk about their in-laws. At some point she realized that hating was at

least an improvement over feeling nothing, and knew she was beginning to recover.

She settled into the new house much as she had settled into marriage. They bought a swing set and a barbecue grill. They planted trees and built a storage shed for the lawnmower. They had people in to play cards and they went out. They went camping and took vacations. They had been in the house a year when his company went on strike and she went back to work. Their third child, unplanned, was born two years later, in the summer. She insisted he take two weeks vacation so her mother would not have to stay; she chose saddleblock over gas for delivery so she would be awake; she wrote precise instructions for when she came home from the hospital. She was armed and ready.

Later, when she saw home movies made during those years, she saw herself with their three blond boys on some vacation outing and was uncomfortably aware of how unsmiling, how nearly grim she looked. She could not remember feeling as solemn as she appeared, but then she could not remember much of those days. They had passed in a blur of young faces and pre-school, tennis shoes and socks to be picked up off the floor and coats thrown down and bills to be paid and high chairs and play pens and swimming lessons and Cub Scouts and teacher conferences and Easter

egg hunts and Christmas bicycles and trips to the emergency room. She did remember that when they were all in school she had taken up painting. She painted in the evenings, after they had gone to bed. She painted deep into the night, until she had a headache from smelling the turpentine, and was groggy and irritable the next morning. And then she stopped. The paintings she had done were stacked in the garage and moved around every time they cleaned until eventually they disappeared, thrown out with other trash.

She turned forty and the weight on her driver's license no longer matched the weight on her scale. They went to visit her Navy officer cousin stationed at Key West, Florida, and she saw the girls on the beach and in the town and knew she was not like them. She came home, streaked her hair, lost thirty pounds, and went to work for an attorney.

One day in the fall her mother called to say that Sonny was dead.

When she was five she had gotten lost one day coming home from school on the bus. A telephone lineman had seen her walking along the street crying and had walked with her until she recognized landmarks and knew where she was and how to get home. He had been tall and sunburned and kind. And he had worn the kind of thick-soled, laced-up

construction boots commonly worn by working men. Years later, when she was fourteen, she and her mother had visited her mother's cousin (it was the only kind of vacation they ever took, visiting relatives) in another town. The cousin had a son who was then in his twenties who they called Sonny. He was a handsome, personable young man, but he was also spoiled and irresponsible, and a great trial to his aging parents. Sonny was often not employed but that summer he had worked for the telephone company and the afternoon she and her mother arrived for their visit, they went with his mother to pick Sonny up from work. He had climbed into the back seat of the car to sit beside her; he was tall, handsome, dusty, tanned. And he had on the same laced-up boots the man had worn who rescued her when she was five.

While their mothers cooked supper, Sonny sat with her in the porch swing. He was friendly and warm, asking her about school and what movies she had seen. She answered in monosyllables, so shivery with nerves from his presence and his attention that her teeth chattered. After supper he went to his room.

She was sitting on the porch with the two women when she heard the screen door bang. She looked around to see Sonny standing in the oblong of yellow light shining on to the porch from the dining room. He had changed clothes but

he was still wearing the boots; she could see them beneath the cuff of his clean khakis. He saw her, winked, and then stepped off the porch and sauntered across the yard and up the street that led to town. He was whistling in the darkness. She wanted to call to him: "Take me with you!" But of course she didn't; she sat on the porch and watched him disappear into the dark beyond the reach of the street light. By the time she awoke the next morning he had gone to work and that afternoon she and her mother left for home. She never saw him again. Now, thirty years later, he was dead.

People said he was not worth killing, but they were wrong. He had disappeared, and three months later was found by a fisherman who hooked into the chains wrapped around his body. His partner in some nefarious scheme had shot him and dumped him in a creek on the outskirts of Dallas. He was fully dressed--suit jacket, pants, tie--except for his shoes. He was barefoot.

She went with her mother and aunts and cousins to the funeral--the casket was closed--and startled them all by weeping throughout the service.

He had not been a hero. He had never helped a lost child find her way home. But he had once worn the same

boots, and for a while she had been fooled into believing he was and he had.

A year passed and then another. The boys grew older and took drivers ed and their friends came and spent the night and on Saturday mornings she had to step over a logjam of teenage arms and legs to get out the front door. They went to Friday night football games and Saturday morning soccer practice. They took square dance lessons and joined a bowling league. She went to plays and read books and he coached baseball and took up target shooting. And they began to fight.

She had long thought there was nothing they thought or felt the same way about but now they could find no single common ground; everything provoked disagreement and argument. One Christmas she began talking idly--thinking out loud really--about upcoming events when he suddenly announced that he wanted to have Christmas dinner with his mother. She was standing in front of the stove, had just made a cup of tea and had it in her hand. Why? she asked. Their Christmas schedule had been established for years--Christmas Eve with his family, Christmas Day with hers.

"Because we never have eaten Christmas Dinner with my folks," he said, as if it were simple.

She objected more to his autocratic announcement--he had begun doing that a lot--than to the change in plans. She protested; he refused to discuss it. When he turned to walk away, she doused his back with the tea out of her cup.

If they were not quarreling they were silent. She gave up trying to talk to him when she began to suspect that he was deliberately withholding signals that he heard her--no "uh-huh" or "really?" or "you don't say?" He had once told her, in the middle of a bitter argument, that she drowned him in words. Now, he sat stony-faced and deaf, staring straight ahead until, babbling she stopped dead in the middle of whatever she had been saying. And the most maddening thing of all was that he never appeared to notice that she had stopped dead.

They moved around each other warily, like a couple of circling animals who were natural enemies, ready at any moment to defend against attack. Then he came home one day and told the boys, not her, that he was moving out.

She wrote to her cousin Harriett:

I used to lie in bed at night planning my next effort to make things work, thinking about what I could say that would let him see things as I saw them, see why we were not happy. Then one day I was trying to talk to him and I began to cry so

hard I couldn't talk and then I saw the expression on his face and it was triumph! He was winning and he knew it. If he could get me in tears, begging him to see things my way, to try to understand my feelings, begging him to talk instead of leave, then he won. It was then that I realized we had played the same scene out a hundred times and it always ended the same way. That night I decided I would not defend myself ever again, I would not try to persuade or dissuade or convince him of anything. It was after that that he left.

I feel incomplete all the time. I come home and think I don't need to cook because Mack is not here. It is as if someone has died, someone the age of our marriage, and I am grieving for that person. I miss someone to talk to, but that is false because I never really had anyone. I feel isolated as if I am moving through a vacuum all day long, without being seen or noticed. I feel invisible.

She was in her office the day he called and said,
"Molly, I'm in the hospital."

He had a suspicious lump in his throat--he had not quit smoking when she had, five years earlier--and was scheduled for surgery. They made tests and x-rays and took histories and shook their heads; she held his hand and told him everything was going to be all right. He said he loved her.

They did the surgery at eight a.m. on a Wednesday morning and found a benign tumor. He could not speak for two weeks, but would be fine, the doctors assured them. She came home from the hospital to change clothes and call their eldest son who was in the service and when she got back he was in intensive care; he had a blood clot in his lung. The surgeon was called. He came, looked, shook his head, and patted her arm. He would call in a special team, he said; they would go back to surgery as soon as the team was assembled.

He was awake and in terrible pain. No, he could not have a sedative. He must be careful not to move. She leaned over him in the cold, dimly lighted, narrow room, holding his hand and begging him to be still, unable to leave him long enough to call their sons or her mother or his. She watched the nurses' faces, those implacable masks, and saw or thought she saw cracks of concern. The surgeon came and went, unhurried, assuring her the team was

arriving, one by one. Like the ten little Indians, she thought, and knew she was becoming hysterical.

When they finally came for him, she was relieved, glad to be sent into a green waiting room where she could stare at the television set on the wall without seeing it and think about whatever she needed to think about. Her thoughts were not structured and helpful but random, the images of dreaming. She thought of their honeymoon in Harriett's rambling house in Fort Worth and how innocent and ignorant they had been; she thought of the roast she had left out on the kitchen counter at home and wondered if she had forgotten to unplug the iron; she thought of their eldest son in boot camp in South Carolina; she thought of food and couldn't remember when she had eaten; she thought of his insurance policies and was ashamed; she thought of death and cemetery plots and calling his mother and she thought of fifth grade when she got a paddling for talking and ran all the way home without remembering that she had ridden her bicycle to school.

The boys came and sat together against another wall, watching television. From time to time, she knew, they cast surreptitious glances at her to see if they should be worried.

Sometime after midnight the surgeon, looking tired, came out and said they had taken care of the clot and he was back in intensive care for the night, but that he would be okay.

Three days later she returned to the hospital under a dark, threatening sky. He had not actually asked to come back home but she knew that was what he wanted. What she was not sure of was if she wanted him back. It scared her. She was more frightened than she had ever been, more than she had been that day over twenty years ago when he was going away for two years. If she didn't want him, what did she want? What was there to want? Someone else? No, not someone else. Maybe herself. Maybe it was as simple as that.

She entered his room. She smiled and took a seat beside the bed.

"It's going to rain," she said. "You can smell it."

He stared back at her without answering. And then she realized, "He thinks I've done it on purpose. He thinks I said that on purpose, knowing he can't answer back."

And maybe I did, she thought. Maybe I did.

Sorrow, regret, remorse ran through her like an electric shock and she sagged in the chair. She had loved him once; probably she still did. And he had almost died,

removing any chance for gestures of reconciliation. She leaned forward, smiled again.

"But of course we can't really smell the rain, just the moisture in the air."

CHAPTER VII

THE BLUE BOX

The box is powder blue, of some metal--tin, I think--and is rather large, similar to a modern jewelry chest. On the hinged lid are white silhouettes of a lady and gentleman, a couple from a former age. The woman, wearing ruffles and a hooped skirt, sits beside a small table extending a delicate cup to the man dressed in buckled shoes and pantaloons, who bows toward her.

I can never remember which of my mother's beaus gave her this extravagant casket that once held layers of chocolates and cremes and nougats, but in any case his name is not important. It is the box itself that matters. Or, what's in the box.

She has brought the blue box with her to my house for safekeeping--it contains the deed to her house, her insurance policies, her divorce decree (48 years old) and assorted other carefully folded, rubberbanded, papers.

When I was five and we lived in a house with my aunt and uncle and three cousins, my mother took the box from the bottom drawer of her chiffonnier one day, sat me down on the bed and explained that it had important papers in it.

"If the house ever catches on fire," she said, "I want you to remember to get this box out."

The summer I was eight we all had boils. My cousin Thomas, two years younger than I, was especially plagued by them and one day my aunt took him to the doctor to have his knee lanced. The doctor's office was only a few blocks away, on the town square, so my aunt left my two cousins and me at home. While we were looking for chalk for hopscotch, we found the candles my mother kept for electric failures. Because we had the house all to ourselves, we lit them.

We were later drawing our hopscotch squares on the front sidewalk when we looked up and saw smoke above the roof. We had forgotten a candle in our kitchen, next to the front room where my mother and I slept, and it had ignited some loose wallpaper (the firemen told us later). The neighbors had already called the fire department when I remembered the box.

The chiffonnier stood against the wall between our front room and the kitchen and when I ran in I could see the flames and feel the heat through the open doorway. I knelt in front of the chiffonnier and yanked at the bottom drawer. It stuck, as it always did, but when I pulled again it came open and I wrested the box out and ran for my life. By the time the fireman came, the room was consumed with flames

crackling and roaring across the walls and licking at the dry paper on the ceiling.

My aunt and Thomas had stopped for a coke in a cafe across from the firehouse when someone came in and mentioned the address of the fire alarm. My aunt ran all the way home, leaving Thomas to hobble along behind. When she came panting into the yard, we were surrounded by neighbors, watching the fireman spray water inside our house.

Most of the excitement was over by the time my mother came home. But I still had the box, hugging it against me, afraid to set it down anywhere.

When my mother saw and heard it all, including what I had done, she couldn't believe it.

"Why on earth did you do such a thing, going into a burning house, what if something had fallen on you or you had tripped or been overcome by smoke! Good lord, I can't believe you did such a foolish thing--"

My aunt stopped her.

"Sarah, I've heard you tell her myself that if the house should ever catch on fire, to get that box out. She only did what you told her."

"But I never dreamed . . .! She should have known I didn't mean for her to go back inside a burning house--"

"Well, she didn't know. She just did what you said."

A few years later my mother and I are living alone in our own tiny house on the edge of town. She is not happy. She sits on the front porch staring into the evening dusk. She says "I've always hated this time of day. It gives me the blues."

She says she is afraid of falling in the bathtub and makes me come in and sit on the commode while she bathes. I hate doing it; the bathroom is hot and steamy and because I'm not naked and wet I am too hot. She talks to me while she bathes and I come to know all her bathing movements. How she soaps her face first, squinching up her eyes to keep the soap out and then leaving the soap on, her eyes closed, while she washes her neck, shoulders, under her arms, her feet, and the parts I can't see that are hidden by the tub rim. She washes with quick hard movements, the way she used to rub my face with a washrag, the way she brushed and braided my hair. Sometimes I take a book into the bathroom with me but the pages get damp and limp and stick together and anyway my mother wants to talk to me. She tells me what happened at work or what she wants to happen to the house or what someone in the family has said. She rinses the soap off her face finally and off her shoulders; her skin is shiny and white in the overhead light, her face scrubbed and colorless and small and I begin to see that while I am like

her, I am bigger--taller, heavier boned, longer arms, longer legs, bigger hands and feet. We are different in another way, too, but she has not noticed and I, ashamed, never mention it. I have begun to develop breasts but mine are not like hers. Mine are farther apart and flat and, most horrible of all, one is a full size smaller than the other.

Down the street from our house is a holy roller church. They have recently put a neon sign on the roof that reads, in blue letters three feet high, "Jesus Is Coming Soon." The words light up one at a time and after "Soon," the whole thing flashes on and off and then all the words go dark and the sequence starts over again.

My mother insists that we visit the cemetery although I am too old to be bothered. We go on Saturdays when it saps your energy to walk down the gravel paths and I hurry to stand in the shade of an oak or a dark cedar while she frets about how bad the graves look. We visit the dead like we visit our other relatives, her widowed cousins and elderly aunts, frail old women with cool crepy skin white as biscuit dough and bones and veins that remind me of a chicken leg. We visit Aunt Sally, who is so old she looks like a baby bird, with her big blind eyes behind thick glasses and her hair scraped back from her face into a knot and a tremulous

thin-lipped mouth that says, "Eh, eh?" when her daughter tells her we have come to see her.

My mother is the eldest of five girls and a boy. Her father was a section foreman for the Texas and Pacific Railroad so they lived in a section house which was parallel to the tracks. All section houses were alike, a long roofed front porch, two front rooms, two back rooms, a long center room, a back porch with shed roof. They were always painted a dark umber with brown trim. My mother was ashamed of where she lived and ashamed of being ashamed. She once told me about some girls in school who invited her on a picnic. They told her to meet them at a certain place on the following Saturday. But when Saturday came and she went to the place they said, the girls were not there. They never came.

"I waited and waited," she says, telling me the story, "before I realized there hadn't even been a picnic. They just told me that to fool me and make fun."

Maybe not, I say; maybe something happened and they couldn't come.

"No, they did it on purpose, all right."

But why? I ask.

"Just to be mean, I guess."

What did you do?

"I went home and cried my eyes out. I was silly. But I never let on at school. As far as those girls knew I never showed up either. One of them tried to make up to me later but I never had any use for any of them after that. And I never let myself be fooled like that again, either." At this point she sometimes adds, "Not until your daddy came along anyway."

If my mother should run into one of these "girls" in town, she says, "That's Lucille Snow. She was one of the ones who invited me on the picnic that time."

These elderly women greet her warmly, unaware that to her they are still eleven year old deceivers whom she has no use for. She is polite but reserved. They take it as her nature, that reserve; if they knew her better, they would know they have not been forgiven.

She has never forgiven my father, who cheated on her and robbed her of a husband, family, security, the full life she thinks other women have.

"Why can't I have a life like other women?" she cries, in her bitterest moments. "Because I was crazy about your daddy and let him talk me into marrying him when I knew better." She is referring to the difference in their ages. She is ten years older and she fixes on this as the cause of

their trouble. "Everyone tried to warn me but I wouldn't listen. Now I'm paying for it."

Now I am grown and separated from my own husband.

Mother and I are in the house alone. It is July and the air conditioner does not work properly so that the air is close and old, like in a long-closed trunk. It reminds me of when my cousins and I used to catch toads and put them in shoeboxes with holes punched in the lid. We would hold the boxes between our hands, clamping the lids down with our thumbs, listening with a mixture of glee and fear to the thump-scratch, thump-scratch the toads made against the walls of the box. Mother would say, "That's mean. Let them out. How would you like to be locked up like that?"

I fold the last washrag and add it to the tower I am building on the coffee table. An old black and white movie is on television. The sound is turned down because of Mother's headache but I remember it as one of those sentimental movies they made in the forties, the kind Mother liked, unless they "ended wrong."

I'm not really watching the television. Joe turned it on before he left for the Sears Service Center, where, if he can be believed, he is being asked to load sofas into Volkswagens. It's his habit to turn the TV on when he comes in or when he gets up, as if he thinks it gives off oxygen

and is necessary to his survival. He has always been addicted to TV. It seemed such a relief after Jason to have a calm steady child who would watch television, that I didn't protest enough.

The movie has ended and a commercial for a personal product comes on. My mother's sister Cent (Millicent legally) once remarked, after seeing one of those ads on television: "Kids know everything nowadays." She said it as if she thought it was better when they knew nothing. Ignorance and fear kept most of my generation pure, it's true; no girl of my kin or acquaintance could have imagined coming home to tell her mother she was pregnant. Those of us who went to our marriages innocent were more afraid of putting our mothers in their graves than of burning in hell. But those of us who went to our marriages innocent were also ignorant. Perhaps knowledge is better.

Mother and I could never talk about it. By the time she could bring herself to talk to me I was past wanting to listen to her; we got through my adolescence more or less by pretending it didn't exist. When I began to date the most she could bring herself to say was "Just Be Careful" in tones so grave and melancholy that sex and danger became inexorably and forever mixed in my mind.

Even today I can't watch one of those movies with my mother in the room. I can feel or imagine I feel her stiffen and then I hear her make that little noise in her throat. I know what she's thinking. She's thinking that people don't really behave like that and if they did and she wanted to see it she would as soon look in someone's bedroom window.

She sits quietly now, across the room from me, eyes closed, arms folded, feet neatly crossed at the ankles. She is not asleep, but "being still," willing the pain in her head away.

"Try to be still so you can breathe easier" she would tell me when, wheezing, shoulders hunched, I struggled in the grip of an asthma attack.

I hated the asthma that kept me from running or playing outside in cold weather or spending the night with someone, but it did not frighten me as it did her. What frightened me was the attempts to cure it--the injections I got every Tuesday after school. I would be sick with fear of the needle by the time I walked the five or six blocks to the doctor's office. I never really got over my fear of pain. The day Jason was born I knew I could never have another child. Lying in the hospital that morning I actually mourned the other babies I would never have, knowing I could

never go through it again. Everyone told me--even Mother who hardly qualified, having only the one--that you forgot the pain of childbirth. Impossible, I thought that day, impossible to forget that. But then three years later Joe came along, and three years after him, Thad.

Would you have had other children, Mother, if you and Daddy had stayed together?

Not if my grandmother had had anything to do with it. She wouldn't hear of her going to the hospital the first time, even though she was thirty-seven, it was her first pregnancy, and the doctor advised it. People went to hospitals to die, my grandmother said.

"You do what you have to do," she has said, explaining why she worked until the last month when other women hardly left the house when they were "that way," how she walked to and from the laundry, stood on her feet all day in the heat --"big as a barrel. I know I looked a sight, but Mr. Brown let me work. I needed the money but I needed to work, too, to have something to do with myself. He knew that and he let me stay on."

I was born at home on a cold windy night in March. As much as I am like my mother, in coloring and shape, I have my father's face.

"You look just like him," she will say, as if it is a judgment.

As a young woman my mother wore expensive clothes and I. Miller shoes. She had her hair bobbed, wore silk hose, and posed stiffly for studio photographs. Because it was not the fashion in those days to smile hugely for the camera and because she was shy, she looks distant, stern, even angry in those early pictures, almost as if she knew her life would not turn out the way she meant it to.

She has never looked her age; everyone says so. Even now her hair is more champagne than gray--beauty shops charge good money for that color--and her face is almost unlined. Only her hands, locked together now across her stomach, reveal her years--those beautifully shaped, long fingered, tapering hands, brownspotted and deeply lined from years of exposure to water, hard work, and neglect.

She was never really ill, not the way some women of her generation were, who suffered from "female trouble" or similar complaints. She never had to have her uterus removed, or her appendix, never had varicose veins or high blood pressure or gallstones. But she did have sick headaches--migraines, I know, now that I have them myself. The headaches were the only thing that sent her to bed. She seldom vomited, fighting it, as I do, by lying still as

death. When I was a girl I read a story about a girl who eased her mother's sick headaches by applying rags soaked in vinegar while her mother lay in a darkened room. I tried to do that for my own mother, but she refused. She wanted only to be left alone, not ministered to. When she had a headache I would wander the house like a restless ghost, unwilling to leave her, miserable because she was not herself, until finally she would rise from her bed, pale, subdued, wan, but "able to be up."

My mother was only really sick once that I remember, the winter she had the flu. She spent days in bed then, hardly eating or drinking anything, not talking to me, turning her face to the wall when I asked if she wanted anything. An old family friend who lived two blocks away happened to stop in one day to see us. When she saw how my mother was, she sent me straight back to her house to call the doctor.

"Why didn't you let anybody know?" she asked, while we were waiting for the doctor to come, and I immediately saw it all through her eyes and saw that it was true--I had let my mother lie sick for days, without calling a doctor or anyone; if she died it would be my fault. It was a long time before I forgave that woman. Or myself.

Instead of aspirin we had in our house in those days packets of BC Headache Powders. I saw Mother and my aunts slide the fine white powder out of the paper packet directly onto the tongue, followed by sips of water. When I was twelve, having or imagining I had a headache, I decided to take a BC powder. My mistake, I realized later, was inhaling slightly before drinking the water. I sucked the fine dry powder down into my throat--down my windpipe, Mother would have said, had she ever known about it--and immediately choked almost to death. I was alone in the house--it was a Saturday morning--and all I could do was cling to the edge of the sink while I coughed and retched and tried to breathe. I tried to gulp enough water to dissolve the powder and remembered my mother telling me about the time she had swallowed a spoonful of salt on a dare and had strangled on it. I knew she had told me the story as a warning against such foolishness and now she was about to come home and find me dead on the kitchen floor.

My mother has never worried about her own health. It's not that she's one of those people who doesn't worry; she worries about hundreds of things: thunderstorms and tornadoes; people going out of town in cars; somebody breaking into the house; what people will say or think. It's just that her own health is not high on her list. She

walks her three miles a day, watches her cholesterol, and refuses to take the nitroglycerin tablets that Muddy, our doctor and cousin, has prescribed for angina pain.

"They won't blow you up, you know," he teases her.

"I know that," she says, offended.

"Then why--?" he is somewhat bewildered by her, as he is by all her siblings, whom he sees, correctly, as neurotic.

"It just didn't feel like my heart," she says, as if she, not he, is the expert. "I think it was that cabbage I had for lunch."

Even when a growth is discovered, even after eight weeks of chemotherapy and radiation, she doesn't appear to worry. But she is humiliated and disgusted by the bleeding. She refuses to buy what she needs so I do it for her, as if I have suddenly acquired a daughter who is too embarrassed to make that first purchase, realizing with some shock that as the mother of sons I will never perform this little chore for a daughter, as she did for me.

Now the headache, exact cause unknown, perhaps reaction to the chemotherapy. I want her to go to the hospital; she refuses. So we battle it out at home, using the prescriptions Muddy sends from the drugstore.

But the next day he puts her in the hospital. The news is not good. I know but I am not ready.

I've always been afraid, all these years when I couldn't get her on the phone, sending Mack, waiting like the coward I am.

Other people lose their mothers, grow up, the day will come you have to face it the Bible says we have three score and ten she's had that--

"Her car's gone," he would say, or

"She was in the yard and didn't hear the phone"

--and I could breathe again.

But not now

Now she's --

The third day she has an oxygen tube in her nose. Because she never opens her eyes, she thinks the oxygen line touching her cheek is her glasses falling off; she keeps trying to move it to the bridge of her nose.

I feed her. She has never liked strawberry ice cream but this is what they bring so I give it to her, bite by bite, remarking to my aunt who is with us that she doesn't care for it. She rarely speaks now, but says suddenly, "Ummm, good strawberry."

On the fourth day when I know, I know, I bend close to her when we are alone and say

"I love you, Mother."

and she says, "Well, of course."

It is still warm when I get home shortly after ten o'clock. Acid rain, ozone damage, the greenhouse effect, some environmental arrogance, has made the night air even more muggy, soft, and damp than usual, as if the night is wrapped in a wet sheet.

Thad and Joe are still out so I switch on the television and lie down on the living room sofa. It is hot and the sofa feels scratchy and I want to get up and open the house, fling open all the windows and doors, let a breeze in, the kind that comes off the lake and gives you goosebumps, a breeze that will sing through the house, billowing the bedroom curtains out, drying the perspiration on my throat and behind my knees . . . But I know no breeze waits outside to be let in, only the clammy, windless night. I listen to the air conditioner roar, staring at the TV news.

I awake at midnight, drenched, dreaming that Mack has come home. But it is only Joe, turning off the TV.

Among the papers in my mother's blue box I find two letters. One is dated shortly after my birth and is addressed to my aunt:

Dear Rose:

I am sorry I have to write and ask you to do this; since I have been in Dallas I have been working and I had saved up enough to pay all of her bills--Doctor bill, Drygood bill, or any other that she had. But I got in a jam last week and it cost me ever thing I had. I still want to pay them but I can't pay all at once now. Would it be asking too much of you to find out what her Doctor Bill is and send them to me? I can pay so much a week until they are paid. Thank you.

Your friend,

It is signed by my father.

The other letter is much longer, several pages written in pencil. It is addressed to my mother and dated when I was six months old.

Dear Sarah,

As you know I have been crippled and sick, couldn't get around to see anyone.

And I have tried to stay out of your and his troubles, but there are two or three things I want to explain to you. He has had back luck since he went to Dallas. He has had work most of the time but as you know he got hurt and his doctor bill

was high. He is just now getting that debt paid. He had to pay that or lose his job. He has been snowed under, that's the reason he has not had any money to send you. He says the baby has been to Dallas but he couldn't go to see it as for the past month they have been working him day and night. He goes to work at 3 in the afternoon and works all night till 7 or 8 the next morning. You can count the hours and see for yourself, that it only gives him 5 or 6 hours to get a little sleep.

Now I don't want to hurt your feelings or butt in where it's none of my business but I feel like I ought to say a word to you as you all are now ready for a divorce.

As I understand it you are asking in the divorce for support of the baby. That's right. We want him to help you take care of that baby. But at the same time you are asking for more than he can pay. I am sorry that he can't pay as much as you ask but on his salary he just can't pay and have anything left, see?

Now if you insist on putting that in, I know him well enough to know that before he would do

that he would quit that job and leave here where you or I or no one could ever find him and if they did find him and put him in jail that wouldn't buy the baby any shoes.

I am sorry about the whole thing but it looks like there is nothing I can do about it. Now we would be tickled to death if he was able to pay but he can't, that's all. Of course you can make him lose his job over it but that wouldn't help matters any.

His daddy and I have worried ourselves sick over the situation. We want him to keep his job even if they are working him 16 hours a day and night. He told us he had taken out insurance for the baby. He loves that baby and wants to do what's right about it, but he will never have the pleasure of being with it like you have. He will be denied the pleasure of having the baby with him unless it's fixed by law for him to have the baby a part of the time. That would be right, don't you think? Now, I don't want to meddle or I don't want to hurt no one's feelings, but you see, my baby is as precious to me as yours is to you. You want your baby to have a living and I want my baby

to have a living and I know what it costs him to live down there.

We would like to see him stay with his job and keep up the insurance for the baby and he will if you and him can agree on the amount of money he can pay you, have it by law in the divorce but don't have it so much he can't meet it because that would only put him in jail, do no good, and make everybody unhappy. No telling whenever he would get another job.

If I have hurt your feelings I didn't mean to and I am sorry. But that's the way I feel about the situation. He loves that baby, he wants to do what's right about it even if it don't look like it and we want him to help raise it, but we don't want to see him lose his job and that is what it would do if you ask him to pay more than he can so I hope for your sake and the baby's sake and everybody interested, you will write him and you and him agree on a certain amount of money that he can pay. I know he will do all he possibly can for the baby but if he loses his job, he can't keep up the insurance for the baby and there is no telling what would become of him.

I still say I am sorry about the whole thing. I hope the two of you can come to an understanding for the good of you and him and the baby, as well as his daddy and I. Now, if you want to talk this over with me alright, but don't mention it to his daddy, as he has worried over it until it makes him sick to mention it. I am sorry if I have said anything to hurt you. I didn't mean to. I only wanted to explain a few things to you that I didn't think you understood. I hope ever thing works out best for all concerned.

Goodbye and best wishes.

This letter is signed by my grandmother.

How many times did my mother read these letters, with fresh outrage, over the years? She kept them all this time, festering in the bottom of the blue box--

No wonder she wanted it saved.

Several days after the funeral I go back to the cemetery alone. Not having been raised to it as I was, my children do not visit cemeteries; they look astonished when I ask if they would like to come with me. I walk among the graves--so many are here now--my grandparents, Hardin, Duncan, Cent, Harriett, Cary. My mother. My father's mother and father. My stepmother is buried alone at

Hillcrest in Dallas. I wonder if my father ever visits her grave. I have not been there myself since the day of her funeral.

For the first time I comprehend fully what drew my mother here, why she came to fuss over curbs and headstones, why she knelt to pull grassburs and weeds, why she wanted to come.

After a while I walk down the rows and stand in front of a tombstone with a picture on it. It is a photograph of a child named Opal, in a white dress, a big bow in her dark hair. She died on her seventh birthday, in 1914. Beneath her picture, carved in the stone, are the words: Our Precious Jewel.

I always visit Opal when I come to the cemetery; since I was a small child and came here with my mother, I have paid my respects to Opal. It is not because she is anyone we know--

Suddenly, standing before her headstone in the lingering heat of early evening, listening to the shrill sound of a locust somewhere close by, I know that I have always been afraid of Opal, a little girl in a white dress, whom death seemed to have caught unaware, perhaps while she was celebrating her birthday.

I leave the cemetery and drive west, wondering where I go from here.

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