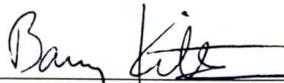


LISTEN TO ME

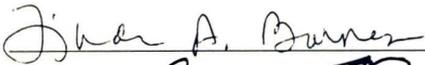
PHYLLIS C. GOBBELL

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Phyllis C. Gobbell entitled *Listen To Me*. I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Barry Kitterman, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
And recommend its acceptance:




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Date 4/4/02

LISTEN TO ME

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Phyllis C. Gobbell

May 2002

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family.

Your voices have been the sweetest music –
and I have loved listening.

ABSTRACT

Listen To Me is a collection of short stories presented as first-person narratives. Each story contributes to the overarching idea that every person has a distinct voice and something unique to say. The five stories in this thesis are the core of a larger work in progress, a collection of voices that represent diversity in age, gender, and culture, in the context of universal themes such as love and loss.

Franz Kafka said, “You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. . . . The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked.” As the characters unmask themselves and tell their stories, I hope that my readers will find the stuff of real life. As you listen to their stories, you may even recognize your own.

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INTRODUCTION

It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. . . . a whispered "Listen," a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

For a long time, I have been fascinated by the idea of *voice* in fiction. Writer Walter Mosley said, "Once you get the voice of your characters right, people will believe anything they say." I am intrigued by the idea that a character's voice can pull us into a story, captivate us, seduce us. Plot may keep us reading, but in the end, the voice is what we take away, what we remember.

Voice drives the stories in this collection. Each narrator's experience is as unique as it is universal. I began to think about this collection when I read an essay by Donald Murray, who wrote about his own experience as a grocery boy after reading John Updike's story, "A & P." He said, "[T]hrough the skillful magic of Updike's prose, I read my own story," and "As you read my story, many of you have heard your own." The challenge of the story is twofold: to say something that is real and true and to touch something real and true in the reader. The protagonists in this collection bid us to listen. Writing these stories, I have listened and learned. Listen as you read, and you may hear your own story.

TELLICO

The *Loudon County Messenger* ran a piece about Jill Moscone last week. Fifteen years ago the seventeenth of May, Jill Moscone parked her red Mazda RX-7 in a weedy spot overlooking Tellico Lake, put a gun to her heart, and pulled the trigger. You would think people might have let it go by now. I was about to graduate from high school. Jill Moscone would have finished her junior year if she had lived one more week.

My dreams are troubled by death and dying at Tellico Lake. I dream of Jill Moscone's spirit hovering above the waters and of the bones of my ancestors that the waters cover. I dream about the contaminated fish. The lake has lived up to its name. The Cherokee call it the Lake of Tears.

Roger Beaumont brought me his newspaper. "Hey, Danny, you need to see this piece on Jill Moscone," he said, slapping the paper on the counter in front of me. The *Messenger* is one of those weeklies that is so thin on real news, a fiddling contest makes the front page. It's big on advice from the agricultural extension agents, and wedding photos and fillers that remind readers to *Go to church Sunday or Read a book!!* Roger was surprised I didn't subscribe. "It's how I keep up with everybody from high school," he said. Like I give a shit about anybody from high school. I drove away from Lenoir City after graduation and didn't look back. I didn't come back until last year, except once, to bury my uncle.

"Remember Susan Pope, Dale's little sister?" Roger dug in his wallet for his credit card to pay for gas and a couple of six packs of Bud Light. "She married Lonnie B. Childress, the all-state quarterback. Remember Lonnie B.? He was a couple of years

ahead of us. Susan works for the paper now. She did the retrospective on Jill Moscone.”

Roger is the kind of guy who can use a word like *retrospective* with a straight face.

“Susan and Jill were friends,” he said.

I was pretty sure they weren’t friends, but I didn’t offer an opinion.

Roger started coming in the Texaco-Mart a few months ago. It’s the Texaco-Mart at the Soddy-Daisy Exit. I work evenings. I live right down the road in a Red Carpet Inn that’s been converted to efficiency apartments. Mine is an easy life, as it goes. I can’t say it’s exciting, but excitement is not always what it’s cracked up to be. I have traveled all across the country. Leo, my uncle, always said my spirit was as restless as the air before a rainstorm. I have been to Spokane, to the Gulf of Mexico off the Louisiana coast, up to Bar Harbor, Maine. Coming back to East Tennessee seemed like a good thing to settle me down. Though everything has changed in this part of the country, it’s still the land of my ancestors. I find some comfort in that. I have no ambitions to see the rest of the world, and the Texaco-Mart is as good as any place to work.

Roger lives south of here, somewhere off of I-75. I picture a big-ass house that backs up to a golf course, similar to Tellico Village. Roger is a lawyer for TVA. A couple of nights a week he stops in for gas and beer on his way home from Chattanooga. He’s always recalling high school days like we’re old pals, like we were best buddies then, which is a big joke. In those days Roger Beaumont wouldn’t have bothered to piss on me if I was on fire.

In high school Roger was one of those soft-bellied, sloop-shouldered guys with thick glasses who dates girls that want to be librarians. Somewhere along the way he starts working out with weights, ditches the glasses for contact lenses, and marries Old

Money from Knoxville. I saw his wife in the car once when he stopped for gas on a weekend. You can't pay for gas at the pumps here. We're not that high-tech. So Roger was inside paying. He made a point of telling me he and his wife – name of *Bree* - were on their way to a big party her parents were throwing up in Knoxville. Lots of movers and shakers would be there. Reminded me how he used to lick Mr. Moscone's boots. All I could see of *Bree* in the car was shoulder-length blonde hair. She sure didn't look like a librarian. Seems Old Roger has done all right for himself.

I didn't know what to make of it when Roger said I should read the piece on Jill Moscone. Later, I couldn't find anything in the article that I needed to know. Ex-sheriff McGinnis recalled the case, saying he never had any evidence of foul play, but people had to blame somebody for Jill Moscone's death, so they directed their blame at him in the next election. He laid out the facts again. There was a suicide note in Jill's neat, back-slanted handwriting. Only one set of fingerprints was found on the weapon. Then there was the clincher, the motive for suicide. The ex-sheriff had no trouble believing that a nice girl like Jill Moscone would be desperate in her situation.

Mrs. Moscone, who was interviewed by phone from Long Island, insisted she never had a clue that her daughter was pregnant until they heard from the autopsy. She didn't know of any boyfriend. The note gave no explanations, just apologies for the pain she was causing her parents by taking her own life. Mrs. Moscone still believes there was more to the case than a simple suicide. "Not that you can ever call suicide simple," she was quoted as saying. "It's very, very complicated." Mr. Moscone lives in Phoenix now. Not long after they left Lenoir City, they divorced. The article made a big deal out of the fact that the Smith & Wesson .357 was part of Mr. Moscone's gun collection.

Mrs. Moscone never approved of guns. She believes their daughter might be alive today if she hadn't had such easy access to a handgun. It does not seem odd to me that a mother would cling to that idea.

Roger was still yammering about the article when I gave his Visa a swipe and pushed the credit card slip toward him. He signed with a big scrawl. "People still can't figure who knocked her up," he said, leaning forward, squinting at me, like he was trying to look through me. "Y'know, Danny – " he gave a laugh that was a half-snort – "I always thought it might be you."

I met his narrow eyes with a steely look of my own. "Maybe it was you."

He scooped up his Visa and chuckled deep in his throat, like he was amused. I don't know what he found amusing about our conversation. "So the mystery lover remains a mystery," he said, as if he thought he'd made some profound statement, and he picked up his beer and left.

The Moscones were from Long Island. Mr. Moscone was a vice-president for a big real estate company. After the dam was built and the reservoir filled, TVA sold off twenty-two thousand acres of prime lakefront property to developers. Lots were going for as much as sixty thousand dollars, Leo said. That was when Mr. Moscone came down to handle the project for his company. There were plans for golf courses and even a yacht club. You'd expect people like the Moscones to settle in a yuppie section of Knoxville, where they could rub noses with other new-money transplants from the Northeast and California, but they didn't. They came to Lenoir City and bought an old house that was once in Daniel Boone's family. Mrs. Moscone was some kind of history

buff. She set out to make the house a showplace. Business was mushrooming for Mr. Moscone. They didn't notice their daughter was miserable. Even now, from what I get out of the *Messenger* piece, Mrs. Moscone doesn't realize her daughter was miserable from the start.

Court battles over Tellico had been going on for years when Mr. Moscone moved his family to East Tennessee, but Jill had never heard of the Tellico Dam until she came to Lenoir City. She had never heard of the snail darter. Environmentalists fought to protect the three-inch fish that thrived in the Little Tennessee River. The Cherokee fought to protect the ancient Cherokee burial grounds located in the valley of the Little Tennessee River. More than three hundred families had been forced to sell their land when TVA claimed the valley. Not all the families were Cherokee, but enough to weaken any fight with the government. "Indians have always been fair game," Leo said. "Look at our history. One broken promise after another."

My uncle Leo was always proud of his Cherokee blood, no matter that it was watered down through the generations. The Dawsons are a mix of Cherokee, Scotch-Irish, and Celtic. The farm that we lost to TVA had been in the Dawson family for a hundred years.

Leo had the strong square jaw of the Cherokee and straight, raven-black hair that he wore in braids. My mother's skin was lighter, her bone structure more delicate, more like my Scotch-Irish grandmother, but her eyes were dark like Leo's. In photographs of her as a girl, her eyes were bright with fire. That fire had gone out by the time I was born. I am a Williams. My eyes are blue-gray, after my father, but my face is shaped like Leo's and my hair is also black. I never wore braids. I never saw that braids would

get me anywhere. My skin is the color of weak tea with a drop of milk in it. Red man, white man, I can go either way, I can't go either way.

"Your father was the biggest WASP I ever knew," Leo told me. "He never forgave himself for marrying into Cherokee blood." My uncle had to tell me everything I know because I was only six years old when my mother washed down a bottle of sleeping pills with a quart of vodka. Leo even had to tell me about my father, who took off when I was two months old. "If James Williams ever shows his face to me again, I will put a bullet between his eyes," Leo said in a dry, level voice. I am content not knowing all the stories about my parents.

By the time I met Jill Moscone, Leo and I lived in a shitty rental house on LeConte Street and he had lost all hope. For Leo, a high point was the first of the month when his government check arrived in the mail. He had even lost interest in hanging out at Pete One-Eye's Bar & Grill, where Pete used to call me to come after my uncle and I'd drag him home, stinking drunk. Finally, he was satisfied to drink and pass out at home. That was how I found him the night Jill Moscone died.

A troop of Boy Scouts was hiking around Tellico Lake on Saturday morning. Some of the boys spotted the red Mazda RX-7 and charged toward it, even though the scoutmaster called to them to wait up. One of the kids, now twenty-six years old, was interviewed for the *Messenger* article. He was the first to peer in the car. He had to see a shrink for a long time.

By that afternoon the sheriff was asking anyone who had seen Jill Moscone on Friday night to come forward. "Possible suicide," they were calling it, but the big

question was *Why?* I was cleaning up in the kitchen, washing bad-smelling dishes from several days past, when I heard McGinnis on the local radio station. Leo came padding in barefooted, droopy-eyed. He'd been drinking ever since he woke up about eleven o'clock. He opened the refrigerator and snapped another beer from its plastic ring.

"Moscone. Moscone," he said, scratching his head with a ragged fingernail.

"Didn't you work for those people last summer?"

"We did some landscaping at their place," I said.

"Same thing."

"No, not the same thing." We'd had this conversation last summer. Leo was morally opposed to any connection with the developer of Tellico Village. I had needed the money and saw no reason to take a big moral stand when I was sent out to do landscaping at the Moscone place.

"You know the girl?" he asked.

"We were at the same school. It's not a big school."

Leo popped the top and took a long thirsty drink from the can. I looked into the sudsy dishwater, felt him staring at my back.

"You didn't mess with her did you?" he said.

I jammed a plate in the dish drainer. "What do you mean by that, Leo?" He grunted. I turned around, glared at him. "They're saying it was suicide."

"Nothing wrong with my hearing. I asked did you ever *mess* with her. Didn't a girl name of Jill call here for you?"

I went back to my work, rubbing at dried oatmeal on a pan, the last of the dirty dishes. “You got a good memory, Leo. I might’ve had a call from her while I was working out at her place. I don’t know.”

His hot eyes kept boring into my back as I sprayed the dishes in the drainer. “Maybe last summer, maybe another time, too, not so long ago,” he said.

“You drink too much, Leo,” I said. “You could keep things straight if you didn’t drink so much.”

He came up behind me. I could smell his unwashed body and beer on his breath. His thick hand clapped my shoulder. He said, “You’re a good boy, Danny. You can have some kind of life if you don’t mess up.”

It’s all we ever said about Jill Moscone. I graduated and left town before the end of the month. I took Leo’s old Chevy pickup. I didn’t feel bad taking it because he was hardly ever sober and shouldn’t be driving. The day I drove away from LeConte Street was the last time I saw my uncle alive.

I couldn’t shake the dreams for a long time. There is one dream that is not about the lake. I’m riding in a white Redding pick-up, with the summer wind in my face, heading out to the Moscone place to put in their landscaping. This is more like a documentary running through my mind than a dream. Jamal is driving, telling dirty jokes and laughing *he-he-he*, jerking at the steering wheel because he’s veering into the gravel. I’m laughing, too. Jamal was a real comedian when he cut loose. It may be the only time in my life I laughed big enough to show all my teeth. My senior year is ahead of me but a good chunk of summer is left, and I have money to spend. I’m thinking about Jill in

her cutoffs and NYU tee shirt, with her hair pulled up on top of her head like Pebbles Flintstone. In this dream I am not afraid.

The white trucks had the landscape contractor's name on the door: Redding's Lawn and Garden. Each morning I reported to the garden center, brick-box house with a long greenhouse attached, surrounded by an acre of shrubs and trees. Sprinklers sprayed a fine mist over the bedding plants, begonias and impatiens and pansies. Stacks of fertilizer and mulch and potting soil and rows of clay pots lined the entrance to the garden center. The overpowering smell was not of the flowers, but of wet, rotting earth. I liked it. The smell seeped into my dreams.

A big, jolly woman named Trudy managed the garden center. I answered to her husband, R.J., who was smaller than Trudy, a lightweight with a paunch. Mornings, R.J. sent out the trucks. I would ride with Buster or Jamal. Buster was a skinny old man who didn't mind watching me haul and spread mulch, dig holes, and carry dogwood saplings from the truck while he hung on the door of the cab, chain-smoking cigarettes he rolled by hand. Jamal was a stout man with shiny-black skin and flashes of gold in his teeth, a full ten years older than me, husband and father, a full-time employee at Reddings, like Buster. Unlike Buster, though, Jamal shared the work equally with me. Jamal and I did the Moscone job, with some direction from R.J. It's strange that I never dreamed about any of the other landscaping projects that summer, just the Moscone job. Digging and sweating and loving the smell of the soil, heaving bags of mulch from the truck, catching a glimpse of Jill hanging around the edges of our work, much as she hung around the edges of things at school. Not knowing what to make of her, not knowing what to make

of my heart thrumming, but sure that something was about to happen. I wake up then to what is real, the stab of truth, the wash of sorrow that it's all a dream, all over, all gone.

Mrs. Moscone favored rhododendrons. We delivered a truck full of the pink variety and used them to line the long cobblestone walk. The first day she was in our faces. Not bossy, she was polite, but everything had to be perfect. In the Moscones' world there was no margin of error.

"Aren't the holes too close together? Won't the bushes be crowded when they grow?" No matter that R.J. told us thirty-six inches center to center. Mrs. Moscone wore a green gardener's apron over khaki pants and a striped knit shirt, with clean, white canvas shoes. Her long pink nails and lipstick matched the stripes in her shirt.

"Shouldn't you smooth out the soil?" she wanted to know, hovering like a painted hen. I told her we built up the dirt a little around the plants so it would hold water. Jamal gave me a sharp look. I was supposed to mumble, "Yes ma'am" and do what she said. Mrs. Moscone considered, tilted her head, then drew her lips into a pink razor slash and nodded. "Go on with it then." She hovered less each day. She spent more time at the tennis courts or the golf course, or she was dashing off to a luncheon engagement, dressed fit to meet the President.

Jill hung back, darted glances at us from behind the pages of a paperback or from the Mazda RX-7, *vrooming* out of the driveway. One day her car won't start. I say to Jamal maybe I can start it for her, but he tells me no, mind my own business, keep working. We're setting out monkey grass around the patio. She looks fresh-scrubbed, hair flying loose, designer jeans and a tight top that shows she's well-endowed. Jill is not

beautiful but her body has the well-tended look of the wealthy. She slams the car door, slams the kitchen door. No one else is home. Mrs. Moscone is on the golf links. I tell Jamal I should offer to help. He says it's none of our business.

Twenty minutes later Roger Beaumont drives up in a Kelly green van with *Tellico Village* painted in white on the side. Roger has a summer job with Mr. Moscone. He steps down from the van, pushes his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, glances at the red Mazda and then at Jamal and me. "I'm supposed to drive Jill somewhere," he says to us, maybe just to me. We had Honors English together. It's not the first time I have heard the smug note in his voice.

Jill comes out, flipping her hair, asking Roger, "Can you start my car?"

Now it's clear there is a glitch in communication. Jill wants to drive herself to the mall. She's called her father to send out a mechanic and he's sent a driver. Roger is no mechanic. He apologizes for the mix-up. I can see there's nothing between him and Jill, though he probably wanted me to think so. He offers to drop her at the mall, come back for her, whatever. He's embarrassed but not rattled. It's not hard to believe he will be a lawyer someday. Jill scrunches her face and shakes her head. Probably she's mad at her father but she's not very nice to Old Roger.

I stand up and wipe my hands on my jeans. "You want me to take a look under the hood?" I say. "If it's something simple, maybe I can fix it."

Jamal is scowling at me. Roger is scowling at me. Jill lights up.

Turns out it's as simple as you can get, a loose battery cable. I don't mention all the times I've had to get Leo's truck running. Even with the sleek little Mazda, I feel at home with my head under the hood. Just poke around, that's what I've learned to do.

The engine's purring. Jill flashes me a grateful smile from the driver's seat.

"Good job, Red Man," Roger says. "You learn that in Auto Shop?"

"I never took Auto Shop," I say.

Roger raises his eyebrows, like I'm the only Indian that ever got through high school without taking Auto Shop. "Guess it's just in the blood."

Walk away, I tell myself. Just walk. I used to fight like a tiger and nobody put me down without getting a bloody nose for it, but Leo taught me I couldn't win. I might beat up the guy, but I couldn't win. I call on my will-power and walk away. Roger is laughing. I don't look back, so I can't tell what Jill is thinking.

But she calls me that night. She says, "Roger is an asshole, you know." I tell her I know it, and we start talking about ourselves, and the next thing I know we're meeting at Tellico Lake every chance we get.

Before that summer the only thing I knew about Jill Moscone was that she was a stuck-up Yankee rich bitch. Maybe somebody said it or maybe I formed an opinion on my own, just seeing her around school. By the end of the summer I knew she wasn't like that. We talked about things I'd never talked about with anybody. In some ways we were a lot alike. The difference was, I didn't give a shit about being in anybody's clique but it was killing her to be an outsider. In a dreamy voice, she told about her old high school and her friends back there. She remembered how it felt to belong. I gave a snort and told her my family had been in East Tennessee for over a hundred years, and I still didn't belong. I was trying to be funny, but her face melted into a dark, sorrowful look. She made a remark about loneliness. Later, I wished I could remember exactly what she

said. Something philosophical, but it was clear she was talking about herself, about the big hole in her own spirit. I wasn't lonely anymore, but she was.

Jill believed she couldn't break in because people connected her - indirectly - with the Tellico controversy. The truth was, most of the kids at Lenoir City High School had not been removed from their farms. Some of the locals actually benefited in the long run from the land development, which created jobs and boosted the economy in the area. I didn't get into that with Jill. I didn't tell her my gut feeling. People looked at her and saw what I'd seen. Her clipped Long Island accent made her sound bitchy. Southern ears were used to slow, sing-songy voices. *Moscone* sounded like somebody from *The Godfather*. Sometimes your heritage is against you and it has nothing to do with the person you are. You know it but others don't, and you just have to live with that. I should have said it before we got in so deep with each other. Why did it matter so much, anyway, what the white-breads thought? What did it matter what anyone else in the world thought of us if we had each other?

Tellico Lake was where we always met. Jill and I knew all the secluded spots around the lake. I drove Leo's pick-up and left it some distance from where Jill parked. We took no chances that we'd be discovered. In the beginning the secrecy was exciting, but it grew tiresome. Jill persuaded me that her parents would send her back to Long Island if they had a clue what we were doing. She was barely seventeen. "You don't know how they are," she said, with a crumpled face that was part sadness, part fear. She was right, I didn't know anything about up-tight parents. I didn't know much about parents. Leo was no threat to us. He was drunk by nine o'clock. I knew that in a small

town secrets are hard to keep. If anyone at school found out about us, everyone in town would know by that evening. I went along with the cloak-and-dagger bit because I couldn't imagine my life without her in it now. I told her I loved her, and she said it back.

I could believe that Mr. Moscone would whisk her away to a boarding school if he was provoked. Twice I had met the man during the week I worked at their place. "Move that vehicle!" he said to Jamal, and Jamal hurried to move the Redding pick-up. Mr. Moscone had an entourage scurrying along beside him, all wearing suits except Roger Beaumont, who wore a green golf shirt and khakis. Sunlight glinted off the diamond setting in Mr. Moscone's gold cuff links. His name was Robert. Bob Moscone. I had to work at not thinking Don Corleone.

I never considered anything beyond the old story, rich girl and poor boy, the cruel parents that keep them apart. Ours was an old story all right, but another one.

I took her clenched fists and kissed the tight fingers when she told me. We were sitting on the hood of her car, the first warm breeze of spring sailing across Tellico Lake. I said in a quiet, reasonable voice, "We can get married." She told me it was a sweet thing to say, but she didn't give an answer. She was worried about her parents. I said we could go away. In five weeks I would graduate, and we could go anywhere she wanted to go. She shook her head as if she couldn't bear the idea. "Whatever you want," I told her. I reached for her but she drew away. For a minute we sat there in silence. My throat was tight, my mouth dry. This might be the most important moment of my life

and I didn't know what to say. Tears streaked her face. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail but loose strands stuck to her damp cheeks.

"Don't act like it's the end of the world," I said.

She stared at me, her eyes wide and wet and panicky, and said, "It *is* the end of the world, Danny. Don't you see it?" And then the words came gushing, mixed with sobs. Didn't I want to go to college? and her parents would hate her, hate her, hate her! and what kind of job was I thinking I could get without a college education? "*What are you thinking?*" she cried, hitting at me with useless fists. I grabbed her wrists and said it back to her, "What are *you* thinking? You think I'll never be somebody? I'll always be broke? All of that can change. I'll change, I *will*." And then I felt the fight go out of her and she turned into a limp dishrag. I folded my arms around her while she cried against my chest, and the words slipped out with the sobs: "You can't change your blood." Her hands covered her face and she was sorry, sorry, so sorry, but there it was. She choked back her sobs, trying to say she didn't mean it, didn't mean it, but there it was. The wind had picked up. It whipped across Tellico Lake and rustled through the new leaves around us.

In the weeks to come we act like victims of war, defeated, scared, grasping for any thread of hope until we are sure it's hopeless, and in the end all we can do is cling to each other. Every night we meet at Tellico Lake. We fall into each other's arms and hold on, hold on, and then we stare into the lake as if an answer might appear on the dark ripples from the long-dead Cherokee or the fish struggling for life in water that each year measures lower in oxygen and minerals. The Lake of Tears offers no promise. Mrs.

Moscone has made plans for her and Jill to spend the summer in Long Island. Jill doesn't resist the idea. She says it will be better to "fix things" somewhere away from here. The days are ticking off toward the end of school and we know what is inevitable. We know what is insurmountable. Not, in the end, her parents' disapproval or an unwanted pregnancy or the disparity of rich and poor. Being in love only makes everything worse. What is going to come of us? What can we do? Nothing. It's the end of the world. And that's when Jill comes up with the answer.

Roger Beaumont has been back in the Texaco-Mart twice since he left me the newspaper article. Once I had a line waiting to pay so he didn't mention it. The next time he couldn't wait to ask, "Did you read the piece about Jill Moscone?"

"I looked it over." His expression was skeptical. I said, "I've been sick."

"You don't look well," he said. "You sure don't." He tossed his Visa on the counter, and his expression changed. He was studying me, but not for the state of my health. "That story really stirred up memories. Memories and questions. People still wonder what the truth is," he said. We finished the transaction and he put his hands on the two six-packs but did not pick them up. "You got any theories, Danny?"

I considered it, and then I told him, "I think they've got all the facts they're ever going to get." I pushed the credit card slip over to him, and as he signed I said, "Don't you think it's sad about the fish dying in Tellico Lake?"

I'm dreaming again. Thanks to the *retrospective* on Jill Moscone, the dreams are back like an avalanche. One keeps coming back. It's our last night together, but Jill says

we can be together forever. I have fortified myself with enough beer so I think it's possible. Leo says alcohol is the best anesthetic. Jill is as calm as the lake, showing me the shiny blue-black gun. She holds it up to the moonlight, turns it so it picks up a glint of moonbeam. My heart speeds up. I am feeling breathless. I am so sorry for everything, I say, but she tells me no, don't be sorry, we'll be together now, and she cradles the gun to her breast with both hands. Gently, like a baby. I am not expecting the pop. It's just a pop. Her eyes fix on mine for one last instant and then glaze over but do not close. I start to cry. I am hyperventilating. I know it's my turn and in a heartbeat we can be together. The gun has slipped between us. I start to pick it up. In my dream, that's where it goes haywire. In my dream, I do.

JOSEPHINE'S NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

My friend Josephine is spending some time at Clover Meadows. I'm trying to think it's a good thing, a dormant phase, like tulips in the bulb stage. I'm trying to imagine Josephine curling into grayish sleep for a season and then sprouting, vibrant and colorful, like the tulips the landscaper just planted around our pool.

Douglas, Josephine's husband, glosses it over as a much-needed rest. "She's been needing a change of scenery, change of pace," he says. "I don't have to tell you, Diane, she *really* needed a chance to clear out the cobwebs." Douglas shares a conspiratorial look with me as his voice slides to a low, sympathetic note. He knows how to talk to women. Douglas Wingo is a plastic surgeon, sculptor of voluptuous breasts and classic noses. "Sunshine, fresh air – and five gorgeous acres to boot. Not bad at all." He sounds like a slick promo for Club Med.

"How long will she have to stay?" I ask.

"Josephine is getting the best treatment possible," he says. "Angela Gianikis is a top notch psychiatrist." His eyebrows arch, black crescent moons. I wonder if he and Angela Gianikis have been playing doctor. Josephine has told me things. I could tell Douglas, Your wife is not crazy. Maybe she needs to clear out the cobwebs, but Josephine is not crazy.

"Women tend to trust a woman," Douglas says.

"Do you really think so? Why, Douglas, I hear your patients adore you," I say, "all those women that you make beautiful."

His laughter is deep, amused, with the right measure of modesty. Douglas Wingo is used to accepting compliments. He is tall and trim, a racquetball player and a jogger. His hair is thick, with flecks of gray at the temples. Douglas is from fine old Georgia stock. Josephine said he bleeds blue. "Douglas is a cliché," she said.

Charlie delivers Douglas's gin and tonic, and there's no more talk about Josephine. It's get-down-to-business.

Charlie and I were having a nice moment by the pool, earlier. They filled the pool today. They have reworked the whole pool area with azaleas and red and yellow tulips, tiers of red and white impatiens, periwinkle, rich, black mulch. We were watching an incredible sunset, blot of red sun, stains of purples and pinks and oranges. Meggie was at a birthday party, a circus extravaganza for a four-year-old boy she despises, little Grant Forester whose nose, according to Meggie, is always running green. I was discouraged from staying at the party with her. None of the other mothers were staying. They had plenty of help. Charlie and I wiggled our toes in the icy water for a while, a rare moment alone. Charlie dried my toes on the tail of his shirt.

He said, "Did I mention that I invited Douglas for a drink?"

He hadn't. "Why?" I ask.

"He wants to see a performa on the lakefront development."

"I don't trust him," I said. "Look what he did to Josephine."

"Get real, Diane. I could use an investor like Douglas."

Charlie and Douglas lean over a page of numbers in something that looks like a report. I bring out cheese twists and grapes. Charlie asks me to flip on the lights. Soft light washes across the pool and patio, across the new flowers and plants and dark mulch. I freshen drinks. I do what I can. Charlie was a pitcher in the majors and I lived baseball with him, talked it, knew all about it, but what the hell is a performa?

A summer evening, two years ago, we were at the Plantation Club, in the Wisteria Room. It takes clout to get your party seated in the Wisteria Room. Dark polished wood, brocade walls, crystal chandelier bouncing light off the silver. We were guests of the Chathams, Frank with the

clout and Rosalie with her tight facelift and high bejeweled bust that may have benefited from a plastic surgeon's work, too. Frank built a computer chip company from scratch but he seemed proudest to tell that he was in the stands when Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth's record for home runs. Frank apparently considered Charlie a celebrity. If you get your picture on baseball cards, I suppose you qualify as a celebrity. Frank invited Charlie to play golf most Saturdays. He was pulling strings to get us into the club. Charlie was hell-bent on joining the Plantation Club.

The Wingos and the Billingshams completed our table. Drew Billingham was on the Board, the Board having sole power over membership. Douglas and Josephine were there as window dressing – charming Douglas, much in demand as a dinner guest, with Josephine, his stunning wife. Dark red hair falling against a pink silk suit. Mischief in her emerald green cat-eyes. Josephine was as festive as a peacock next to Drew and Lucy Billingham, in funereal black, with beakish noses and darting eyes that were astonishingly alike.

“Pell?” Rosalie Chatham squeezed our name through her thin, tight lips. “That's not a Georgia family, is it?”

“Charlie's folks are from Florida,” I told her. Charlie and I both came from what is known in the South as poor-white, so I didn't elaborate for Rosalie.

“Frank took me to Miami Beach in eighty-four, August, of all months, the one and only time I had the pleasure of visiting Florida, thank you,” she said, the last word on Florida.

Noiseless waiters threaded among each other, filling water goblets, whisking out the appetizer. The Oysters Rockefeller was fair but hardly deserving of Charlie's overdone praise. Don't lay it on so thick, Charlie, I protested in silence, wishing I could catch his eye, prompt him somehow. Charlie Pell, this is foolish, I wanted to say, this craving to join the Plantation Club. We've had oysters at Brennon's and escargot at Windows on the World. Why, I couldn't name

the fine restaurants where we've paid for our own meals. We weren't wasteful but we didn't slouch, either. You used to make six figures, Charlie. Don't grovel now.

Silver clinked against china. Voices droned. Rosalie had given up on me and was enthralled with Douglas, who studied her neckline and bustline with detached professional curiosity. Lucy Billingham, with her spooly perm, bit her thumbnail, watching Douglas like a lustful old maid. Poor Lucy seemed to have no breasts at all under her high-necked black dress.

Josephine called across the table in a loud stage whisper, "Diane! Let's have a chat in the ladies' room!"

A hush. A freeze.

I waited for Josephine to scoot her chair back and head for the ladies' room but she didn't, maybe because Frank suddenly declared, "The wine!" The wine steward presented the Dom Perignon, and the uncorking gave an excuse for everybody to sigh and resume their polite murmurings as if nothing had happened.

Josephine's naughty eyes latched on me, spoke to me, struck a chord of pure harmony. I knew that Josephine might do anything and that everyone knew it, too, that this happened all the time. No question but that I would meet her in the ladies' room whenever she wanted.

Now Frank was making a blubbery toast. Charlie had alerted me before the dinner party that Frank started drinking when he came off the eighteenth hole. He stood behind his chair and tipped forward at a precarious angle, grasped the decorative chair post, and raised his glass high. "To a fine athlete and a smart, up-and-coming entrepreneur, Charlie Pell, and his lovely wife, Diane, our new friends, our dear young friends, we welcome you to our city and to our table, and we take you into our hearts, Charlie and Diane."

We sipped our champagne and at the end of the soup course, Josephine excused herself. I followed. Josephine was tall and stately. I felt the surge of her power as she locked her arm in mine and swept me through the spacious halls of the Plantation Club.

“You know why they hate you,” she said. She caught my surprise and laughed. “You didn't know they hate you?”

“I didn't think of it like that.”

“Well, they do. You know why?”

“No.”

“Because you're beautiful and young.”

“Oh, I don't know - ”

“I know,” she said.

“Do they hate you, too?”

“What do you think?” Josephine spread her fuscia-tipped fingers across her white throat.

“I'm not beautiful like you, but they hate me.”

“But you *are* beautiful, Josephine.”

“Used to be. Now it's all leftover. I used to be young. But you know, I was so naïve then. I'm better now. Smarter. What do you think of the Billingshams, the matched pair of crows?”

Josephine sat at the gilded mirrors in the ladies' lounge and emptied her evening bag. She made a straight line on the vanity with comb, eye shadow, mascara, pressed powder, blush, lipstick, nail polish. She picked up her comb.

“Douglas and Drew are old money,” she said. “Frank Chatham is new money. Got that? Old money scorns the *nouveau riche* - that's always how it goes - but Frank has piles and piles of

money so he's not a good one to snub. Pay attention, Diane. May I comb your hair? Do you have a comb? You're a natural blonde, aren't you? I can tell.”

She combed my hair, and then she gave me her comb. I ran the comb through the dark red hair, thick, smelling like strawberries. We have reverted to high school, I thought, and then it didn't seem strange at all.

“Frank will get you into the club,” said Josephine, “but you have to play their games or you don't count. I can tell you things. I've been here for twenty years. I was modeling in New York when Douglas married me. His family had a fit, but sweet Douglas did it anyway. He was *very* sweet in those days. Oh, I know how they can chew you up and spit you out. It was all so exciting, Douglas defying the powerful Wingos, risking his inheritance for love. Lean over, I'll touch up your mascara.”

We dabbed mascara on each other's lashes, brushed each other's cheekbones with blush, and Josephine polished my nails with her color.

“Your precocious daughter is creating quite a stir at the Montessori School,” Josephine said. “No one ever out-performed the Forester lambkin, young Grant, till your Meggie enrolled. Todd Forester is with a big law firm that represents Frank's company. Charlie wouldn't want to piss him off.”

“No one has told me anything,” I said.

“I hear things,” she said. “The Pells have been a hot topic lately. I know Charlie had to quit baseball because of his shoulder. I don't know your net worth yet, but eventually that will come out, too. I hope you have tons of money, Diane, because you can't keep up if you don't.”

We missed an entire course. The Dover sole was being served. Rosalie scowled at my nails as I edged in beside her. “We had a lovely salad,” she said.

There followed a lovely dessert and more lovely wine but in my mind the evening from there on was a vast stretch of tedium. Until, at long last, our party broke up, and Josephine pulled me aside.

“Come to see me,” she whispered. “I’m easy to find. My house is the biggest in Vista Park.” Vista Park was where we all lived - everybody who is anybody.

“I will,” I said. A thrill coursed through me, like an electric current. My first invitation to anyone’s house in Atlanta. And not just *anyone*’s house. Josephine’s.

“It’s so huge, it’s obscene,” she went on. “I planned to fill it with children. I planned to raise a big bustling family. We were well off, why not? So we had a daughter, then Douglas said *No more!* Snip, snip! It doesn’t matter. We sent Emily off to boarding school anyway.” She shook her head. “What kind of parents are we? We had one child and we sent her away.”

Charlie kept inventing diversions for me. I took up tennis in the spring. Why not? Now we belonged to the Plantation Club with its fourteen clay courts. We entertained movers and shakers and anybody with a buck to invest. Charlie got it in his mind that the house needed a makeover and hired a dippy decorator named Cherry to bog me down with swatches of cloth and paint chips.

“Enjoy it!” Charlie said, spreading his arms wide, looking thoroughly bewildered. I still couldn’t get used to Charlie in double-breasted thousand-dollar suits. “Enjoy not having to type memos all day,” he said, a reminder of the secretarial work I did before Meggie was born. Charlie had earned big money in the majors, but all the time he was squirreling most of it away for the day he couldn’t play ball. He had watched too many professional athletes squander what could have set them up for life. If we splurged on anything, it was travel. Charlie loved to go to new places. In the off-season we booked cheap flights anywhere we could get them for long

weekends. New Orleans for one nineteen. San Francisco for one fifty-nine. To celebrate our fifth anniversary we indulged ourselves for a week in Maui – but day-to-day we lived a simple life during those glorious baseball years. We had a ranch-style house in the suburbs, with neighbors who borrowed hedge clippers and grilled out with us on Saturday nights. My salary mattered because Charlie’s went toward investments. I worked for an insurance company. I didn’t mind. Those days – before Meggie was born, before Charlie left the majors – are another life, without glitz, but shining.

“This is harder than I expected, Charlie,” I said. “I can’t get the hang of it.”

“What is? What do you have to do that’s hard?”

“I was never an athlete. I’m not a very good tennis player.”

“So what? Are the other wives any good? It’s *social*, Diane. What’s so hard about it, for Christ’s sake?”

“You really don’t know, do you?”

Charlie kicked the door as he left. Made a big mark for Florentina to clean.

Josephine would say, “I need to spend money today. I have a passion to spend Douglas’s money.”

Now this was a diversion: Watching Josephine on a shopping spree at the Goodwill Thrift Store. We carried in sacks of nearly-new clothes that Josephine had ripped from her closet. Then she went through the Goodwill’s racks and picked out an armload of clothes for herself.

“You know this is worth more than twenty-five dollars,” she scolded the skinny clerk who was ringing up a black sheath and beaming over her big sale, coming to a hundred ninety-five dollars.

Josephine gave her four hundred-dollar bills. It was still a bargain, Josephine said. These were designer originals. They had been some of her favorites before she'd brought them to the Goodwill last season.

"Everything is a game," she said. "Just play."

"Josephine will ruin you with everybody else," Charlie said, meaning she would ruin *him*.

"Josephine is alive," I told him. "That's why they all hate her. I finally figured it out. They hate her because they're all dead wood but Josephine is alive."

"Dammit, Diane, you're sounding just like her."

"Husbands love it when you spend their money," Josephine said. "It makes them think you're happy."

A florist had just delivered an exotic arrangement of calla lilies for Josephine's marble entry hall.

"I used to think I'd like to teach handicapped children," I said. "I mentioned to Charlie that I wouldn't mind going back to college. I'd get my degree in special education."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't get it. He thinks I have everything I need. Maybe I do. Maybe I should appreciate having a husband who makes a lot of money and wants me to have all the amenities."

"Amenities." Josephine mused. "What a lovely word."

"Why does it feel so awful?" I asked her.

But she didn't answer. She turned the vase slightly and stepped back. "What did Charlie say?"

"He said I'd been spending too much time with you."

She laughed her silvery laugh. “I used to think I would sew all my children's clothes. I had a flair for designing clothes. Everyone said so.” She stood back and admired the arrangement. “Perfect!”

“Do you think I'll ever do anything that amounts to anything, the rest of my life?” I said.

“Probably not,” she said. “I haven't.”

I go to see Josephine at Clover Meadows. Clover Meadows is ten acres of prime real estate in the heart of the city. Behind a high wrought-iron fence, covered in ivy, and a gate with elaborate security, there is a winding road. There is nothing posted that says. Nothing to hint that this is what it comes to with women like Josephine. No sign of any kind. It could be a college, an estate, a nunnery.

The grounds are well-manicured, lush, green grass, laced in red clover. Magnolia trees as huge as oaks. Past a turn, the buildings come into view, gleaming white, sprawled on a rise, built around a replica of an antebellum house. “Sometimes,” I've said to Charlie, “don't you just get sick of all this plantation crap?” All these residential clusters he's developed, all built around the big plantation-house. It all seems trite to me. Charlie is not sick of it yet. He's making a fortune.

They take me to Josephine. Visitors have to call in advance, so they are expecting me. A brisk woman from the office escorts me to the patio and delivers me to a giant black man. “I'm Vince. I'm her N.A.,” he says. I read *Nurse Assistant* on his pin. He says, “Josephine is a good girl.”

He leads me to her. Oh, Josephine, I think, and then I get a closer look and I think, What a good time she's having! She is sunning at the edge of the patio, stretched in a lounge chair,

wearing sandals and khaki shorts and a pink knit shirt with a boat-neck. She has a drink in her hand.

“Somebody to see you, princess,” Vince says.

Josephine rouses slowly, sloshes her drink, which appears to be orange juice. I suspect she's on medication. She's low-key but not down. Her upper lip is beaded with sweat. Vince moves her lounge chair over to a shady spot and brings one for me. Oh, they are so nice here.

“I played tennis three times this week,” I tell her. “Singles twice, doubles once.”

“I played shuffleboard and ping-pong,” she says.

“This is not bad, Josephine. Is it?”

“Oh, no. We're on an exercise program, we're on macrobiotics, we have the sun and the view and the serenity. And it's all women. Do you know how many husbands are paying out the ass to keep us here? Now isn't that love, Diane?”

Something shifts in Josephine's manner. Something sudden, the bottom falling out of a good mood. I wonder if I should go, but she says, “We can walk on the grounds. It's all right as long as we stay within the boundaries.”

She is very quiet as we stroll across the velvety lawn. She stoops and plucks a clover bloom. “Josephine,” I whisper, “what did Douglas do to you?”

“Do to me? Douglas? Why, Douglas doesn't do anything to me.” She giggles, girl-like.

“I wouldn't mind. I wouldn't mind if he just did *something*. Slapped me around or stroked me like a kitten, I wouldn't care. Anything.”

I have an image of Douglas and Josephine dancing. New Year's Eve, our first year at the club. I watch them glide and sway, partners whose movements are so rehearsed, so many times performed, they are flawless. A splendid, handsome couple. Everybody watches.

I was mesmerized by their dance, that New Year's Eve. Until Lucy Billingham leaned toward Rosalie Chatham and remarked with a smirk, "Have you ever seen anyone look as bored as Douglas?"

Rosalie's reply was lightning-quick. "Yes. Josephine."

It was true. I could see it then, the way they looked past each other's eyes to something else, or to nothing. And I thought, Oh I hope Charlie and I never come to that. And now I don't know. It's been so long since we danced a slow, dreamy dance, I just don't know.

"Let's go back now," I tell Josephine. I think Douglas may be right. She needs her rest, needs to clear out the cobwebs.

"It's the labels that get on my nerves," she says.

"What labels?"

She touches the back of her neck, at the neckline of her knit top. "They've cut them all out, see. I'm not the only one who can't stand labels. They're stiff and scratchy and they annoy the hell out of you." She loops her arm through mine, reminding me of that first night at the Plantation Club, as she steered me to the ladies' room. But the shine has gone from her eyes.

"One day I cut out the labels from all my clothes," she says, "and Douglas said I needed a rest. That's all it was. When I can stand the labels again, I'll go home."

Charlie decides the maid should come every day. We're not all that messy. I keep saying, "I don't want her every day. It's bad enough twice a week when I have to get out of her way. That maid is a witch. She yells, 'Don't step on the wet floor!' God, whose house is it, anyway?"

I would get rid of Florentina, but Rosalie Chatham recommended her so we're stuck.

"Please, Charlie, We don't need her every day," I say.

But it's like saying, Charlie, I don't need a Mercedes SUV. I like my Volvo station wagon. It was six years old but only had sixty-three thousand miles on it. My rump was etched in the driver's seat. "You'll love the SUV," Charlie said, meaning I'd better love it. Life in Vista Park dictates certain behaviors, and it is tiring to keep resisting. *Responsibilities*, Charlie is saying these days. He used to talk about the benefits and now it's the responsibilities.

Summer is so heavy. Josephine stays at Clover Meadows. Her clothes start to sag, her skin, too. Seeing her makes me want to cry, beautiful Josephine, wasting away.

She is on new medication, I can tell. Her voice is manic. I know things about Clover Meadows now. I visit when they will let me. They aren't big on visitors. I take in everything when I am here. It is like a resort for rich women, but you don't leave. Somehow they see to that.

"What kind of pills are they giving you?" I ask.

"Red ones, yellow, white. Who knows?"

"What are they for?"

Josephine tosses her head and laughs. "What are pills *ever* for? They make us sleep, make us happy, they make us behave, they take away the pain."

Josephine sees Vince tap his watch and she clings to my arm. "Will you bring something to me?" she whispers.

She waits till Vince turns away. She blinks fast.

"Bring me some scissors to trim my hair. You'll have to sneak them in."

"I don't think I can."

"You can. They don't strip search you. Bring manicure scissors. They'll work. I'll make them work." She tells me how easy it will be. I'll bring manicure scissors in my pocket, and

while we stroll along the grounds, I'll slip them to her. Manicure scissors are tiny enough to lose anywhere, once she's finished.

“You know I don't like to look shabby, Diane.”

The way she puts it, it sounds reasonable. It sounds perfectly sane.

I call Clover Meadows and they tell me Josephine can't have visitors. I scream at them.

Then I apologize. “I'm so worried about her,” I explain.

All I can get is that Josephine is not sick or hurt and that she has lost visiting privileges for a while.

I can't go to Douglas, either, because he has flown to New York for a long weekend.

“I'll bet you anything he's with Dr. Gianikis,” I tell Charlie. “Don't you know he's with somebody!”

“Now you're imagining things, Diane.”

“I *know* things.”

Charlie holds his palm out to me, flat. Stop. I don't want to hear. Go away. He says, “Not my business. Douglas has invested a hundred grand with me. That's all I care about.”

It's the truth. That's all he cares about.

Another week, and they finally say I can visit. It's been twenty days.

Josephine is wearing a black Cleopatra wig when she comes to meet me in the rec room.

Today it is raining. I never came to Clover Meadows in the rain before. The rec room smells like the community center in the projects where Charlie used to volunteer when he was a nobody, just playing ball and having fun with it, and he was the sweetest man in the world.

“I cut my hair,” she says. “All this fuss because I cut my hair. And they make me wear this thing for punishment.” She lifts off the wig.

My hands fly to my face. I hear myself moaning.

Josephine shushes me. “They’ll make you leave. Get hold of yourself, Diane.”

Her hair is stubble, sheared away like one of those awful victims of concentration camps. She has cut all her splendid hair off. I can’t bear to look at her. “Oh, Josephine, I’m so sorry.” Over and over I stammer, “So sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “I’m not sorry. You did what I asked you to do. You’re a true friend.”

I can’t do anything but blink, blink.

She smiles a cunning smile. “Douglas will notice me now, don’t you think? This will surely get his attention.”

September mornings are chilly and Charlie is wanting to heat the pool so we can swim on through cool weather but it’s madness. We didn’t swim in the summer, so what’s to make us think we’ll swim in the fall?

I am up early watching my impatiens fade. I am up early every morning, sometimes before the sun. My early rising makes it hard to deal with Meggie later when I have a dip of pure exhaustion. Night is when my mind churns. Sometimes the label in my nightshirt scratches like sandpaper, and I think of Josephine, and I miss her till I can’t bear it.

Charlie and Douglas come to the pool and start talking heating systems. They are out early this Saturday morning. They have a nine o’clock tee time. Douglas is wanting in on another one of Charlie’s developments, I understand, because the lakefront is a boom. Charlie has been lucky. He’s flying high.

I ask about Josephine.

Douglas turns to me, turns his full attention to me. He stuffs his hands in his pockets, knitting his brow. "I don't know what to tell you. I really don't. She was supposed to come home last week. Things were looking good. I went after her, and she wouldn't leave. She just wouldn't. Nothing short of dragging her would make her leave. Angela - Dr. Gianikis - says there's no way to know how long it will be."

He says this as if it breaks his heart. So convincing, so incredibly sincere. I despise Douglas, but I believe him. I believe this happened and I believe that Josephine will not be home soon.

Charlie asks me to make coffee, or I think he asks me, or maybe I do it because that is what I do, what I have always done. I fill the Mr. Coffee and think of Clover Meadows, of dew-sparkled mornings at Clover Meadows. Josephine's nervous breakdown is not so bad, with Vince dispensing orange juice, with shuffleboard and the vast stretch of green lawn, and pills to keep you from worrying or being sad. Josephine is getting a long nice rest, Josephine with no hair to fret over and no labels in her clothing, no stiff, worrisome labels.

UNDER THE DOG STAR

The Rottweillers were yipping and whining when we sat down to eat. Daddy had been out with the wrecker till nine, and we'd waited supper for him.

I was fifteen in 1985. August's heat was extreme that year, with blistering days and nights that hardly cooled down at all. The windows were open all over the house, but the air was still and sultry in our little kitchen, around the supper table.

"It's dog days," Daddy said, swinging his thumb toward the racket outside.

"What's dog days?" asked April Dawn. Eight years old, April Dawn looked like her name sounded. Fair-skinned, sunny-haired, and rosy-cheeked, with wide blue eyes and a mouth like a little valentine.

"It's this hell-hot time in August when dogs go mad," said Patsy, April Dawn's mother but not mine. My mother was bringing home ice cream for my second birthday when her car collided with a trailer truck and tumbled off Indian Bluff. Daddy, crushed with grief I believed, let his mother have me until I was seven years old. That was when he married Patsy and April Dawn was born, and he brought me back to live with them. I never thought of Patsy in any way but Daddy's wife or April Dawn's mother.

"It's bad luck to go swimming during dog days," Patsy said.

I couldn't keep quiet any longer. Patsy called it putting in my two cents – "Mary's just *got* to put in her two cents, don't she?" – but sometimes I couldn't help myself.

"Dog days are named for Sirius, the Dog Star," I said. "In August, the Dog Star rises and sets with the sun."

Patsy clanged her fork against her plate. "Do tell!"

“Do dogs really go mad?” April Dawn asked me, paying no attention to her mother.

“I’ve seen it many a time!” Patsy cut her blue-lidded eyes at me in a warning, keeping them fixed on me. “How about you, Sonny?”

It didn’t bother Daddy, being in the middle like that. He shoved the last piece of cornbread into his mouth and nodded.

“Dogs are more likely to get sick when it’s so hot,” I said, “and people are more likely to get infections. That’s why they say don’t swim during dog days if you have a cut or a sore.”

“Oh, Mary, you are *so-o-o-o* smart!” said Patsy, popping up and whisking away our plates. Then Daddy pinched her on her round behind and she gave a playful little shriek and slapped at him, and they started laughing. No one said any more about dog days that night.

When it was all over, that was how I framed it in my mind: The night Tom Luck broke out of the state penitentiary was the first night the dogs yelped and rambled in their pen and howled at the hazy moon.

The next morning Sheriff Hollie came to our house.

I was helping Patsy clean up in the kitchen when we heard an engine cut off. We could see straight through the living room to the sheriff’s car. We could see how he took his time getting to the front porch, looking this way and that, adjusting his sunglasses. Patsy threw down her dishrag and groaned, “What the hell does *he* want?” Sheriff Boyd Hollie was a good-looking man in his khaki uniform, tall and lean with a military

manner. He and Patsy had dated for a time before she and Daddy married, but it was no secret that she despised him for putting her brother behind bars. Her shoes made rapid, angry clicks across the linoleum. She met him at the screen door, her fists propped on her hipbones. I was anxious to hear but hung back at a safe distance.

The sheriff had been to our house once before when he arrested Tom Luck. His deputies had searched the house. Not until later did we find out they were looking for a long-bladed knife, the mysterious weapon that never showed up. Seeing the sheriff at our door stirred up old fears in me, but Patsy only sounded annoyed. “What do you want?” she asked.

“Everything all right here, Patsy?” the sheriff said, taking off his shades.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

He looked around her, peering into the living room. “Do you mind if I come in?”

“I asked you what is this all about, Boyd.”

“I’d like to come inside, please.”

Finally Patsy gave in. “Whatever you’ve got to say, make it quick.” She stepped to the side. The sheriff let himself in.

He removed his hat and surveyed the room. His eyes fixed on mine for a moment and then he turned back to study Patsy. All the time she was studying him, too. “Now will you please tell me what’s going on?” she said.

“When have you heard from your brother?” he asked.

“Tom? I guess it’s been a while. Why?” Her hands flew to her face. “Oh, Lord! Has something happened to Tom?”

“He escaped,” the sheriff said.

A current ripped through me like electricity. Tom Luck was supposed to be locked up for fifteen years. He wasn't even supposed to come up for parole until I was out of high school.

Patsy let out a little moan. "When?" she asked in a small voice, not like Patsy at all.

"Last night. I figured you'd heard by now."

Patsy shook her head. Her fingertips still touched her cheeks. The sheriff waited a minute. "You're sure your brother hasn't contacted you?" he said, when Patsy didn't speak. "We can check your phone calls, you know."

She folded her arms. "Check the goddamn phones all you want to." She had her voice back and her temper, too.

The sheriff kept a level voice, a rigid mouth. He stood with his legs slightly apart, his hat in his hands, very official. "Your mama still live up around Bristol?"

"You leave her out of it. She's not in good health." Patsy's voice notched up. "Don't you think she's suffered enough, her only son locked up like an animal?"

"Maybe Tom has contacted her. He'll need money if he stays on the run."

"Dammit, Boyd! She don't have money! Besides, if she'd heard about Tom, don't you know she'd be calling me? And I've not had a call, so there." All at once she flung her arm out straight, pointing her finger at me. I didn't know she had seen me eavesdropping. Her face pinched up. "Ask Mary if you don't believe me. She'd tell!"

Sheriff Hollie gave me a swift glance. I shook my head. I wasn't sure what the question was but I must have satisfied him. His eyes turned to Patsy again. He gave her a long, measuring look and drew his mouth into a line, as if he had come to a conclusion.

He must have been convinced that Patsy was telling the truth. "Tom killed a man," he said. "A real dumb move. Struggled with a guard and shot him. Took his gun. Nobody's going to be too careful to bring Tom back on his two feet."

I had to let that sink in, too - *Tom Luck killed a man*. Patsy whined, "Oh, Tom," and I wondered if she was beginning to give up on him at last. "Tom wouldn't hurt anybody unless he had to," she said.

"I'm not here to argue his morals," said the sheriff. "I just want you and Sonny to do the right thing, is all. If you hear from him, you tell him the best chance he has of staying alive is to come in on his own. If he don't, well, don't you be dumb, too."

"You've always had it in for him," she said.

"I did my job and I'm not ashamed."

"You *ought to* be ashamed! You didn't give that boy a chance. Nobody did."

Boy? Tom Luck was no boy, I thought. He was nearly as old as Patsy, and Patsy was nearly as old as Daddy.

"He molested a little girl, Patsy, a little twelve-year-old girl!" the sheriff said.

"If you take the word of a kid!"

I slipped back into the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe. What would Betsy McCaleb think about Tom Luck's escape? She was sixteen now. The penitentiary was only a hundred miles away. She'd surely be afraid Tom Luck was headed her way, to pay her back. What would her mama think, Mrs. McCaleb who was so overwrought at the trial? Mr. McCaleb was a big deer hunter. Would he go hunting for Tom Luck? The McCalebs were supposed to be good Christians, but Betsy's daddy would surely shoot Tom Luck on the spot if he got the chance.

“What’s Mama talking about?” came April Dawn’s voice. She was barefooted, still in her pajamas, her hair tousled from sleep.

I shushed her, drawing her into the kitchen. “Better stay out of your mama’s way,” I said, pointing her toward the table. “You want Lucky Charms or Cheerios?”

None of us got in Patsy’s way when she was mad, not if we could help it.

April Dawn didn’t want cereal. She wanted a grape popsicle, so that’s what I gave her. Patsy and the sheriff continued to argue, his voice edgy, hers hostile. Patsy in particular was hard to tune out. I watched April Dawn’s lips turn purple. I took pleasure in seeing how simple treats and surprises delighted her. I spoiled her, but I thought that was how it should be with little girls. April Dawn was the only person in the world that I was sure I loved. Maybe I loved Daddy, but it wasn’t the same. I knew if Daddy left me or sent me away, I’d get along all right. But I was sure that if anything separated me from my little sister, my heart would crack into a million pieces. This possibility frightened me worse than any harm that could come to me.

Nanny, my grandmother, had not believed in frivolous things. She hadn’t believed in pampering. But I was content living with her. She would say things to build me up: “Your mama gave you a good solid name like Mary because she knew you’d be a good solid person.”

Smart-mouthed Mr. Peck, Nanny’s old man, said, “Maybe your mama didn’t have much imagination,” but Nanny winked at me, letting me know he was harmless.

Mr. Peck had another wisecrack, this one about Daddy’s marriage to Patsy: “Decent of him, to give the kid a name.” I didn’t get it at the time. April Dawn was born

a few weeks after the city-hall wedding. I couldn't imagine living with Daddy and Patsy without April Dawn.

Her grape popsicle distracted her for a minute, but Patsy's voice grew louder, drawing our attention back to the living room. "What's that man doing here?" April Dawn asked.

"That's Sheriff Hollie," I said. "He's talking to Patsy about her brother that went to the penitentiary." That was all I could bring myself to tell her about Tom Luck.

"Why's he fussing at Mama?"

"I think it's Patsy that's fussing," I said.

As I wiped her purple mouth with a wet paper towel, I told her, "Don't be such a worry-wart. Everything's all right." I wanted to believe it myself, but in my heart I knew better. Mention Tom Luck, and it was trouble.

The dogs were worse the second night.

I never liked the Rottweillers. Daddy got the first dog for protection because we lived on a country road without close neighbors, but now we had three. We were all restless with Tom Luck on the loose, nerves on edge. Patsy kept fretting that Tom Luck would get himself killed, and Daddy kept fretting that Tom Luck would show up at our house, expecting us to hide him.

"I'll not cover his ass!" Daddy said. "What a fool thing to do, kill a guard. Sombitch didn't have but four years till he'd be up for parole. Four years is not such a long time."

"You don't know *nothin'* about what he's gone through!" Patsy said.

“If he was any kind of man, he’d take his medicine.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve never been locked up like that.”

“I know what it’s like to serve your time like a man.”

Daddy didn’t say much about Viet Nam, but sometimes, out of the blue, he would make a remark, and I knew he was thinking about his time there. I had the impression that the things he had done or seen were always with him, just below the surface. He wasn’t a violent man, but there were streaks in him that frightened me. He took spells of liking the Rottweillers mean. Sometimes he encouraged them to be vicious by keeping them hungry for a couple of days, then dumping a bucket of scraps into the pen like he was feeding hogs. I had seen the dogs try to tear each other apart over a piece of fat meat, and Daddy beaming with satisfaction, taking it all in.

Once I asked him, “Why can’t we have hunting dogs?” He took me hunting on occasion, only me. It pleased him when he taught me to shoot, and it pleased me to tramp in the woods alongside him, but I would not look at any creature I killed.

“It’s a better hunt when you use your own senses,” Daddy said, with narrowed, brooding eyes, and for an awful moment I could see him creeping through the jungles of Viet Nam, hunting down humans.

Yet most of the time Daddy was easygoing, letting Patsy boss all of us, putting in his hours at Batterman’s Service Station without grumbling, just trying not to make waves, it seemed to me. Arguing with Patsy about Tom Luck was a way to let off steam. If Tom Luck showed up on our doorstep, I expected Daddy to do whatever came easiest at the moment, nothing more.

I took April Dawn out on the porch, away from our parents' bickering. The night was lit by a big orange moon and a billion shimmering stars. The dogs were howling. Crying for the moon, Nanny used to call it when I was gripped by a longing for something I could not name.

Daddy used to come to Nanny's house on summer nights and linger on the porch, drinking beer with Mr. Peck. When he was ready to go, he'd tell me to cup my hands and he'd fill them with coins. But he would not look me in the eye.

"You know he wouldn't have the foggiest notion how to take care of a girl!" Nanny told me once as I watched his pickup shrink into a speck and finally vanish altogether.

My last day at her house, Nanny packed my things in a cardboard suitcase of hers that she said she'd never need. She was happy that Daddy wanted me. All the time she was packing, she was building up the normal family life I'd have with Daddy, Patsy, and the baby. I hadn't been with them six months when Nanny died. She had failed to tell me about the cancer. Mr. Peck went to live somewhere up north. He left directly from the cemetery. The day Nanny was buried may have been the only time in my life that I cried. I cried long into the night, but after that, there were no tears left for anything or anybody.

"Can you find the Dog Star?" April Dawn asked.

"No." I reminded her, "It's dog days. Sirius rises and sets with the sun. But come winter it will be the brightest star in the sky, at the nose of the Great Dog constellation, Canis Major." April Dawn's tilted face shined with fascination.

Once, Tom Luck had stretched out in the grass and pointed to the summer sky. Daddy and Patsy had gone out to celebrate their anniversary. April Dawn was asleep in

her baby bed. “Come look at that bright star. It’s the Dog Star,” Tom Luck said. But he was mistaken, or he lied.

“Let’s sleep out here where it’s cool,” April Dawn said. It was not cool on the porch. It was the magic of the glittering sky that captured her imagination.

“The dogs are making too much noise,” I told her. So we went on to bed, and after a while I could hear Daddy and Patsy making up. But the dogs kept howling their mournful tune.

When we woke up, Patsy was flitting around, stuffing underthings in a suitcase. “I’ve got to go see about your Mee-Maw,” she told April Dawn. “Damned if she didn’t have some kind of attack when she heard about Tom. They called from the hospital in Bristol.”

Patsy didn’t mention taking April Dawn. Maybe she couldn’t have a child with her at the hospital, but she showed no sadness at having to leave her little girl. She snagged her pants on the screen door, hurrying out with her suitcase, and had to go back and change. In the meantime, Daddy called home from the service station. He told me he’d bring home some ham at noon and we could have it for supper. Patsy got on the phone and scolded Daddy about the hole in the screen that he’d been supposed to fix for a long time.

“I’ve got a six-hour road trip ahead of me and I’m late getting started,” she said on her way out. “Don’t y’all make a mess now.” She gave April Dawn a brush of a kiss, and she was gone.

April Dawn hung against the screen door, staring into the distance with watery-bright eyes, even after the Dodge Dart had disappeared. She wiped her nose on her arm, a sad little figure against the sunlight. She seemed so fragile and defenseless. Patsy might have mentioned that we should keep the doors locked, which seemed to me a normal precaution with a convict on the loose, but Patsy wouldn't be thinking of Tom Luck as a convict. She always had a blind spot where her brother was concerned. I was not much older than April Dawn when he came to live with us the first time. He lived with us off and on for two years after that, until he got in trouble over Betsy McCaleb. "You do what Tom says," Patsy would tell me whenever she and Daddy went out. Her reply to my protests was always the same: "There you go, trying to make trouble!"

"Don't cry, April Dawn. I'll take good care of you," I said, and I meant it. I swore that I would do a lot better than Patsy.

The best thing Patsy ever did for me was take me to Tom Luck's trial.

All I knew of Betsy McCaleb was from a distance. The very idea that a plain, shy girl in junior high had managed to get Tom Luck arrested for rape was amazing. People were saying he'd threatened her with a knife, another fact that fascinated me. Daddy made a feeble protest that the trial was no fit place for me, but Patsy dismissed his argument with no more effort than swatting a gnat. She was determined for us to "show family support." She kept on at Daddy until he took off work and attended the trial, too. He grumbled, as he often did, but grumbling was as far as it went. School had not started back, but I was the only child in the jammed courtroom, reeking of Avon perfume and the smell of working men. I got plenty of stares. So did Patsy and Daddy. What

parents in their right minds would bring an eleven-year-old girl to hear the X-rated testimonies of Tom Luck's accusers? Betsy herself was not present on that first day. I didn't care. No one could have imagined how much I wanted to be in that courtroom.

Sheriff Hollie was the first witness. His testimony centered on the evidence that his investigation had produced: Tom Luck's fingerprints found inside the McCaleb house, on the door jamb of the bathroom, and a button that matched the buttons on one of Tom Luck's work shirts. "Is there a button missing on the sleeve of this shirt?" asked the well-dressed prosecutor. The sheriff seemed proud to say yes. The prosecutor then passed the evidence to the jurors, the shirt and a plastic bag containing the button. Several jurors nodded, exchanged glances.

"And where was this button found?" the prosecutor asked, after the long demonstration.

"In Betsy McCaleb's bedroom," said the sheriff. A hush rippled through the courtroom.

Tom Luck's lawyer had a bulldogish face and his voice was a low growl as he cross-examined. "Do you know whether Mr. Luck came into the McCaleb house to use the bathroom?" The sheriff frowned. He had to say he didn't know. "Were Mr. Luck's fingerprints found anywhere else in the house?" the lawyer asked. "You did not find Mr. Luck's fingerprints in Betsy McCaleb's room? Is that correct?" The button he played down also, by getting the sheriff to admit that Tom Luck's tan work shirt was similar to the sort most men in the community wore. "Have you ever seen Betsy McCaleb's father wearing a tan work shirt?" he asked. Everybody that had ever seen Mr. McCaleb on his mail route knew the answer. "Sheriff, would you please look around this courtroom and

tell me if you see any other shirts that resemble the one in evidence,” he said. Everybody looked around, including the jurors. Tom Luck’s lawyer smiled. “Never mind. I withdraw the question.” The sheriff darted an uneasy glance at the prosecutor as he stepped down from the witness box.

Patsy poked Daddy’s ribs. “I think she *planted* the damn button.”

The sheriff was followed by Dr. Tyler, who had examined Betsy. The son of the old doctor who had delivered me and most of the others in the courtroom, Dr. Tyler did not have the kind, slow voice of his father. His medical language was somehow more startling than the vulgar words rough boys used. How awful for a girl to have these things said about her, I thought, even if they were true, even if the doctor meant well. Tom Luck’s lawyer was as hard on Dr. Tyler as he’d been on Sheriff Hollie. “Can you say who the person was who had sexual intercourse with Betsy McCaleb?” he asked.

The doctor frowned. “I didn’t examine her until some time after the incident, or incidents.”

The lawyer repeated the question. Dr. Tyler sounded irritated. “It was much too late -”

“Doctor, *please*. You know the answer to the question.”

Dr. Tyler hesitated. “No,” he said, in a quieter voice. “I can’t say who it was.”

Long, tedious hours passed. A window air-conditioner whirred without much effect. The witnesses, lawyers, jury, and the judge in his thick robe wiped their faces with limp handkerchiefs. The last witness of the day was Mrs. McCaleb, who broke down twice during her testimony. I couldn’t help thinking how lucky Betsy McCaleb was to have a mother who would go to court for her and take the stand and weep in front

of everybody. As Tom Luck's lawyer spoke to her, his voice turned quiet, even sympathetic. "Mrs. McCaleb, I just have a few questions for you." He asked about her work at the shoe factory. She seemed to relax a little. He asked if she ever worried about leaving Betsy at home by herself.

Mrs. McCaleb took a minute answering. "Well, I have to work at the factory, you know, but I thought it was all right to leave her. Betsy's a good girl, and she's responsible."

Tom Luck's lawyer smiled. "Mrs. McCaleb, has your daughter ever told you a lie?"

The first day ended with everyone on Betsy's side looking grim.

The next morning Betsy McCaleb was brought into the courtroom. She was small for twelve years old, so frail a wind might blow her away. Her hair was lighter than mine, the color of cornsilk. I craned my neck to get a look at her face. I wanted to see what courage looked like. In the courtroom she was just as ordinary as I remembered, except for a glittery, feverish expression around her eyes that looked more like nervousness than bravery.

On the stand, she seemed even more pale, but she told her story in a level voice, her fingers laced in her lap. Earlier in the summer, Tom Luck had been at their farm building a shed for her daddy. Her daddy was out on his mail route. Her mother was at work at the factory. Tom Luck knew she was alone. He came to the house and asked for a glass of water. She let him in because he seemed nice enough. He didn't really want a glass of water. She put up a fight, she said - at first she did - but Tom Luck laid a long-bladed knife against her cheek.

Mysterious knife that no one ever found. My tongue touched the dry ridges of my lips. I glanced at Mrs. McCaleb, who looked as if her heart would break. Betsy was lucky to have a mother who believed her, who took every word as the truth.

Her voice grew softer as she told every ugly thing that happened, what Tom Luck did to her and what he made her do to him, and how he held his long-bladed knife at her throat, warning, *Don't tell*. She wanted to tell her parents, she said, but she was afraid and ashamed. Her parents were good Christians. She didn't know what they'd think. She believed everyone would blame her for letting it happen.

My body was thrumming like a tight wire. It was a thrilling thing to see what a girl could do with courage and imagination. Women wiped tears from their eyes. Men cast their eyes downward. Tom Luck's bulldogish lawyer squeezed his chin, trying to look thoughtful, but it was clear he was worried. Tom Luck wore a peaceful look that never changed. He sat straight up, his close-cropped hair neatly combed, his long white fingers clasped on the table before him, like no one you'd ever pick for a criminal. Patsy must have been the only other person in the courtroom who was unmoved. She looked annoyed and said in too loud a whisper, "Why, she's lying, you *know!*"

The prosecutor, tired-looking now and not so starched, waited for the courtroom to settle down. He asked Betsy if she'd like a drink of water. She shook her head. He waited for the whispering and coughing to stop, and he asked, "Betsy, did Tom Luck rape you again?"

She lowered her eyes. She seemed to be picking at her fingers. "Betsy?" the prosecutor said, gently. No one seemed to be breathing in the courtroom. In the

stillness, the lawyer's quiet voice seemed to boom. "Betsy, did Tom Luck come back after the shed was finished?"

She could have been in a trance when she looked up. Her voice sounded empty as she said, "I thought it was over, but he came after me again."

"Was that when you told your mother?"

Betsy McCaleb didn't blink. "It wasn't ever going to end if I didn't tell."

The trial went quickly after that. The jury reached their verdict late that afternoon.

Tom Luck's gaze went straight to Betsy McCaleb, and a scornful smile that might have meant he'd misunderstood the guilty verdict. The look she gave back was a murder-wish.

"Lies! A pack of nasty lies!" Patsy cried. "Tom would *never* do those things!"

But I knew he would. I had known about Tom Luck for a long time.

The day Patsy left, Daddy came home at noon, like always. I unlocked the door and let him in. "That's good," he said about the locked doors. "I'll bet Tom's made it out of state by now, but you can't be too careful."

Dinner was not much. I warmed up leftover white beans and picked some green onions and tomatoes from the garden. Patsy liked to cook and she never wanted me around till dishwashing time, so I was not very handy in the kitchen. Daddy had brought home country ham for supper. He told me to boil the salt out. We never had country ham except for breakfast, sliced and fried. This was a good-sized slab. "No reason for

us to rough it just cause Patsy's gone," Daddy said. I wondered how much he'd care if she just didn't come back.

He pulled down his grease-stained cap and said he'd be home by dark.

Sheriff Hollie dropped by that afternoon. I was sitting in front of a rotary fan that only moved the hot air around, listening to the radio, WKDA-Nashville. The TV hadn't worked for a month. I didn't hear the sheriff until he knocked on the door. Maybe he had taken precautions to be quiet. Maybe he'd even been listening at the door before he knocked.

I invited him to come in, but he said that was not necessary. "Just checking on things, making sure everybody's all right." He glanced past me into the living room.

April Dawn was stretched out on the floor, dressing her Barbie doll.

"I hear Patsy took a little trip," he said.

"Her mother's in the hospital up in Bristol," I told him.

He nodded. "That's what Sonny said."

So he was making sure that we all stuck to the same story. He asked who called Patsy and if I had heard her take the call. It happened before I woke up, I said, but I was sure he could check out his facts with the hospital in Bristol. He chuckled. "You're a clever girl."

He stepped back and adjusted his hat. "Keep your doors locked, now," he said.

"I will," I said.

"Tom Luck may be family, but he's a dangerous criminal."

"He's not my family," I said.

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. He studied me for a minute. "You remember when we arrested him, don't you? You came to the door." I nodded. I wondered what he was remembering. I had tried not to show how relieved I was when they led Tom Luck out in handcuffs.

The sheriff left. April Dawn left Barbie on the floor and leaned on the window frame, watching his car pull away. I could tell she was thinking hard about something. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Tom Luck is our uncle," she said.

"He's a bad man," I said.

"Mama's real worried about him."

I wanted to tell her about Patsy's blind spot, but it seemed to me that a child ought to be spared facing up to her parent's shortcomings. I thought about warning her - *Never let Tom Luck near you* - but it seemed useless to scare her, when surely Tom Luck would know better than to show up here at the very place the sheriff was expecting him.

The thing I didn't take into account was, Tom Luck was crazy. By that evening, he was in our back yard.

It was still light. April Dawn had gone out to gather eggs before the chickens roosted. No breeze stirred the blue-flowered curtains at the kitchen window. The air was heavy with the smell of country ham. I tried to keep my mind on the nice supper I was fixing. Ham, brown-and-serve rolls, applesauce from the can, tomatoes and onions. I was setting three places at the table when the dogs started up.

I held a fork mid-air, listening. Too early yet, went a silent alarm in my head. The other nights the dogs' noise was unsettling, but this time their commotion sent a shiver through my body. They were barking with a purpose. I dropped the fork, heard it *clink* on a plate as I spun around to the window to see what I already knew, that Tom Luck was out there with April Dawn.

Midway between the hen house and the dog pen, Tom Luck and April Dawn faced each other with only her egg basket between. April Dawn's pointer finger hopped from egg to egg. "What do you have there?" Tom Luck would've asked her, or something equally harmless. April Dawn might have hesitated until he told her who he was. She'd tell him her mama was real worried about him. She was like that. He would put her at ease with his gentle manner. "How many eggs did you get?" I didn't have to hear him speak to know this. His voice was forever with me: "Come here, pretty thing." The tone that made a child think she should trust him. There was a softness about Tom Luck that April Dawn might mistake for kindness or even goodness. Oh, it was not goodness, that grotesque softness, but how would April Dawn know? How was a child supposed to know?

I blinked hard. Tom Luck was squatting now, eye level with April Dawn. He was talking in earnest across the top of the egg basket. She had set the basket on the ground between them. It was filled with brown eggs. April Dawn was attentive, face tilted, her round eyes locked on his. I had failed to warn her – *Never let Tom Luck near you*. Failed her. I rubbed the gooseflesh of my arms. I thought about calling Daddy, but what would Daddy do? Call Patsy for her opinion? Those times I had begged him and Patsy not to leave us with Tom Luck, and she'd said I was being a troublemaker, didn't Daddy always

give in to her? Daddy had not taken a stand since Viet Nam.

Precious seconds flew by, and all I could think was that it was up to me. Not to be heroic like Betsy McCaleb, who refused to obey Tom Luck's warning: *Don't tell*. She would never know she had saved my life. I was not brave like her, but I was supposed to be smart. Call the sheriff. That was in my mind when I saw Tom Luck's long fingers brush a strand of April Dawn's hair back from her small face. His smile was so serene, not even the noisy Rottweillers, just steps away, appeared to make a dent in his twisted mind. April Dawn made a shy movement with her shoulder, a slight tuck of her chin, not knowing quite what to think of his gesture. I could read her that way. Once I might have made that same gesture. "What pretty gold hair," he would say. "What pretty pink lips." His body hot as fever, his long evil fingers touching her young skin.

I forgot all about the sheriff. It came to me what to do, and I did it without thinking too hard. I jabbed a big fork into the ham, lifted it from the boiling water, and put it in a pan with a lid on it. I carried it out to Tom Luck.

Four years in prison, and Tom Luck didn't look any tougher than he ever looked. I had thought he was being punished in prison. He didn't look like he'd been punished. In his tee shirt and loose khaki garb, he could've come from shooting baskets at the community center, or from building a shed at Betsy McCaleb's house. He never looked like the devil. How did you fight the devil? I had never figured it out. I had only learned to scrub my evil skin in scalding water when he was through with me.

He stood up. "Well, Mary," he said, as if he'd been waiting for me.

I stopped a good distance from him.

“You cut all that pretty hair off.”

“I cut it a long time ago.”

“All grown up,” he said, in the quiet, chilling voice that hung a whole story on those words. Fifteen was too old for Tom Luck. But April Dawn was another thing, and he had put his hot, evil fingers on her skin.

“Go to the house,” I told her. It was not the normal tone I used with her, and her face showed it, but she didn’t protest. She stooped to pick up the egg basket.

“Wait up there,” Tom Luck told her. She drew back. Hugging the basket against her, she moved a few steps away from him. Out of his reach at least. With his cloying smile still turned upon April Dawn, he said, “Don’t send her away, Mary. I was just trying to get to know my little niece. I believe that gold hair is just about as pretty as yours used to be. Yes sir, she is a pretty thing.”

It was all I could do to keep my head. Be smart. “Leave her alone,” I said.

“Why, Mary!” He jerked his face toward me. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

I felt my face burn. He saw the shame in my cheeks and gave a mocking smile, the same taunting smile he had given Betsy McCaleb in the courtroom: *You will never be through with me.*

“The sheriff was here looking for you. He’ll be back,” I said.

“You’re not trying to run me off, are you? Patsy wouldn’t like it a bit if you ran me off. Where *is* my sister, anyway?”

April Dawn piped in, “She’s gone to Mee-Maw’s.”

I flinched. Her sudden, innocent revelation made Tom Luck laugh. “And Sonny’s down at the service station?” he asked her.

"I guess." Her voice was a little breathless. She was wavering now, not sure she'd said the right thing. Did she remember that I told her Tom Luck was a bad man?

"Then I'll have to count on you to help me out, Mary," he said. "You were always good about secrets."

I swallowed back a bitter taste. I could feel April Dawn's eyes seek out mine, trying to understand these strange words from Tom Luck. It was up to me to get us out of this. I had to be smart. Taking another step closer to the dog pen, I lifted the lid from the ham.

Now the smell of ham had the Rotweillers in a frenzy. They bumped against the pen, making a nerve-racking fuss that finally pierced Tom Luck's eerie calm. First his face wrenched into an awful contortion, as if a pain had struck. Then all at once he jerked something shiny from somewhere inside his loose-flying shirt. Tom Luck raised his voice for the first time. "If you can't shut 'em up, I can!" he said, and I realized it was a gun he was pointing toward the pen. His movements were awkward. It was plain he didn't know much about guns. Tom Luck was not the kind who relied on guns or knives. Not even a knife when he warned, *Don't tell*, but Betsy McCaleb needn't worry. Her secret was safe with me.

"I'll make them stop," I said, moving deliberately now toward the gate, one foot in front of the other. I was careful not to make any sudden movements. Tom Luck was a wild animal that might spook. My breath came faster, the machine of my heart laboring noisily in my chest and throat and ears, louder than the fierce yelps of the dogs. I reached the gate. I pinched off a corner of the ham and tossed it into the pen. The Rottweillers thrashed against each other, fighting for the meat. Tom Luck dropped

his arm and let the gun hang, as if he'd suddenly blotted out the Rottweillers' commotion. His voice turned soft once more. "Don't waste it on *dogs*, for God's sake, Mary. It's been three days since I had anything to eat."

"Here. Take it." I put the lid back on and held out the pan to him, but I did not move my feet. He came for it, trusting me. Why wouldn't he trust me, bound as we were by our sin? As he took the pan, I made one motion with my free hand, and the gate swung free. The dogs were all over him.

That was what I had worked out. I had no plan past the instant when the dogs attacked. The pan and lid and gun went flying. The ham was gone in two seconds and the dogs were still hungry. They had Tom Luck on the ground, the smell of ham still on him. He fought, trying to shield his face. April Dawn squealed. I had a glimpse of her crouching next to the henhouse with her face buried in the crook of her arm, the brown eggs spilled all around her. And then my eyes latched on the glint of steel. I wasn't afraid of the dogs. I wasn't afraid of anything except that the dogs would lose interest in Tom Luck, and he would get away. I moved in. All the heat of the day had swollen into one space in our chicken-pecked yard, a dusty circle that took in the dogs and Tom Luck and me. My blood surged in my ears, like crashing waves washing the shore clean.

I picked up the gun and fired and fired and fired.

Time was funny. A few seconds took forever; then the hours hardly registered, until the coroner's wagon left and the whole yard was roped off, and the deputies pushed a swarm of nosey neighbors and thrill-seekers back to the road, and the sheriff got around to me.

Another funny thing, the dogs were quiet, even with all the excitement around the house and yard. Back in their pens, they must have watched the crime scene with silent curiosity. I didn't hear so much as a growl.

The house had not cooled off. The darkness had closed in, sealing the stagnant air inside our small house. Sheriff Hollie's khaki shirt was drenched with sweat. Daddy's dingy undershirt didn't show up wet, but his smell was rank as he brought me a damp washrag. I sat very primly in the red armchair. He said, "You're not gonna vomit, are you?"

I gave a sharp laugh. "Why, no!" I must've looked awful, from the way Daddy stared at me.

Then the sheriff asked me what happened, and I told him.

I told him how I went out to feed the dogs and found Tom Luck holding a gun on April Dawn, and how I came up with a plan to let the dogs attack.

"Mighty clever of you," said the sheriff. "Brave, too."

"I had to protect my sister," I said.

He nodded, satisfied, impressed too, I thought. Then I told how the gun flew free when the dogs attacked. "I picked it up, so Tom Luck couldn't get it, and the gun just went off." I said it without blinking, like Betsy McCaleb.

Sheriff Hollie rubbed his chin with his knuckle. I expected him to ask why all the shots, but he didn't. The only other question he asked was to April Dawn, who was crouched next to Daddy in the brown armchair looking like a rabbit about to bolt. "Is that the way it happened, honey?"

She darted a glance at me, and I gave a smile to comfort her. She gave two rapid nods and buried her face against Daddy.

“She was terrified,” I said. “She covered her eyes through most of it.”

“She’s lucky to have you for a sister,” he said.

As Daddy walked him to the porch, the sheriff’s voice sounded over the screech of the screen door. “Good thing Patsy was gone.”

Daddy hung his head. “She’s gonna be hell to live with.”

He worried over Patsy for a while, walking the floor, saying, “I ought to call her before she hears it some other way,” but he didn’t. I told him Patsy wouldn’t blame him, but we both knew how it would be for all of us, with her holding Tom Luck’s death against me. Finally Daddy said, “Maybe she’ll stay with her mama a while.” He sounded as if that settled it, but I could tell something else was not settled in his mind. He was still restless.

Daddy drifted to the kitchen and opened a bottle of beer which he never drank. He turned on the radio but switched it off the minute the news came on. He looked in on April Dawn and saw she was asleep. “Mary - ” he said. He was studying me, as if I were a curious-looking creature he’d stumbled upon for the first time.

“What is it, Daddy?” I asked. I hadn’t moved from the red chair.

He sat in the brown chair, squirming, shifting his eyes away from me. “I didn’t say anything about this, but I *know* you know guns better’n you let on, cause I taught you myself.”

“Anybody can have an accident with a gun,” I said.

He darted a sideways glance at me. "You just decided to feed the dogs, out of the blue? You don't ever feed my dogs."

I shrugged. "They were making such a fuss, I thought they were hungry."

"And you didn't mention it was a nice ham you took out there. That's what it had to be, else where's our supper?"

I gave him a hard look. "What are you saying? I already told the sheriff I planned how the dogs would attack."

He rubbed his face and took a long breath. "The dogs would've done a good enough job, Mary!" he said in a plea to understand. I could tell how hard it was for Daddy, trying to sort out the pieces, trying to make everything fit. He was not used to that. Giving up, he shook his finger at me. "If Boyd Hollie hadn't been so hard against Tom, he would've asked more questions."

"There's nothing more to tell," I said.

Daddy finally looked me straight in the eye. "Do you swear it?"

"I swear it."

Minutes crawled by. I wanted something else from him, but I couldn't name it. I didn't dare ask if he believed me. He began to drink his beer and by the time the bottle was empty, the worry lines around his eyes were smoothing out.

I told myself it was finally all over, it had to be, Tom Luck lying on a cold slab, shot through his black heart. What more could I do to make it all go away?

Daddy had heard what he wanted to hear and he could sleep like a baby. It wasn't anytime till he was snoring. I heard him through the wall as I lay next to April Dawn in the bright starlit bed. Only for the dogs and me was sleep as far out of reach as the moon.

CRYSTAL BALL

The midway is rocking like a dazzling party boat when the Tilt-a-Whirl stops. I love the woozy feeling, teetering between euphoria and nausea, my cropped hair full of wind and tingling at the roots. I reach for Phillip's arm to steady myself. He feels remarkably sturdy, coming off the stomach-churning ride. I'm still laughing as we start down the long, zig-zagging, wooden ramp.

I tell myself that Phillip is having a good time. Don't expect giddy laughter from this man. He pushes back a shock of gray-streaked hair and tugs at his corduroy jacket, and I revise: *Good time* is a stretch, but I can tell it wasn't awful for him.

"Come on, say it. It won't kill you to say *fun*," I tell him, trying to coax a smile.

"Now you want me to lie." One corner of his mouth makes a slight upturn, almost a smile but not quite. "You're not satisfied that I'm about to lose my gourmet meal from the corn dog stand. I have to call it fun."

"You're very sexy when you're wind-blown and indignant," I say. He gives a reluctant smile, and I squeeze his arm. Just a smile, and I'm content.

We come off the ramp and I see a gate in the metal mesh fence. I grasp Phillip's hand and head for it, pulling him along. The gate opens. Phillip calls, "Gina, wait -" just as a rush of kids sweeps toward us, adolescents in designer jeans, flashing braces. I hang on to his hand until the wave of hyperactive bodies has washed past us, their scent a mix of chewing gum and cigarette smoke.

Phillip lets go of my hand. "Do you see now? Didn't you hear me tell you to wait?" I see that everyone else is leaving the Tilt-a-Whirl from the other side. The gate,

which we have reached at last, is the entrance to the ride. A rawboned, unshaven man motions sharply to us to go through, get out of the way.

Brushing past him, I offer a meek smile. His hard eyes meet mine for two seconds before he tosses down his cigarette and snuffs it out with the toe of his boot. That's the end of that.

But not with Phillip. He presses the small of my back and steers me along roughly, away from the restless ticket-holders, out among a more leisurely crowd. "We looked like fools," he says.

"Sorry," I say. "Guess I got turned around."

"I don't know why you couldn't wait."

"I said I'm sorry."

"Sometimes you can be so impulsive," he says.

"Don't scold me, Phillip." I deliberately slow the pace, tilt my face toward him, and purse my lips. "Sometimes you can be so *professorial*." My mouth turns softer, and Phillip's mouth softens, too, because he was my professor first, before he was my lover. This is always between us, chaffing at times, but at other times a gentle connection.

"Come on, Phillip, let's just have fun," I say. "Please?"

"Do you know how exasperating you are?"

I have a flash of Desi saying this to his scatterbrained redhead, though he'd mispronounce *exasperating*. Lucy would bat her eyelashes and they'd kiss, dissolving into the trademark heart, happy ever after. Not that Phillip resembles Desi in any way, certainly not that slicked-back hair, but for a moment it is the same scolding-but-adoring gaze, and everything is all right again.

Phillip finally puts his arm around my shoulder. “No more rides.”

“No more rides,” I promise.

The midway pulses with calliope music. Rides are strung with lights that twirl and leap, leaving bright tails. “Ring a bottle!” a barker shouts. “Three chances for a dollar!”

“How do you think a carnival wound up in this stodgy university town?” I ask. Phillip’s answer is a small, gruff noise deep in his throat.

I remember other carnivals, other clear, brisk October nights. Darryl Dukes and I sailing through the Tunnel of Love. He gave me my first French kiss, and I gagged. Jerry Callaway wriggling out from under the safety bar when the Ferris wheel stopped with our seat swinging high above the midway. He got us both thrown out of the carnival that year.

“Don’t you just love it?” I ask.

“Can’t you tell how much I love it?” Phillip says, with a crooked mouth, amusement that won’t quite surface, curving toward one dimple. It’s the expression that I labeled his *ironic smile*, my first day in his Microeconomic Theory seminar, after he had ripped my answer apart and then added, “– nevertheless, insightful.” Very sexy. By the time we slept together, mid-semester, I was addicted to his ironic smile. Lately I wish he’d just let go sometimes, show the fillings in his molars. Let a belly laugh fly.

We meander into a row of sideshows. The “Largest and Smallest” show pictures a giant holding a midget in the palm of his hand. Next we come upon “Madame Zora the Fortune Teller.”

“Oh, Phillip, let’s go in,” I say. “Let’s have our fortunes told.”

“I don’t believe in fortune-telling,” he says.

“I don’t believe in it, either, but wouldn’t it be fun?”

“No.”

An olive-skinned, dark-eyed girl stands beside the tent flap, holding a money box. She might be eighteen but more likely is a mature fifteen. She is dressed in a flamboyant gypsy costume, embroidered vest and low-cut blouse with billowy sleeves, a long brightly printed skirt, flashy earrings. “Madame Zora sees the future in her creestal ball, five dollars,” she sings out in a husky barker’s voice. Catching Phillip’s eye, she strikes a pose, pushing out her small pointy breasts. “Get your fortune told, meester?”

“I don’t want to know my future,” says Phillip. “What if it’s bad? Do you give refunds?”

The girl’s rakish smile reveals a chipped front tooth. Phillip looks very pleased with himself. Maybe he’ll change his mind if the girl keeps flirting, I think, but he touches my arm, and we walk on. I start to tell him about the bet I had with Jerry Callaway that he wouldn’t stand up on the Ferris wheel, how I had to make good on it that night after the carnival, but I think better of it.

At the rifle gallery, a crowd is cheering on a spindly old man as he tries to win a cheap prize. He’s already won a pile of trinkets. “Don’t I get the bear yet?” he asks in a childish whine.

Phillip nudges me along. “Rigged,” he says. “Now they’ll rack up on all those other suckers. The old guy will never win a bear. It’s all phony.”

We walk past the fishpond where tinny-voiced children win penny prizes. We pass the darts, pass the basketball-shoot where a wiry kid is whining, “Man, the hoop’s too little. Ain’t regulation, man!”

“What a racket,” Phillip groans.

Phillip does not like the real world very much. I realized this when I was leaving graduate school. An opportunity to buy into a boutique came my way and I took it. “I can be an equal partner in three years,” I told Phillip. We were sharing a bottle of cabernet at our favorite hangout, a tiny café off campus that caters to the townies, not the university crowd.

“Squeezing overweight women into expensive cocktail dresses – I don’t see you at that, Gina,” he said. “Not with your options.”

“I’m not doing it out of desperation, for God’s sake,” I told him. “Not everybody’s cut out for a PhD.”

“You’d be a brilliant doctoral candidate.”

“Don’t you think I’ll be brilliant in the real world?” I laughed, and when he raised an eyebrow, I laid my hand on his. “Phillip, it’s time for me to leave the nest,” I said.

He looked thoughtful, and then, with a mock- scowl, he said, “There be dragons out there.” I sucked in a deep breath and leaned forward, managing to turn over my wine glass in the process. It had struck me how safe the world of theory was, and I might have said it, but we were diverted by the red rivulets on the white tablecloth.

Along the midway, we buy popcorn and Cokes from a stocky woman with chin whiskers. A bell rings and cheers rise. Phillip’s rigid features seem out of place among the festive crowd.

“You didn’t really mind missing the Wymans’ party, did you?” I ask.

“The Wymans’ parties are real yawners,” he says.

“I can just hear them – Delia and all those proper wives – ‘*Where are Phillip and his perky little salesgirl?*’” I do my imitation of Delia Wyman. I spread my fingers across my chest and assume my throatiest voice, give it my best Southern drawl. It’s not a bad imitation of Delia, whose Old South accent is pure affectation, I have always believed. I get a weak smile from Phillip.

“Delia never remembers my name. The closest she gets is Jean. Don’t you find it interesting that she can’t remember?” Phillip’s expression doesn’t change. He gazes into his cup, shakes the ice around. “Well, we’ve only been together a year and a half. Why should she know my name yet? Right?”

Phillip rubs his forehead with his forefinger, a very professorial gesture. I’m giving him a headache, I think. He’s trying to hang on to his composure but the light has gone out of his eyes. “You’re prettier and brighter than any of them,” he says.

And younger. Half their age, half *his* age. It is only lately that I have begun to think about how much *young* matters to Phillip.

“Delia and the others are sure I’m just another disposable plaything, so why take me seriously. Right?”

“Forget Delia, for God’s sake,” he said. He dumps his popcorn box and cup. I dump mine. We walk faster now, circling back to the heart of the midway.

I rub my arms through my sweater. Phillip’s voice is still cross. “You should have worn something heavier than that. Here.” He starts to come out of his jacket.

I raise my palm in protest. “No. I don’t want it.”

“Gina, don’t be silly. You’re shivering.”

“No, Phillip. I happen to think the chill is invigorating. All right?” I am sure he thinks I sound like a pouty child.

He straightens his lapels. A boy with thick glasses narrowly misses swiping him with cotton candy.

“Are you afraid to see what’s in the crystal ball?” I ask.

“Gina!” He gives a haughty laugh.

“Don’t make fun of me, Phillip.”

“I can promise you, I’m not afraid of anything a phony fortune teller sees in a phony *creestal* ball.”

“Then why not do it, just for fun?”

“Because I resent playing the part of a sucker,” he says, flatly.

The noise of the midway seems louder. The lights seem brighter. I hug myself, shivering more fiercely now, but Phillip isn’t noticing.

“What if the fortune teller said you’re going to meet an exciting new student? The prettiest and smartest of them all. Wouldn’t you be curious?”

“Gina, this is foolish.” Phillip draws his mouth into a tight line.

“What if Madame Zora saw someone who loves to chatter about the national debt at your tedious faculty parties, and free trade and the Dow-Jones? Wouldn’t you like that? I used to be good at that, didn’t I, Phillip?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Someone who doesn’t give up the noble study of economics to become ordinary.”

“You are not ordinary,” he says, without conviction.

“No, I’m not,” I begin but I don’t know how to finish. I hike my chin. I wonder if Phillip has heard the tremor in my voice.

Phillip says quietly, “I think I’d like to win you a stuffed animal.”

“ - Somebody who hates carnival rides,” I keep on.

“Where was the one with the darts? I can throw darts at balloons. That’s what I want to do.”

“I don’t care about that,” I say, but Phillip is already several paces ahead of me. In no time we’re back to the arcade games. The darts are in sight. We have to wait for a middle-aged couple to finish. One balloon bursts, a loud pop that makes me flinch, and the balding winner takes away a six-inch stuffed dog. He doesn’t give it to the woman with him.

Phillip slaps a dollar bill on the counter and a kid with a pencil-mustache hands him three darts. He aims carefully but misses. He buys three more. Finally, after three more, I say, “Phillip, stop. I don’t want a stuffed animal.”

I turn away and blend into the crowd. Phillip might be following or not. My eyes sting. A minute later he catches up with me. He walks alongside, with his hands in his pockets. He doesn’t say anything.

I say, “Sometimes I don’t know what to think about us and it makes me a little desperate.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“You don’t ever feel like that, do you, Phillip?”

He doesn’t answer. Neither of us says anything for a minute.

And then he could be speaking to himself, his voice is so quiet. In the midst of the music and bells and shrieks of laughter, I can barely make it out.

“Possibilities intrigue me. I don’t apologize for liking things wide open, but I’m sorry if that frightens you.”

He looks at my arms. I am holding myself, trembling. Phillip takes off his jacket and puts it around my shoulders.

“We’ll go to the fortune teller,” he says. “It doesn’t mean anything, anyway.”

Phillip waits outside while I go in to see Madame Zora. The girl in gypsy dress gives him a flirty smile that does not escape me – is not *meant* to escape me – as she pulls back the tent flap for me to go inside. Phillip is pacing, his hands in his pockets, when I come out, and the girl is flirting with a juggler. No gypsy babble to it. She could be from Kansas or California.

While Phillip has his fortune told, the juggler performs with a sword, a fish, and a bowling ball. He’s doing a handstand, juggling balls with his feet, when Phillip touches my arm and says, “Let’s go.”

We don’t talk at first, but after a few minutes, I have to ask. “What did she say?”

A burly man carrying a big stuffed bear pushes past us. Phillip gives a double take, maybe thinking that he was wrong, that some people do win the big prizes. The crowd is uncomfortably thick now. Everything is loud and glaring, like a party after everyone is a little drunk.

“A long and happy life with the one I love – that’s my fortune.” Phillip’s tone makes it clear that he’d expected as much. “What about yours?”

“The same. Exactly. You’re right, it’s all fake.”

I pull Phillip’s jacket around me and clutch the lapels at my chin. Its wooly smell is somehow comforting as we pick our way through damp grass, heading toward the car. I barely feel Phillip’s fingertips on my back, a feathery touch that doesn’t commit.

“You know I don’t believe you,” I tell him.

He says, “I don’t believe you, either.”

PRIMATES

Up here, where the road dips into hollows that hardly ever see the sun, the mail comes in a beat-up Dodge Ram. Jason Blair's daddy has been the mail carrier on this route all my life. Jason was my boyfriend in seventh grade. I hear he's on a scholarship at the university in Johnson City, the same place my mother is working on her nursing degree. I hear Jason wants to make a lawyer and come back home to work for legal aid. I know for a fact Mama won't be back.

Mr. Blair hands me a big Priority Mail package. "Hey, Rochelle, you having birthday or something?" His smile is lopsided like Jason's, but without the dimple.

"Yep, tomorrow," I answer.

"You must be about twenty."

"Yep."

"Jason turned twenty back in the spring."

April second, I could say. He missed being born on April Fool's day by nine minutes. Jason dumped me in eighth grade, but what they say about your first boyfriend is the truth, you remember every teeny-tiny thing that ever passes between you. I remember more about Jason than I have ever known about Eddie, and I've been with Eddie since my senior year.

Mr. Blair shuffles through a stack of mail and comes up with a handful for me. On top is Daddy's check, first-of-the-month, as sure as Christmas. The rest looks like junk.

I thank him and tuck the package under my arm. Mr. Blair tips his Peterbilt cap and the Ram eases forward, on down to Lena and Rydell's mailbox, peeking from a tangle of purple morning glories.

The screen door whacks behind Daddy while I'm tearing into the package. He comes to the edge of the porch, where my legs are stretched out across the top step. His striped pajama bottoms leave a gap of knobby ankle above his house slippers. My eyes travel up the stripes covering his skeleton frame. His thin shoulders give a sudden jerk, as if a shiver is passing through him. He's always chilly. Even now in July he won't turn on the air-conditioner.

Daddy has not put on anything but pajamas since his last doctor's appointment. He seems down and out these last weeks, making me wonder what, exactly, the doctor told him about his emphysema. The cuffs of his sleeves are frayed. He taps his pack of Marlboros against his knuckle and pulls out a cigarette. His hands are all bones and veins under papery skin.

He looks down at my package. I don't have to say it's from Mama. Daddy's eyes in their shadowy sockets seem to know. He draws on his Marlboro, making his mouth pucker in hard ridges, and coughs a dry hacking cough.

I unfold a strappy dress, greenish-blue, the color of my eyes, which I bet Mama was thinking when she bought it. I wonder what else she was thinking. She knows there's no place around here to wear a dress like this.

"Snazzy," Daddy says, when I hold it up for him to see.

Also in the package is a fat book with the title, *A Pictorial Guide to Primates of the World*. I show Daddy the grinning chimpanzee on the cover. The chimp's goofy grin makes me smile, but Daddy's mouth keeps its hard line. He stares at the cover, drawing his wiry eyebrows together. "What the hell kind of book is that?" he mumbles.

"Just a book." I thumb through a few pages, photos of chimps as cute as human babies and gorillas with sagging breasts like old women. Dr. Rineholt said gorillas in their natural habitat are nothing like our King-Kong version. They are peaceable and guileless, he said. Dr. Rineholt was personally acquainted with the woman who lived with gorillas in Africa. At the video store we have the movie that was made about her.

Daddy takes a long drag on his cigarette. His eyes squeeze into slits, like inhaling takes all he's got. "Just like Jean to send you something like that," he says, finally, the words coming out with the smoke, his mouth pulling down at the corners the way it always does when we talk about Mama.

He tosses his cigarette, half-smoked, over the rose bush into the yard, and shuffles back into the house. The screen door flaps. I hear his recliner chair squeak and the portable oxygen tank start up with a faint hum. Daddy uses his oxygen all the time now, except when he comes outside to smoke.

Mama didn't up and leave in a storm of angry words or a gush of tears. She'd been leaving all along. I just hadn't paid attention. The day she finally drove away with her grandma's cane-bottom rocker in the back of her old Chevy wagon, I had the notion she'd been waiting it out till I graduated from high school, but maybe I was no part of it at all.

"You can't say you're surprised, Rochelle," she said as she cleared a few trinkets from her dresser and packed them in a cardboard box. There was not much left that belonged to her by that time. The pay in rural clinics was chickenfeed compared to private duty nursing in Johnson City, Mama had said all the time she'd been driving back

and forth. From the first, Lena made snide remarks about Mama's patient who needed full-time care after his stroke. She arched her eyebrows when she talked about "Jean's professor." Lena, with her soap-opera mind, is Daddy's baby sister so naturally she would take his side, but I couldn't prove there wasn't truth to her suspicions.

"You can come and see me any time you want to." Mama raised her blue eyes to me, her eyelashes thick with mascara. "You can come with me now if you want to." My face was hard-set. She looked back down at her fingernails, bit to the quick.

"You think I'd walk out on Daddy like he is?" I said. He had just gone on disability. Even though he was able to work in his shed, fix lamps and such, he was going down fast. It looked bad for Mama to leave.

"Maybe you want to stick around because of Eddie Lufkin, too," she said, wrapping newspaper around a glass figurine, an angel from her childhood, with her birth year on it.

"Maybe so." I felt a mean-spirited streak shoot through my veins. I looked at Mama's made-up face and for one split-second something wild in me wanted to scratch my fingernails across her pretty skin. She stooped and picked up the box, shaking the hair out of her eyes. I crossed my arms, holding myself tight, and followed her to the car.

Her Chevy wagon was old when she bought it, and now she'd made so many trips over the snaky mountain roads, it looked like the tires were about to fall off. She set her box in the passenger seat. "Well, come and see me whenever you want to," she said again.

"Don't hold your breath," I said.

I glanced down the road, where Lena stood on her porch with a broom in her hand. She was not sweeping. Lena couldn't hear what I said but I imagined she could tell by my hiked-up chin that I was not begging Mama to stay.

"You're eighteen, old enough to decide," Mama said.

My teeth scraped my bottom lip. Then I said, "Is it true?"

Mama knew exactly what I meant. "I've told you, and I've told Vernon, and Lena, too, for that matter." Her eyes darted toward Lena's porch and back. "Dr. Rineholt is my patient. But you want to know something, Rochelle? I'm not sorry to be leaving. I like it in Johnson City just fine. Is that what you want to hear me say?"

I felt my lips curling into an ugly smile. "I didn't want to think you're a whore, that's all," I said. Having the last word, I whirled around and left her standing as still as a rock. I went to the kitchen sink and saw, far off in the edge of the back yard, Daddy standing just as motionless, with a cigarette burning between his thumb and finger. A minute later Mama's car made an eager noise and pulled away.

I love how I look in the dress, in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. It could be Mama in the mirror, Mama from long-ago pictures in the album she took with her, shiny blonde hair falling over her shoulders in her senior photograph, and in her wedding picture, a waist Daddy could circle with his hands. She was eighteen and he was twenty-seven. In the photo that sits on my dresser she has put on weight and cut her hair, but it's my favorite. She's holding a baby on her lap - me in my bald, toothless stage. She looks proud and hopeful.

Lena's voice sounds at the kitchen door. "I've been to the garden," she calls. She brings a Walmart sack to the kitchen counter and takes out fat, ripe tomatoes. Lena gives off the smell of her kitchen, greasy and cozy, the warm smell of a big supper on the table, her and Rydell and the kids passing around heaping hot bowls of fried vegetables.

"Damn!" she says as I strike a pose in my new dress. "Where'd you get that?"

"In the mail, from Mama."

Lena grunts at the mention of Mama. She lines the tomatoes up on the window sill. "Where do you think you'll wear a fancy thing like that around here?"

"Maybe I'll wear it somewhere else," I say.

She cuts her eyes at me. This thing hangs between us, as real as sheets flapping on Lena's clothesline in a stiff breeze. In June, when I was going to visit Mama, Lena said, "What good do you think it will do? Jean is the one that left." Two years had passed with nothing from Mama but a few phone calls. I told Lena I thought it would settle something in my mind. "Or stir things up," she said.

I used to want to be like Lena. She was slim and graceful and funny. Now she's a size eighteen with bad teeth. In those days when Lena was slender and laughing, throwing her head back, Mama was a shapeless form that smelled like the clinic's disinfectant, a weary voice saying No. Nothing like the woman who hugged me on Dr. Rineholt's porch, telling me, "Life is not a straight line. It's not a sin to change your mind."

Lena unpacks more vegetables, wrapped in newspaper. "Hey, Vernon," she calls to Daddy in the living room. "I brought you some good-looking tomatoes, and okra and green onions."

He calls back in a thin, strained voice. He's stretched out in his recliner with its oily headrest, watching some game show with beeps and shrill laughter. The footrest goes down and he sets his slippers on the floor. He unhooks his oxygen and shuffles to the front door, coughing as he goes.

"How's he doing?" Lena asks, washing the okra and onions.

"About the same." I ask if she'll give me a ride to work. Lena works three to eleven at the nursing home. I have to be at the video store at three. "Eddie's picking me up tonight."

Lena's voice takes on an over-bright tone. "Vernon likes Eddie."

"Everybody likes Eddie." I try to lift the mood between us, saying offhand, "We're going to watch football at Katie and T.J.'s."

Katie and I have grown up like sisters. Five days younger than me, she's about to have her second baby. I can feel Lena cheering at the mention of her daughter. She dries her hands on a dishtowel and begins to massage the hard spots at the back of my neck.

I rotate my shoulders. "That feels good."

"You're too young to be so tight." She kneads harder, working my muscles like bread dough.

"You could make money at this, Lena."

"Rydell says the same thing, says I could be a massage therapist. I tell him I've got my hands full keeping him satisfied."

"You and Rydell are terrible. Worse than Katie and T.J. have ever been."

"Honey, I try to tell her. If you want to be happy, keep your man happy. You might profit from my advice, too." She peeks around me to see the look on my face.

“I’ll remember that when I get married,” I say. She keeps watching, like she’s waiting for some announcement, but all she gets from me is a big phony smile.

In seventh grade I would have bet my right arm I’d marry Jason Blair.

Mama had just started the job with Dr. Rineholt. I was too caught up in Jason to think much about her absence. Most Saturday afternoons I wound up at the Blairs’ house in town. They turned their basement into a rec room, furnished with a pool table, television, VCR and CD player, along with some old furniture and a refrigerator stocked with Cokes and popsicles. Already Jason talked about college and how he hoped to get a scholarship. Already he talked about coming back to the mountains to do something that counted. He thought he might make a preacher. The Baptist church had a new young pastor that Jason admired, who took the youth group on retreats, and they would come back full of religion. Some Friday nights their youth group met in Jason’s rec room. He begged me to come to church with him, come to youth group. He was always pestering me to think about good grades and college and life so far in the future it blurred.

“You’re smart, Rochelle,” he’d say, his breath soft on my neck as we lay on an old quilt that was losing its stuffing. “You can do anything you set out to do.”

I avoided that kind of talk when I could. I found ways to shush him.

Mrs. Blair never bothered us in the rec room, with Garth and Reba turned up loud. “Ma trusts us,” Jason said, both of us knowing she shouldn’t.

I doubt Mama ever suspected Jason and I were not playing church, those Saturday afternoons. She had her own worries, her marriage on a downhill slide. Most Saturdays she was in Johnson City, looking after Dr. Rineholt. Lena was more tuned in to me. She

told Katie and me that she had once dated a young preacher herself. "A preacher-boy will screw around like anybody else," she said, "but when all is said and done, he will marry a virgin."

Jason ditched me for a girl in his church group but he didn't marry her either. Now he's training to be a lawyer, not a preacher. Life is not a straight line. Mama got that right.

Before I go to work, I fix a plate of leftover greens, creamed corn, and meat loaf for Daddy's supper. I slice one of Lena's ripe tomatoes, cover both plates with plastic wrap, and set them in the refrigerator. Rydell or one of the boys will check on Daddy. Lena sees to that, evenings when she and I both work. Lately, Daddy won't even microwave his own meal.

Lena honks for me at twenty till three, and I call to Daddy that I'm leaving. "Remember Eddie and me are going over to Katie's after work."

He raises his scrawny hand a few inches, his eyes stuck to the TV, and says, "Bye." He is adjusting the nosepiece of the oxygen tube as I head out the front door with my purse and my new book, for slow times at the video store. I have dreamed of coming home and finding him in the recliner, head slumped to one side, his skin bluish-gray, no breath but the oxygen tank still humming.

"I can get your daddy in to see a good respiratory specialist at the medical center," Mama told me as I unpacked my bag on a high four-poster bed, upstairs in Dr. Rineholt's moldy-smelling house. "I'd be glad to do it if Vernon would let me."

"I can ask him," I said, "but I think he likes his doctor well enough."

"Dr. Ballew? Has that quack ever done anything for him?" Mama folded my tank tops, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles. "Never mind, it's not your fault."

I turned my bag upside-down and a tangle of socks and underwear fell out. "Some people like Dr. Ballew just fine."

"Some people never worked in the clinic with him." She pursed her lips and blew out a little breath of disgust through her nose. "Nothing ever changes in the mountains."

Dr. Rineholt's tall, thin house, in walking distance of the campus, was easy to find with Mama's directions. The shrubbery was so overgrown against the dark brick that it hid the windows, blocking the sunlight. At night I could hear branches scrape against my second-story window. I could hear groaning and squeaking. "Don't let the noises spook you," Mama warned me. "It's just old." I could tell it was a run-down version of what used to be a fine, solid house. Mama's room looked out into a big dogwood tree that was still in bloom. I slept in the room next to hers, unafraid of the creepy sounds.

Mama is much more than a nurse to Dr. Rineholt. She buys groceries, does cooking, cleaning and laundry, all that, plus going after her nursing degree like she's leaning into the wind. Lena will say, "You might accuse Jean of a lot of things but laziness is not one of them."

I asked Mama, "Are you going to get a nursing job at the hospital or are you going to take care of Dr. Rineholt?"

We were making spaghetti together, me chopping up tomatoes, her pushing the onions around with her spatula. Her eyes were fixed on the frying pan, her smile dreamy. "I'll take care of Dr. Rineholt as long as he needs me. But you never know when things

will change," she said, as if the idea had just struck her. "A woman has to look out for herself. A woman can't just depend on a man for her livelihood or her happiness." She fastened a look on me that said I should take her words to heart.

I set the dining room table with gold-rimmed china. Dr. Rineholt came to the table in his wheelchair. His thin gray hair bobbed against his neck. He made a production of lifting his nose, sniffing, popping his eyes wide behind his black-rimmed glasses. "Spaghetti? What's the occasion?"

"It's Rochelle's favorite," Mama said. It used to be my favorite when I was about ten.

Dr. Rineholt's thick lips pulled back, showing big white horsy teeth. His mouth and glasses filled his skinny face. "Jean would be feeding me a TV dinner if you weren't here," he told me.

"That's a bold-faced lie!" Mama said, pretending to be shocked and then wounded. "Only one time, when I was late to class. You'll never let me forget it, will you?"

Dr. Rineholt had a polished way of speaking, without any particular accent. I was surprised by the strength of his voice, which didn't match his frail body. His slow speech, with some hesitations, was partly because of the stroke, Mama had explained, but it only made him sound smarter, more thoughtful, to me.

"Dr. Rineholt is a famous anthropologist," Mama said, not for the first time. "You should hear the stories he has to tell.

"Jean is going a little overboard," he said, narrowing his eyes at me. He put down

his fork and picked up his napkin, using only his right hand. His left hand lay claw-like on his lap.

“I like all your pictures,” I said. Throughout the house on walls and tables were photos of monkeys. Some in cages, some in the arms of a fuzzy-haired man wearing thick glasses.

“I was interested in primate research when I was young,” he said. “I worked with a primatologist for several years.” With his good hand, he dabbed spaghetti sauce from the corners of his mouth. He said that non-human primates can teach us a lot, that they are intelligent and honest. I’d never thought of an ape as honest. He said they share human traits. “Bonobos have sex facing each other,” he said.

Dr. Rineholt was at least twenty years older than Daddy, but even half-paralyzed, he might outlive Daddy. If he could have stood up straight, he would have been as tall as Daddy. I wondered if Mama had ever made these comparisons. I wondered what it was about these years with Dr. Rineholt that had washed the tightness out of her face.

“Tell Rochelle about the rhesus monkeys,” Mama said.

“Jean has her favorite stories,” he said, with a glance at her that seemed overly fond. He dropped his napkin next to his plate and pushed back from the table. He’d barely touched his food. “Harlow was a psychologist who studied mother-infant bonding, using rhesus monkeys and surrogate mothers. The monkeys were raised in cages with two objects substituting for their natural mothers.” Dr. Rineholt had started to sound like he was teaching a class, no stumbling over words. “One object was just a wire form, constructed so that the monkeys could receive food. The other was a soft cuddly

object wrapped in terrycloth that gave no food. So there they were – one food-giving object, and one terrycloth object. Then came the moment of truth. A large mechanical spider was put in the cage with the monkeys. Can you guess which surrogate mother they turned to?”

A no-brainer. “The cuddly one,” I said.

“You’re absolutely right.” He raised his good hand and slapped the arm of his wheelchair as if he were tapping a bell. “The monkeys chose the soft mothers.”

“I think it’s such a sweet story,” said Mama, “but sad.”

“Research is a two-edged sword,” Dr. Rineholt said, still in his teacher-voice. “The primate may actually live with the researcher. Chimps have even learned sign language. The animals become highly socialized during the research. The problem is what to do with them after the project ends.” He took a deep breath, gathering steam for another story. “In Africa, there is a sanctuary for research primates who can’t be returned to the wild.”

I leaned forward, drawn into the next story. Mama’s fork was suspended mid-air as she chewed, smiling from him to me and back at him, her face pink like a bloom.

“He likes you,” Mama said as we loaded the dishwasher, after Dr. Rineholt had wheeled himself to his room. She scraped plates over the garbage disposal.

“I like him, too.” I was obligated to say it, but it was mostly true.

“What made you decide to come see me?” She didn’t look at me.

I held a handful of silverware under the faucet. “I just thought it was time,”

“You’re right about that.”

She asked about Lena's family and I told her Katie was due in September. "Brandon won't even turn two till January," I said, thinking how strange it was that Mama hadn't seen Katie's first child.

"Two under two, now that's a handful." She poured detergent in the dishwasher and said in an offhand way, "You still with Eddie Lufkin?"

"Yep."

"You going to marry him?"

"I think he wants me to," I said.

She washed her hands at the sink and dried them on a paper towel. "You love him?"

"I'm supposed to," I said.

"I guess that's my answer."

After she'd started the dishwasher, she led the way through the house, past all the photos of monkeys, to a side porch off the living room. The wicker furniture must have been expensive twenty years ago. I could make out the faded flowers on the cushions, but barely. Bushes were grown up around the porch so it felt private, though another house was lit up past the driveway.

"I loved your daddy," Mama said. "I loved him more than anything, once upon a time." I wondered if she was remembering when she came to the mountains as a licensed practical nurse and Daddy worked for the Blue Diamond Coal Company. His daddy had begged him not to go down into the mines, so he trained as an electrician and kept their equipment working. All the same, he's dying with emphysema.

"So what happened?"

“People just get stuck,” she said. “Maybe it’s something about the mountains.”

I tried to imagine how it might have been between them before Blue Diamond went bust, before whatever love Mama felt for the mountains and for Daddy burned out, and Dr. Rineholt drew her away to this life.

“You know something about that, I guess.” It sounded like a question.

I felt my neck stiffen. “There’s nothing wrong with Eddie,” I said.

Behind Mama, the greenish lights of fireflies blinked against the dark. “Dr. Rineholt wouldn’t mind if you wanted to stay here a while,” she said. “If you wanted to take some courses at the college.”

My head felt thick, like I’d had too much beer. I remembered the same feeling as Jason Blair’s breath grazed my cheek: “*You’re smart, Rochelle. You can do anything.*”

I walked past Mama to the edge of the porch. The fireflies’ blink-blink-blinking made me dizzy. “Just because you left Daddy doesn’t mean I can,” I said.

Her voice floated over my shoulder, and I felt the heat from her body. “Lena and Rydell will take care of Vernon. Don’t you know Lena’s always been right there? Your daddy might live for God knows how long, Rochelle. You can’t tell about emphysema.”

I realized her fingers were lying on my arm, as weightless as a flower petal. I could feel the heavy beat of my heart in my throat.

“It’s not a sin to change your mind,” she said. “Life is not a straight course.” She pulled me close and a powdery-smell I remembered from long ago was strong in my nose. “Just think about it, baby,” she whispered. “Don’t give an answer till you think about it.” I felt my arms thread around her, the first time in a million years.

Keeping the video store open till nine on weeknights is a waste. I pass the time with my *Primates* book. Chimps, apes, and animals I have never heard of, lemurs, pottos, galagos, and lorises. One photo that looks like a chimp has the caption, *Bonobo*. I think of Mama and Dr. Rineholt and the clink of silver on china. I wonder why I wasn't embarrassed, hearing an old man talk about bonobos having sex, or bored by his crash course in primates. I see Dr. Rineholt's mouth moving around big words: *placental mammals, opposable thumbs, Homo sapiens*. It all seems like a strange, half-remembered dream.

Dr. Rineholt wheeled away from the table and we followed him through the house. He stopped at every photo and gave another lesson. The house was one big classroom.

"I have never seen a house like this," I said.

Dr. Rineholt lifted his face toward mine. "Jean makes it a home," he said. "I couldn't function when she came here eight years ago. She gave me physical therapy. Jean gave me back my life."

Mama laid her hands on his shoulders, her fingers working like Lena's when she's giving a massage. "Nice," he said. "Nice, Jean."

A few minutes before closing, Eddie drives up in his truck, pulls into the space next to the door, eases between the lines, perfectly. No other car is parked anywhere around but Eddie is going to do it just right. I wave through the arc of words on the store window, and he waves back. I've told him he can come in but he'd rather sit there, listening to Tim McGraw or Shenia. I close up, shut off the lights, lock the door behind

me and hop into the truck. Eddie is six-foot-two, two hundred twenty pounds. He reminds me of a bear-sized puppy.

He kisses me hard, lots of tongue, before we say a word.

“What’s that all about?” I say.

“Has it got to be about anything?”

I can guess, by his beer taste, that’s he’s been to the County Line. It’s where Eddie and his buddies from the Highway Department like to hang out, where beer is cheap and the fries are fat and sizzling.

We back out onto the street and head out to T.J. and Katie’s. A minute later we are wrapped in blackness, except for the headlights that shoot out into the dark. Katie and T.J. live next to his folks, not far from town, a couple of turns off the main road, plenty of curves and dips, like all the roads up here. We pass sleepy houses with squares of light glowing, people watching television. Eddie opens his window and props his elbow in it. Mountain air is always cool at night.

“What kind of book you got?” he asks. I tell him Mama sent it for my birthday.

“A weird present,” he says, and before I can tell him that it’s really not, he reaches over and gives my leg a little tug. “What are you doing way over there? Come on over here.” He turns the radio down low as I scoot next to him. His hand slides up my thigh.

“You better watch the road,” I tell him, twining my fingers in his to keep them still. Diamond Rio belts out a few lines. “Mama sent me a dress, too.”

“You can wear it tomorrow night.” I frown at him. He says, “For your *birthday*.”

I’m used to celebrating my birthday with Katie. Lena is fixing us a birthday supper Saturday night, and of course Eddie is invited. “It’s a real dress-up dress,” I say.

“So?” He gives me a sly, cat-like grin. “You don’t turn twenty but once.”

The lights from Katie and T.J.’s trailer come into view, and I close my mouth on my question. I’m glad when Eddie puts both hands on the wheel and turns off the road.

“The Braves are down in the bottom of the sixth,” T.J. says, his eyes glued to the big-screen TV that takes up most of the room. He is a sheriff’s deputy. T.J., the biggest hell-raiser in the county when we were growing up. He and Katie have been together since junior high. Mama says nothing ever changes in the mountains, but look at T.J.

“Didn’t you fix something to eat?” he asks Katie. She is as big as a cow but that doesn’t keep her husband from ordering her around. “Get us a couple of beers, too,” he says. I follow Katie into the kitchen. Brandon tries to hang on to her legs, makes her stumble. I pick him up. He smells like milk and talcum powder. He stretches his wiry little body, reaching toward his mama, whining.

“He’s been so cross today,” Katie says.

“Brandon or T.J.?” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “You got that right.” She takes ham sandwiches and cheese dip out of the refrigerator and fixes a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a bowl of chips. We deliver the food to our men and Katie says, “Let me show you the baby’s things.” Brandon squirms out of my arms and finds his pacifier under the table.

The trailer has four rooms and a bath, so the baby – a girl, they know – will sleep in Brandon’s room. Katie has fixed up one crib in pink ruffles, with the mattress covered in a Sleeping Beauty sheet, across from Brandon’s bed with its bear theme. There’s just enough room to walk in between. Katie shows me more pink blankets and girlie outfits.

"I don't know what to do about the curtains," she says, touching the material, examining it as if she will find her answer. Brown bears march on a blue background.

"Girls like bears, too," I say.

Katie shakes her head. "Something in pink and blue together. Or maybe just white with pink and blue trim."

"White's good."

"Lots of diapers," Katie says suddenly. A little breathless laugh escapes. She presses her huge belly. "I'd like to get my tubes tied but T.J. wants another."

And speak of the devil, he calls to her at that moment from the other room. "Katie! Get in here!" Brandon has turned over the dip, and it's time for more beer.

After the Braves lose, the Johnson City newsman leans toward the camera, speaking in a too-serious voice about security problems at the university. Brandon lies on the floor in front of the TV, sucking on his bottle, his eyelashes making a soft flutter. The air feels heavy. I finish off a beer. Katie leans against T.J., her feet propped up on the coffee table.

"Your mama still living with that college professor?" T.J. asks me.

"T.J.!" Katie says. "You are so rude."

He gives a big put-on shrug. "All I know's what I hear from Lena."

"Mama is Dr. Rineholt's nurse," I say. "He's in a wheelchair."

"Does that mean he can't get it up?"

"For God's sake," Katie says. "Shut up."

T.J. kicks her foot off the table. "What did you say to me?"

"Hey - " Eddie holds out his empty bottle. "How about another beer, T.J." T.J. kicks Katie's other foot off the table. "Get him a beer."

"I'll get it," I say.

Katie begins to lift herself up, off-balanced, feet turned out. T.J. gives a little push, a little help. "I'm going to the bathroom anyway," she says.

"You go on. I'll get the beer," I tell her.

"Two," her lazy husband says.

By the time Katie has come back from the bathroom and I've brought three beers and a Diet Coke for Katie and more chips, T.J.'s mood has turned silly. "You kick-boxing in there tonight, baby?" he says in a high-pitched child-like voice, leaning his ear against Katie's big belly. Eddie and I get to hear a discussion of the baby's kicking and Katie's bladder. I notice Eddie has zoned in on the baseball scores, scrolling down on the TV screen, but after a minute Katie mentions the birthday supper Lena is fixing for us Saturday night, and Eddie's eyes lock on mine.

"Tomorrow's Rochelle's birthday." His voice is playful but there is a serious, searching look in his unblinking eyes.

I take another sip of my beer and I begin to feel kind of drunk. Katie says Lena is making a sour cream cake with sour cream frosting for Saturday night, and T.J. says Katie's birthday present is going to be a new dishwasher because the old one broke down. I hear Eddie say my present is a surprise. I notice a slight narrowing of his eyes, and I think he's concentrating all his powers on me, trying to peer into the depths of me, and I know. I know it's a ring.

I hear myself say, "Mama sent me a book for my birthday. It's in the truck." I'm on my feet suddenly, my legs moving me toward the door.

Eddie says he'll go get the book and starts to follow me, but I say no. "I'll go," I tell him in an insistent voice. Katie and T.J. are very still, with puzzled expressions frozen on their faces.

"*Rochelle* -" Eddie's voice pleads and scolds at once, a voice he might use to coax Brandon into good behavior. The sound follows me like a shadow as I stumble outside, but I shut the door on it. The cool air hits the sweat on my forehead and a chill runs through me.

The truck is lit by the moon. I hurry toward it, wondering what would happen if I just up and drove away. But behind me comes the light from inside the trailer, and then Eddie's big frame blocks the door. "What's the matter with you, Rochelle?" comes that kind, worried voice, and I know I wouldn't get far, and I don't think he left the keys in his truck anyway.

I want to tell him Dr. Rinehart's story, but I know I won't. I won't speed off in the truck, and I won't ever tell Eddie about the sanctuary in Africa for research primates who can't be returned to the wild. A researcher visits the sanctuary and sees one of the chimps, off in a corner looking lonesome, and she wonders if he knows sign language. So she goes up to him and signs, *Hello*. The chimp signs back, *Help me*.