

**MICHAEL: A NOVEL**

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**COLLEEN WATT**



MICHAEL: A Novel

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An Abstract  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Colleen Watt

May, 1990



## ABSTRACT

In the 1890s and early 1900s naturalism in American literature served as a precursor to American modernism. Prior to this time, the realistic writers of the 1870s and 1880s focused on the typical within society, primarily the middle class, and they tended to avoid the extraordinary. In contrast, the works of the naturalistic writers focused on the sociological, where they emphasized the struggle for survival within the American culture, and on the Darwinistic, where the emphasis is on the bestial in man and the manifestation of the basic drives. Working on the assumption that life is more explicit among the lower class, the naturalists, whose view of society was pessimistic, delved into the depths of the social order where they often chose to portray characters and times other writers chose to ignore. They became voices for the inarticulate individual neglected by society: the poor, the old, the abandoned, the lame, the mentally deranged.

In the late twentieth century, many writers have once more shifted the focus away from the common individual to the rich and powerful in contemporary society. Therefore, the voice of the inarticulate individual is, again, often unheard.

This novel is the story of one of those individuals struggling to be heard, Michael. It is a story about a young boy who is put in a foster home at birth because he is the product of the rape of his retarded mother and his



desire as he grows older to claim his identity and to learn the truth of his existence. It is also the story of how society, in the form of the welfare department, denies him any knowledge of his mother and his heritage. It becomes apparent through the novel that there is a tragic problem with a system--however well meaning--that has no consideration for the psychological well-being of Michael, who has a normal, innate, human desire to see his own face reflected in the face of his mother.



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Austin Peay State University

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Colleen Watt

May, 1990





To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Creative Thesis written by Colleen Sue Davis Watt entitled Michael. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "D. H. V. L.", written over a horizontal line.

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Second Committee MemberA handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Sharon K. Lee", written over a horizontal line.  
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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "William H. Eelie", written over a horizontal line.  
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## PART I

(1937)

Through the haze on the window, Alma stared out over the yard, beyond the rusty iron fence, and across the street into the park where children played on teeter-totters and swung so high on swings she couldn't see them through the branches of thick, brown trees full of new leaves tossing in the windy afternoon.

She faintly remembered the pleasure of going up and down on a teeter-totter and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her stare moved past the children to a long row of lilac bushes blooming lavender at the back edge of the playground.

*How pretty they are!* Her nose ached to smell the musky sweetness she knew from a bottle of toilet water her mother had gotten from the Fuller Brush man a long time ago.

*"You like that pretty lady,"* the Fuller Brush man said as he stared below Alma's neck. *"That's lilac water. I bet you like pretty things, don't you, honey?"*

Mama had grabbed her by the arm, pulled her out of the room, and sent her upstairs until the man left. She heard Mama holler *"Get out and don't come back!"*

She didn't know why Mama was so mad, but the next time Mama opened the door there was a new Fuller Brush man.

"Alma!"

Startled, she backed away from the window and answered loud enough for her voice to travel through the doorway and down the stairs, "I'm up here, Mama."

"Have you taken your bath yet?"

"No, Mama, not yet. I . . . I'll do it now." She opened the door to the chifferobe and pulled out a shirt-waist dress covered with tiny purple and white flowers. Her hands were shaking.

Alma heard her mother muttering as she moved away from the stairs. Alma imagined hearing the words 'that child' clearly, as if her Mama was in the room right next to her.

She bent on her knees at the tub and watched warm water cascade through her fingers and turn into white, foamy bubbles from the new Fuller Brush Man's bubble bath. When the tub was full of bubbles, she pulled the dress over her head and dropped it into the splashes of water her fingers had made. She undid her brassiere and her breasts fell free. She stood before the mirror and took out the pins holding her black hair into a bun at the back. Her hair fell and lightly brushed the middle of her back.

She stood naked in front of the mirror and made faces with her mouth and eyes and nose. She bent and touched her nose to the mirror. Her eyes were big and brown with specks of gold and looked like her Mama's pancakes covered in melted butter and honey. She leaned further and her breasts brushed the faucet. She jerked back and cupped her cold breasts in her hands and kneaded them, trying to get them warm again. She let go. They were pink with prints from her fingers and the ends were brown and hard and



shrivelled like raisins. She twisted her body from side to side and watched in the mirror as her breasts swung back and forth. Her breasts swayed for a second after she stopped twisting. She did it several times. Each time it took her breasts longer to stop than the rest of her body.

She felt the water again, stepped in the tub, held her nose, slid her body and head under the water and blew puffs of white foam into the air.

After her bath, Alma stared out the window to the lilacs in the park again. The bushes were in bloom, but she sensed the purple blossoms would leave soon, like they did last year. Every time when the flowers left she felt sad, as if she'd lost something.

Alma heard her mother coming up the stairs slowly; and as the creaks got closer, she ran across the room and picked up the things she'd left laying on the floor--her monkey bank, Shirley Temple paper dolls, and a brassiere.

"Your lunch is ready." Her mother placed clean sheets on the dresser and began to strip the bed. "Honey, I want you to come down and eat while I hang clothes out on the line."

"Outside, Mama, outside? Please." Alma knew the answer.

"No!" Her mother nearly shouted, and her eyes were wide. She went to Alma at the other side of the bed and cradled Alma's head against her breasts. "I'm sorry, baby,

I can't let you out. It's starting to get warm again." She kissed Alma's forehead. "It was hot the last time you got sick. I can't let you get sick again?"

Alma didn't answer. She remembered being sick, but it was blurs of faces, Mama, Dr. Nolan, Mrs. Finkey from next door; and colors, white and grey; and heat and sweat and thirst; and after that everything was dark; and when it was over she was like a new person, starting all over again. She knew that somehow she was different now, too. Sometimes it was hard to remember things; everything just seemed to bunch together and become cloudy, and sometimes she felt like something was wrong, like she wanted to play in the park with the other children, but they were so much smaller than her; and her fingers were too big to use the small scissors for cut outs, and she can't remember her numbers or letters; she tries to remember the smell of the lilacs, almost remembers; then it goes away. Thinking about all those things made her tired and her head hurt.

"I sleepy, Mama."

Her mother kissed her forehead again. "Don't you feel good, Alma?"

"Just sleepy."

Her mother folded down the cover and top sheet. "All right, baby. You eat lunch, and when you're done, come up here and lie down, and I'll call you before dinner, okay?"

They went down, and Alma sat at the kitchen table

eating slowly. Her mother brought a load of wet wash up from the cellar.

"I'll just be out back. Are you sure you want to lie down, Alma?"

Alma nodded her head.

"It's probably too warm in here. I'll open some windows. Then, you take a nap. A good nap will make you feel better, you'll see." Her mother opened the kitchen window, then walked out the back door, letting the screen door bang shut behind her.

Alma pushed the soup bowl away and watched her mother and Mrs. Finkey talking over the fence between the houses. Her mother would go in Mrs. Finkey's kitchen to drink coffee the way she had before. She moved from the table toward the stairs and saw the postman walking up the porch steps with a handful of mail. She hid around the kitchen corner until he was gone; then she moved to the front door, opened it, and breathed in the faint scent of lilacs.

She opened the screen door and stood on the porch. A warm gust of wind pulled strands loose from the bun at the back of her head. She pulled the pins out and her hair snapped like whips in the wind, stinging her across the face. As she walked down the sidewalk toward the gate, the wind pressed her dress against her left side while the right side opened like an umbrella.

She reached the gate and pulled it open slowly, peeking



up and down the street and behind her, making sure no one, especially her mother, would see her outside the house. She went through the gate and started to run across the street to the park. The top of her body leaned so far forward, she thought she would fall. Her arms flailed, and the soles of her shoes slapped hard against the pavement. She could feel the balls of her feet stinging. When she came to the edge of the park, she stopped running. She breathed deep as the scent of lilacs floated across her body. Then she saw the swings.

She stumbled to the swings, sat, and pushed the ground with her feet; her seat started to sway back and forth, and she started to pump higher and higher; her dress filled with air like a balloon and the hem slid past her knees. She breathed in the wind, and she laughed as the moisture in her eyes and mouth dried; her arms and forehead began to sweat. Then the wind blew hard, and her dress blew up over her face. She couldn't see, and her heart started pounding faster, and tears welled in her eyes. The swing twisted back and forth, and she held on so tight to the chains her hands hurt. Her feet scraped along the ground, and the swing slowed down. The heels of her shoes bumped along the dirt. When the swing stopped, she sat waiting for her heart to quit pounding, and she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Her shoes and socks were covered with dirt. Then she saw the teeter-totters and went toward them.

She was disappointed none of the children she watched from her window were there to play on the teeter-totters with her today. She straddled one end and pushed her dress up between her legs and held on to the handle and sat down. Her weight pushed the end down; she landed with a hard THWACK and fell over backwards. Someone laughed behind her. It was a deep laugh closer and closer. She rolled over and got up.

"Hey, honey, you all right?" It was a man. He was still laughing. She watched him laugh. He was bigger than the Fuller Brush man or the postman; his hair was black and his hands were brown like her mama's got from working in the sun.

She started to back away, but the man came toward her. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't hurt."

She stopped and stared up at him. She had never seen anyone like him before. His nose had a kind of curve; his words sounded different, like parts were missing.

"Maybe you'd like to talk a little bit. I'm kinda new here, and maybe you could tell me about the neighborhood, like a good place to get a hot dog or where a fella can get a cold beer after a hard day's work, or maybe how a fella can get a pretty lady, maybe like yourself, to go have that hot dog and cold beer with him."

His pants were stained with grease, but his shirt was clean, and the top buttons were open. His chest was covered

with curly black hairs.

"Hey, what were you doin' on the teeter-totter? Do you like to ride it?" He moved his fist up and down.

Alma looked at the ground as she spoke. "I ride."

"Well, come on, honey. I'll ride with you on it." He headed toward the teeter-totter.

She closed her eyes and saw from her window the children going up and down, laughing, and she moved toward the teeter-totters.

He walked to the other end and swung his leg over the board. "Come on, honey, get on."

Alma moved to her end and swung her leg over the board and pulled her dress between her legs so she could hold on to the handle.

He squatted his legs and Alma rose in the air. She was afraid at first, but as he raised and lowered her, she started to laugh. The motion was like her Mama's rocking chair.

"Do you come to the park a lot, honey?"

She looked at the man; his voice sounded far away. She shook her head.

"Are you sayin' you never come to the park, honey?"

She tried to separate actually being at the park from looking at the park through her window. She was confused. But then that motion and the feel of the board beneath her butt and thighs and the steel of the handle on her hands



seemed familiar somehow. "I . . . I don't know."

"How old are you, honey?"

She hesitated. "Thirteen."

"No, honey, you're no thirteen. How old are you really?"

She knew he was right. She had been thirteen a long time ago, but she couldn't remember how old she was now.

"Don't know."

"Well, why'd you come to the park today?"

"Smell lilacs."

"Well, where's your mama, honey?" He looked around. She pointed across the street to the house.

"Ain't she gonna be looking for you?"

"Drinking coffee." She pointed to Mrs. Finkey's house.

"Mrs. Finkey." She giggled.

"Well, where does she think you are, honey?"

"Sleeping."

"Oh, well, don't you think she might see you from here?"

She turned and looked in the direction of Mrs. Finkey's. Mama would be mad if she knew Alma left the house.

"Come on, honey. Put your feet on the ground and spread them apart." He lowered her so her feet were touching the ground. He got off his end of the teeter-totter and went to her and held the bars while she got off.

"Didn't you say you came to the park to see the lilacs?"

She nodded and looked toward the lavender bushes.

"If we go over by the bushes, your mama won't be able to see you."

Alma looked back toward Mrs. Finkey's again. He held his hand out toward her. She held on to it and ran. The man's hand was warm. His palms were wet and rough.

When they came to the bushes, Alma dropped his hand and pushed her face into the clusters of flowers. She ran along the wall of bushes, her arm pushed into the purple softness, a shower of petals fell behind her. She laughed and ran back to the man. She felt the sticky wetness of her own body. His forehead was covered with sweat.

"Boy, honey, you sure are pretty."

"Mama says that." She giggled.

"Well your Mama's a smart lady." He turned to the bushes. "Why do you like these flowers so much, anyway?"

"Smell pretty. They soft. I want to smell like them?"

"Don't you have any stuff to make you smell pretty, honey?"

"It all gone. Mama send the Fuller Brush man away."

The man picked some petals from the bush. "Well, honey, I know how to make you smell like these pretty flowers here." The sweat rolled off his nose onto the white shirt. "Do you want me to show you?"

The flowers smelled pretty. She missed that smell in the bottle. Soon these flowers would be gone, too, and she wouldn't be able to smell them anymore. She would probably never get to smell like the flowers again after the man left. Her mother never let her come to the park.

"Yes. Smell like the flowers."

"Well, good for you, honey." He looked around. "But we'd better go around to the other side of the bushes so your mama won't see you, don't you think?" Alma had never thought about there being another side to the lilac bushes.

She looked over her shoulder to Mrs. Finkey's again and followed the man behind the bushes.

Behind the bushes was a block wall taller than the man, taller than the bushes. Alma pressed her body against the wall. It was cool against her arms and sweating cheek. The space between the wall and the bushes was just wide enough for her and the man to stand next to each other. He walked ahead.

"Come here, honey."

The man was close and she smelled the grease and the lilacs and the sweat. She felt dizzy and couldn't remember why she was there with the man.

"Remember, honey," he said, "I'm going to make you smell like the lilacs."

Oh, yes. She looked at him and smiled. "Smell like the flowers."

She moved toward him, and he took some petals from the bush and held them out to her. His fingernails had dirt around the edges. He raised his hands and put the petals in her hair. She could feel him moving her hair up and down putting the petals in it; then he moved closer and put his face in her hair. It felt good to have the man play with her hair like that.

He pulled more petals from the bushes and put them under her hair and under the neck of her dress. She was surrounded by the scent of lilacs. He unbuttoned the top button of her dress and put petals in the opening; he undid another button and pushed petals between her breasts. She looked at his eyes. They were green like a cat's. She was afraid of cats. But the scent of the lilacs made her feel good.

"You know, honey, the lilacs are gonna be gone soon, and if you let me, I can make you smell like lilacs for a long time."

She imagined smelling like lilacs for a long time, the smell of lilacs in her room, rolling her body across the sheets making them smell like lilacs, holding Shirley Temple in her arms and making her smell like lilacs, the smell of lilacs on her hankies, her panties, her dollies.

"Do you want me to make you smell like lilacs all the time, honey?"

She nodded.



The man took her hand and sat down on the grass. Alma sat down. He took her shoulders and pushed her back gently. He crawled to the bushes and pulled blossoms and blossoms off the bushes and laid them next to her. He moved toward her and straddled her like the teeter-totter.

The man took a handful of lilacs and rubbed them over her face; then he rubbed them on his own face. He wanted to smell like lilacs, too. He moved his face over hers and told her to smell the lilacs. He put his face close to hers and she smelled. He smelled her face too and licked her near her lips. She wanted to taste the lilacs too, so she licked his cheeks. The man took hold of her head and held it and lowered his face to her chest. He raised again and undid the rest of Alma's buttons. He moved to the side and told her to sit, and he raised her dress over her head.

He stood and spread the dress over the lilac bushes. "Let's let your dress breathe the flowers, too." The breeze made the dress move up and down on the bushes like it was breathing in the scent of the lilacs. He kneeled at her side and leaned and undid her brassiere, and her breasts fell free. He raised a handful of petals to her face. "See honey, you're gonna smell like this all over."

Alma breathed in the scent as he eased her on her back again. The grass tickled the edges of her body, and the breeze was cool between her legs and under her arms. He stayed to the side and began rubbing the petals on her chest

and breasts and belly. He leaned over her side again and licked her on the neck, then on the breasts. He moved one hand just underneath her panties and rubbed a breast with the other hand full of petals. She trembled from the touch, a tickle in her chest, in her belly, between her legs.

"Doesn't that feel good, honey?" he asked.

"Yes, feels good." She closed her eyes and felt the touch and breathed the lilacs. "Smell like lilacs?"

"Not yet, honey. Soon."

He put the petals to her face again, and she breathed. He moved to the end of her body; his hands moved up her legs and pulled her panties off. He moved to her side again and took the petals and rubbed them over her abdomen; he swung his leg over her thighs and straddled her while unzipping his pants and caressing between her legs. She moved up and down to the stroke of his hands. The tickle in her belly and between her legs made her feel hot and breathless. But it felt good.

"See, honey," he said as he scooped some petals and put them in his underwear, "I want to smell like lilacs too."

He leaned over her again and licked her face and breasts. She liked the pressure of his body and his hands between her legs. She looked to her side and his pants and shoes were lying on the ground next to a pile of lilacs. She wondered how they got there.

He eased up on her body from her abdomen to her belly

and began to lean back. He took the point of her breast in his mouth and pulled lightly. His cat's eye looked at her while he bit her nipple, and he licked the end of her breast with his tongue over and over again. The touch made her tingle again in her chest, in her belly, between her legs.

His hands were touching hers on each side of her body in the grass. As he leaned back, he raised one of her hands and pressed her palm flat against his belly, his other hand rained lilacs over her belly and face. His belly was soft and full of black hairs like his chest.

"Here, honey, help me smell like lilacs, too." He gave her a handful of lilacs. They were soft like a pillow, and he moved her hand of lilacs back to his belly. She began to rub the lilacs over his belly and abdomen like he had hers. He held her hand and pushed it lower. She felt a swelling at the bottom of his belly where his legs straddled hers. She stopped. The swelling was long and pointing near her breasts. He held her hands in the air and scooted up her belly some more. The point was lying between her breasts. There was a small hole in the end.

"Don't be scared, honey. That's going to help you smell like the lilacs."

She looked at his face. He was still sweating and his cat's eyes looked like a glass of green water.

He lowered her hand and made her touch the point with her finger. It was soft, the long part silky and bumpy.



"Here, honey, put your hand around it like you hold a carrot or a cucumber."

She put her hand around it; it was soft and hard at the same time. She squeezed and stroked it like Shirley Temple's soft arm. She took a handful of lilacs and stroked it with the soft petals. The man began to move back and forth against her belly, and she could feel the point throbbing like a heartbeat.

The man pushed her hand away. "Okay, honey, you still want to smell like the lilacs don't you?" He moved to the side and put a handful of lilacs to her face and stroked her between the legs.

"Yes. Smell like lilacs."

He straddled her again and put her hand on the point. "Do you see how it looks like a flower, honey?" She held it in her hand and raised it up. The point did look like a flower or a mushroom and the long part was like a stem. "That's going to help me finish making you smell like the lilacs, honey." He stroked between her legs. She raised up to meet his hand. "You want to smell like the lilacs on the inside and on the outside don't ya, honey?"

She thought of her mama, and the tingling, and the smell of the lilacs, and how her mama told her Jesus wants you to be sweeter on the inside than on the outside. "Yes, make me smell like the lilacs on the inside too."

"Remember when we rode on the teeter-totter and you



liked it so much?" She nodded. "Remember how you fell before I came and your butt hurt for a little bit and then the pain went away?" He stroked between her legs. She raised and nodded again. "Well, while I make you smell like flowers on the inside it's going to hurt just a little bit, too, but not for long, okay?"

He stroked harder. Alma felt the tingle grow stronger and she ached to smell like flowers on the inside. "Yes, make flowers inside."

He raised up over her and stroked her and stroked her. Alma felt the point between her legs; he leaned toward her and covered her mouth gently with his hand. She could feel the point pushing against her, then the man pushed hard, and she felt a sharp pain between her legs. Her belly burned; he clamped her mouth harder with his hands; she couldn't breathe; her eyes stung and sweat and tears rolled down her face into her hair.

He held still. "It's okay, honey. It won't hurt anymore. If you promise not to holler, I'll move my hand. You don't want your mama to come find you over here do you? Remember, you're going to smell like flowers on the inside."

He eased the pressure on her face, and she took a deep breath of oil and lilacs. He let her mouth go and began to move again. He rubbed her body and face with lilacs again and moved in and out. She could feel the point go back and forth. He took her hand and moved it over her belly and

between her legs, and she could feel where his body and her body were connected by the point.

The man let go of her hand and put his hands underneath her butt, raised it on his knees. He began to move faster. Alma felt the tingling again as he squeezed her breasts and stroked between her legs. He took the lilacs from her belly and rubbed them between her legs. As he moved back and forth, Alma moved up and down to meet him. She arched to meet him, wanting him to rub the lilacs between her legs.

The man began panting hard and pushing harder, and she thought he might be sick so she stopped moving up and down, tried to get out from under him. He held her butt tighter with his hand; he pushed harder; his back stiffened; then he leaned forward, sucked on her breast, and lay on top of her. She could his heart beating against her chest.

"You sick?"

"No, I'm not sick." His voice sounded mad.

She felt him pull out of her. She felt a stickiness between her legs. He got up and grabbed his pants from the ground.

She sat up and looked on the ground between her legs. The grass was wet.

She looked up at the man.

"That's what flowers are made from, honey." He laughed, and his cat's eyes weren't glassy anymore. "That's what flowers are made of. Don't you know the bees have to

sting flowers so they can make honey?"

"I smell sweet like flowers inside now?"

He laughed again. "Honey, you're about the sweetest thing on the inside I've ever known."

She smiled. Jesus would be happy she was so sweet on the inside.

He pulled his pants back on fast and stood up to leave.

"Make my legs and feet smell like lilacs?"

"Hey, I have to go." He was pushing himself onto the top of the wall; his shoes were in one hand.

"See over wall?"

"No, go home to your Mama."

"Legs and toes smell like flowers?"

"I don't have time to stay here and play no game; you'll have to do that by yourself." He was sitting on the wall putting on his shoes. "Hey, didn't your mama teach you to say thank you when someone did something nice for you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't I get a thank you for making you smell like flowers before I go?"

She looked down. "Thank you."

"Okay, honey, you're forgiven. You'll smell like flowers in the morning, too. You'll see." He jumped down from the wall on the other side.

She rubbed petals on her calves and over her feet and between her toes, and she dressed. The tips of her breasts

and between her legs were red and sore; the smell of lilacs was gone from her arms and her face beneath her nose. She could smell the man's grease and sweat and could feel his stickiness between her legs, but her dress smelled faintly of lilacs.

She peeked around the bushes, children were playing on the teeter-totters, but there wasn't a seat left for her.

She ran back through the trees, dashed across the street, through the gate, up the porch, into the kitchen. Her mother was outside Mrs. Finkey's hanging up clothes.

She ran up the stairs, stuffed a handful of lilac petals, one by one, into the monkey bank.

She stared out the window to the lilac bushes. She smelled her arms, hair, feet. The scent was gone from the outside, but she knew the soreness between her legs meant she smelled like lilacs on the inside. She lay in the bed and slept.

\*\*\*

. . . . the leaves fell from the trees; the ground turned brown; then it was white; she got fat, threw up; Mama cried all the time; Mrs. Finkey said Alma was carrying a pumpkin around in her belly; Mama kept talking about a man; asked about the Fuller Brush man, the post man, not the man from the park who looked like a blur like when she was sick;



the pumpkin moved, woke her up in the middle of the night; the pumpkin was trying to get out; she thought she was going to pop like a balloon if it didn't get out; she couldn't wear her pretty flower dresses anymore, not even the one that used to smell like lilacs in the bottom of her chifferobe.

Her mother ran alongside the bed, rubbing her hair, telling her to calm down and hush and that everything was going to be all right. The room was cold with white walls, men standing over her in white coats, masks over their faces, one of them looked like Dr. Nolan's eyes; his voice muffled; she was afraid of the masks, the men, the pain, the pumpkin. And Mama had a mask on, too; she looked like Dr. Nolan, too, only afraid. The man with Dr. Nolan's eyes told her it wouldn't be long; she would be all right, but she was tired of hearing that, and just after he said that she had a big pain, ripped at her insides; she screamed; Mama held her hand, and Alma mumbled over and over again about the heat, the grey and white, the sweat, Mrs. Finkey, Dr. Nolan, Mama, the park, the man who made her smell like lilacs.

She screamed; Dr. Nolan's eyes told her to push; she felt a welling up inside her that wanted to break loose like a flood; she wanted to help it break loose; she pushed and pushed trying to help it get free; she felt it hump and move and form a great knot, and she knew that she and it wanted the same thing--to be free of each other. She pushed again

and again and felt the pumpkin slide out of her belly, heard the pumpkin cry in relief, and she cried, too.

(1942)

Irene slung the parlor rug over the clothesline and beat it with the rug whacker until the brown roses started to turn pink again. Dust clouds whirled around her in the sunlight, then settled into a thin layer of grit on her arms and, she was sure, in her hair. She couldn't remember how long it'd been since the last time she'd taken the rugs out for a good beating. It must have been . . . Good Lord, it must've been over four years since she'd done it last. She was sure of it now. It was when Alma was first pregnant and started getting sick and throwing up at the least little smell . . . bacon frying, ammonia in the scrub bucket, the musty scent of Grandpa's old books.

The books. They were the ones Grandpa liked to call 'pure delights'--Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Melville's Moby Dick. He said books could teach a man everything he'd ever want or need to know about human nature without the man ever having to walk out the front door of his own house. As if she was sitting with her legs crossed Indian style next to his old rocker again, Irene could hear her Grandpa's voice crack when he tried to talk like Miss Watson and how instead his voice screeched like a witch, "'Dont put your feet up there, Huckleberry,'" and "'dont scrunch up like that.'" She giggled every time her Grandpa changed his voice to suit the characters. But most of all, she remembered how carefully her Grandpa turned the pages and how every time he picked a book up or laid it down he'd turn

it over first and run the palm of his hand over the spine.

It'd been hard to pack the old books away. It seemed they were all she had left of the happiness she'd felt as a child growing up in her grandpa's house.

She sighed. It was hard to feel that kind of happiness anymore. She started to beat the rug again. Each hit made a thwacking sound, and the border and leaves started to look fresh once more. Four years. Irene could hardly believe it. Alma's baby was four years old now. She hit the rug harder. She breathed dust through her nose and mouth but kept beating. When he was born, that baby had the thickest head of black hair on a baby she'd ever seen. Thick black hair. Just like Alma's. And that cry. The only time she'd seen him quiet was when she'd watched through the nursery window while he was taking a bottle of milk. She hit the rug again. Warm tears stung her eyes, then rolled down her face. She stopped beating and wiped her cheek with her arm. The wiping left a brown streak of dirt across the back of her hand.

Irene turned toward the house and looked up. Alma was standing in the window just as Irene knew she would be. She couldn't help but feel Alma wasn't looking at anything in particular, just staring over and through things to a place Irene knew she could never know. Alma had been throwing tantrums since before the baby was born. The doctor said maybe it was because she was confused over how her body was changing. Then he said it was hormones. Hormones. Maybe.



But the tantrums continued after the baby was born. And since Irene had started seeing Mr. D'Angelo, they had gotten worse. And now that they were getting married, Irene was afraid of how Alma at twenty-eight would handle having new people in the house, especially Mr. D'Angelo's daughter, Nancy. Now there was a rotten one.

Irene pulled the rug off the rope clothesline, carried it into the kitchen, and hung it over the back of a chair. She ran warm water in the sink and wiped her face with a washcloth, then poured a cold glass of water from the pitcher in the refrigerator and sat at the kitchen table. The first swallow cleared the dirt from her mouth. She could feel the cold run along the inside of her throat, down her esophagus and along the sides of her stomach.

She took a deep breath of ammonia and pine and looked around the room. Everything had a fresh, clean look to it. The curtains had been bleached white again for the first time in years. There was a new coat of paint on all the walls, and the windows were shiny and clear with no streaks. It was good to see the change in the house, and she was glad there'd be a man around the house again. She chuckled at the thought of herself, at fifty-one, glad to have a man. She was sure she needed to confess the thought to Father McMahon on Saturday. She gave the sign of the cross and took another sip of water.

"Mama, I'm cold."

Irene choked and spilled water on the table when Alma spoke. She hadn't even heard her come down the stairs.

Alma was wearing a pink cotton dress with puffy sleeves trimmed in white lace. It had a print of small white daisies. Irene hadn't even thought about it being chilly in the house, even though it was only late February. She walked over and touched Alma's forearm. It was cold.

"I'm sorry, baby. I got so warm beating the rugs, I didn't notice how cold it really is." She went through the doorway into the parlor and lit the gas stove. "Come on, honey. Come over here. Sit in Grandpa's rocker by the fire, and I'll cover you with a quilt."

Alma's arms were pink from the cold. Her legs were too skinny. Not real skinny, but the combination of the crew socks rolled down over her Buster Brown shoes and her sad, brown eyes made Irene think of the pictures in Life magazine of poor Appalachian children. Alma sat in the rocker, and Irene rubbed her arms up and down trying to make them warm.

"You should've put a sweater on, Alma. Or a winter dress."

"Oh, but aren't the flowers pretty, Mama?" Alma raised the skirt of the dress to her nose. "And they smell so good."

Irene saw that she wasn't wearing a slip under the dress. No wonder she was cold. She covered Alma's legs and arms with the quilt then stood behind her and rocked the

chair slowly back and forth.

She was glad Alma was content to sit so quietly. It reminded her of how, when Alma was small--maybe four or five--she loved to snuggle up in Irene's lap and rock while Alma's daddy hummed and sang to her. Irene quietly sang "Rock-a-bye Baby" and wondered if Alma could remember those days when her daddy was still alive.

She thought of her husband, Matt, and of how his heart would've broken if he'd lived to see what the scarlet fever had done to Alma. And if working in the foundry hadn't killed him the way it did, surely Alma's pregnancy and giving the baby away would have.

She wondered again if Matt would think she had done the right thing. She'd prayed and prayed to God and then she'd gone to the cemetery to talk to Matt, hoping she'd get an answer about what to do with the baby from one of them. But when the answer didn't come, she had to make a decision on her own. Father McMahon and the welfare worker, Mrs. Wright, thought she should give the baby up for adoption, but she couldn't bring herself to just give Alma's baby away. But Irene knew she couldn't take care of both of them. Then, when Mrs. Wright said she could put the baby in a foster home without letting him go for adoption, it seemed like the only solution. She didn't know what else she could've done.

And now she was getting married, and she knew she could never bring herself to tell Mr. D'Angelo about the baby. She



hadn't told him before, and she couldn't tell him now. She was afraid he wouldn't understand why she hadn't told him before. Her only hope had been that someday the doctor would find a way to make Alma better.

But it had been four years now, and Irene knew Alma wasn't getting any better. Maybe worse. And it was almost four years since Irene had seen her grandson. He'd be four years old March 18th--just twenty days away.

Alma hadn't moved for a while, and Irene knew she was asleep. She quit rocking the chair, and turned the radio on low. Woody Herman was playing "Blues in the Night." Irene went back into the kitchen and sat at the table again.

The thought of having a man in the house had worn off. All she could think about now was Alma's baby. Her grandson. She couldn't understand how she could have let so much time slip by. Taking care of Alma and the house took time. Yes. Confession on Saturday. Mass on Sunday and Wednesday. And there was Mr. D'Angelo now. But other than Alma, she was the only real family the baby had. No one knew who or what his father was. That wasn't the baby's fault. Or Alma's.

But Irene had promised herself and the social worker that she would never interfere with the baby as long as he was being taken care of properly. But the more she thought, the more she convinced herself she couldn't know how he was being taken care of if she didn't see him.

Her chest was tight now. She knew she had to see him.



She wondered why she thought of him as the baby instead of Joseph Henry Buchanan. She was the one that had named him Joseph Henry after her grandfather. He was Grandpa's namesake, and she hadn't seen him since he was two weeks old in the hospital when Mrs. Wright had come to take him away. Her grandpa would be ashamed of her if he was alive.

Irene remembered how empty she felt inside after Mrs. Wright left. Like she'd felt after her grandpa died . . . and again when Matt died. Like they'd taken away a part of her instead of a part of Alma. Alma didn't even know she had a baby. She had never asked why the pumpkin cried.

But none of that mattered anymore. What mattered was taking care of Alma and making sure the baby . . . Joey . . . was being taken care of. Irene took another sip of the water she'd left on the table earlier. It was warm now but eased the swelling in her throat and the tightness in her chest. She emptied the rest of the glass in the sink then went to the table in the hall by the stairs and dialed Mrs. Wright's number.

\* \* \*

She sat on the bus bench at the corner of Titus and Willow Avenue just a block and a half down from the address Mrs. Wright had given her over the phone. Mrs. Wright's voice turned curt over the phone after Irene told her she

wanted to see the baby. She had said, "Mrs. Buchanan, your visit could only harm Joey, and it won't be good for you to see him when you know you won't be able to take care of him yourself." Irene also thought of how Mrs. Wright tried to assure her that Joey was being cared for by a family who loved him. But Irene had finally been able to convince Mrs. Wright to let her see him, just once, before she got married. Mrs. Wright pleaded with Irene to change her mind, but Irene promised her that if Joey was happy she would never interfere again. Irene knew that would be a hard promise to keep.

It was 3:15, and Irene wasn't supposed to be at the house until 3:30. She had taken the early bus and had been sitting on the bench since 2:25. She was hoping to get a look at the baby before it was time to go in. She wondered if his hair would still be thick and black like Alma's. Maybe he would look like Matt or her grandpa.

It had turned grey outside, and Irene's gloves and coat and scarf couldn't keep out the cold wind blowing in off the lake. She walked down the street, looking at the houses. It was a nice neighborhood. Her own house was old; it had belonged to her grandparents. It needed new paint and the eaves needed repair. The houses on this street looked freshly painted and new. Most of the fronts were made of stone. Chain link fences connected the back yards, and the front yards were flat and well landscaped. In the spring, her fence would be overgrown with bushes and vines. And the

city had stopped taking care of the park across the street from her house. Even the lilac bushes were being choked by ivy and weeds.

She stopped at the house with the number 593 on the front. It was a large house with a stone front. There was a picture window on the left and a dormer above the garage. She stood at the end of the driveway. The skin on her legs was tight from the cold, and her toes cramped in the heels she usually wore only to church. She wished she was home wearing her socks and slippers. She thought about turning around and going home but shoved the thought away, walked to the door, and rang the bell. She could hear the chime on the inside, and as the door opened she could hear small bells tinkling.

The woman who answered was large, had short, curly, brown hair, and wore glasses. She was wearing an apron over a green shirtwaist dress. Irene stood mute at the doorway for a second until she felt the heat from the house escaping.

"Mrs. Schmidt?"

"Yes."

"Hello, I'm Mrs. D'Angelo." Irene had agreed with Mrs. Wright to use what her new name would be. "I believe Mrs. Wright called and told you I would be coming."

"Yes, please come in." Mrs. Schmidt held the screen door open, and Irene felt swallowed up by the warmth of the big house.



She walked through the foyer into the parlor. Logs were crackling in the fireplace at the far end of the room. The furniture was new and was upholstered in pale green except for an overstuffed, brown chair and hassock at the other end near the fireplace. Beside the fireplace, there was a gas hurricane lamp with two big globes sitting on a large console radio.

"Would you like to sit down?"

Irene was startled by her voice. "Yes, I'm sorry. I was admiring the room. It's lovely." Irene sat down on the sofa. Mrs. Schmidt sat in the overstuffed chair.

"Thank you." Irene could tell that Mrs. Schmidt didn't know where to begin. She pulled off her scarf and gloves.

"I assume that Mrs. Wright told you who I am?"

"Yes."

"But I'm not sure she was able to tell you why I wanted to come." Irene took a deep breath to keep her composure.

"I'm not sure I know why myself."

"She told me you wanted to see Mickey . . . that he's your grandson."

"Mickey?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My husband's name is Michael, so we've been calling the baby Michael . . . or Mickey . . . since he first came into our house."

Irene was confused. "But I named him Joseph Henry . . . Joseph Henry Buchanan at the hospital. Didn't they tell



you?"

"Yes, but since he was going to be living with us for quite a while, we asked if we could call him Mickey . . . Michael Schmidt . . . just until he's old enough to be told his real name."

Irene panicked. "I really wanted him to be called by my grandfather's name . . . Joseph Henry. And it's very important to me that he keep his mother's last name . . . Buchanan . . . for her father."

Mrs. Schmidt moved from her chair and sat down by Irene. "Mrs. D'Angelo . . . I understand how you feel, and my husband and I aren't trying to hurt you. We really are trying to do what we think is best for your grandson. It's so hard for children to go to school and be made fun of by other children because they live in a foster home or because they don't have the same last name as the people who act as their parents." Mrs. Schmidt covered Irene's hand with her own. "He was so little when he came to us. We wanted him to feel like he was our own . . . We really do love him, Mrs. D'Angelo."

Irene understood what she was saying and squeezed her hand in response. Mrs. Schmidt's hands were large like the rest of her, but the skin was warm and soft to touch. Irene watched her face. It was big-boned too, but her skin was fair and looked soft. Her eyes were small and brown and were speckled like pebbles in a creek. Irene knew Mrs. Schmidt

was a kind woman and knew Joey was lucky to have a good home. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Schmidt . . . " Irene looked down at the hands in her lap.

"Nina . . . Please call me Nina."

"Nina." Irene smiled her gratitude. "I'm Irene."

"I understand how you feel about his name, Irene. But he is still legally Joseph Henry Buchanan. We just want him to be secure enough about how much we love him and want him to know he is a part of our family. Then, when he's old enough to be told the truth, we hope that our love for him will make him strong enough to accept it."

Irene tried to weed through everything Nina was telling her. She couldn't help but wonder if Joey would ever be able to accept his real name. How would they know when to tell him the truth, and what would it do to him? Irene didn't want her grandson to hate her. But she didn't want to give him up either.

"Before we took your grandson into our home, Mrs. Wright told us a little about you and about your daughter. I know about your daughter's illness, and I know you lost your husband before that. After everything else, I can only imagine how hard it must have been for you to let your grandson go. And I can understand why you would want him to keep your husband's name."

It made Irene feel better to know that someone understood why she couldn't let go of her grandson completely.

Maybe Joey would be able to fulfill the dreams Matt had for the daughter he'd loved so much.

Nina spoke again. "For twelve years my husband and I tried to have a child of our own. In four years I had two miscarriages. Then, after another seven years, I became pregnant and carried our little boy for eight months. Two weeks before he was due, he died in my womb." Nina hesitated. "They didn't know what happened. But I knew we could never go through that again."

Irene could feel what a strong woman Nina was.

"Your grandson, Irene, is the son my husband and I could never have. We really weren't sure that taking in a foster child would work out. But once he came into our life, we knew we were doing the right thing by opening our home up to a child that needed us."

"Mama. Mama!"

Irene jumped. She knew it was her grandson's voice, and suddenly she was afraid.

Nina went to the bottom of the steps. "Come here, Mickey. You can come down." She turned to Irene. "He's been taking his nap." She turned back and looked up the stairs. "Be careful now and hold onto the rail."

Irene stood and tried to see through the white columns and over the mahogany bannister. A few seconds later, she could see the top of his head. It was full of wavy black hair. Just like she'd imagined.



When he got near the bottom of the stairs he raised his arms toward Nina. "Jump, Mama. Jump!"

"Okay, Mickey. Jump!" Nina held her arms out and the baby took a leap off the second step. Irene sucked in her breath.

Nina caught him under the armpits and raised him in the air. She put her mouth to his belly and blew. His giggle reminded Irene of herself with her grandpa and Alma with her daddy.

"Look, Mickey, we have a visitor today." Nina turned and started to walk toward Irene. The baby's legs were straddling her hips. "Can you say hello?"

He put his finger in his mouth and looked at Irene. "He-wo."

She couldn't speak. He was beautiful. He had pure white, beaver cheeks with a red spot on one side that Irene knew was there from his nap. His hair was coal black, and his lashes were long and thick. She walked toward him. His eyes opened wide as Irene got closer. They were honey brown like Alma's but had flecks of green that made Irene think of a cat. She reached out to touch his cheek, but he turned his head into Nina's chest. She drew her arm back then turned and sat on the couch again.

"Now, Mickey. Come on. Don't be a shy boy." Nina put him down on the floor; then she sat next to Irene.

Irene was surprised that he was so tall. He had taken



his finger out of his mouth and had his arms to his sides. It was hard for her to remember he was almost four now. He looked at the floor but rolled his eyes up to peek up at her.

It dawned on Irene why he was being so shy. She hadn't said a word to him. "Hi Jo . . . Mickey. My, aren't you a big boy. Why you must be ten years old." He giggled. "You mean you aren't ten years old?" He shook his head. "Do you know how old you are?" He nodded. "Well, how old are you?" He held up four fingers.

"Four? Are you really four years old? My, my I would never have guessed it." He was looking straight at her now. She held up two fingers. "Is this how you do four?" He shook his head. She held up her hand and spread her fingers and thumb. "Is this four?" He shook his head again. "Well, can you show me how to do four?" He nodded, then walked over to Irene. He took hold of her thumb and tried to fold it down. She kept pretending her thumb wouldn't stay down. Each time he bent it, she'd make it spring up like a jack in the box. He tried to push the thumb harder, and she knew he was as stubborn as she. She leaned forward and pressed her cheek to his forehead. He didn't move other than to play with her fingers. The tips of his fingers were wet. She put her right arm around his body and held his cheek next to hers. His skin was soft and his body had a light powder scent. He started to squirm, and she knew she had to let him go. She could feel her chest tighten, and her throat

constricted. She gave him one final squeeze and let him go. Her eyes were welling up again. She stood.

"Well, I really need to go now." She turned away from them to pull on her gloves and wrap the scarf around the collar of her coat. She touched a fingertip of her glove to the corner of her eyes. She didn't want the baby to see her crying. She took a deep breath and turned back around. Nina was standing in front of the couch. The baby was getting up on the overstuffed chair at the end of the room. When he turned and sat, the heel of his shoes just reached the edge of the cushion. Irene knew now why it looked worn in that spot.

"Irene, will you be all right?"

Irene took another deep breath. "Yes, I'll be fine." She looked toward the chair again. "Nina, I want to thank you for everything you and your husband have done. I know Jo . . . Mickey is in fine hands."

"Is there anything you want us to do? Anything you want us to say to him." She could tell Nina knew that she wouldn't be back.

"No. I think that it would be better if you didn't say anything about his mother or me."

Nina nodded her head. Irene felt her chin quivering now and knew she had to leave quickly.

She turned toward the door.

"Wait, Irene."

Irene turned back around. Nina pulled out the top drawer of the Queen Anne desk next to the foyer. She handed Irene a picture of Mickey.

"It was taken in the back yard last summer."

He was sitting on the ground in knee pants and had a huge wide brim hat on his head. Irene held the picture to her chest, then hugged Nina. She looked at the picture then at the baby over Nina's shoulder. He was watching them. She backed up toward the door.

"Thank you, Nina." She slid the picture in the pocket of her coat. She looked at Mickey again and waved goody-bye. Nina turned toward him.

"Come here, Mickey, and say good-bye to Mrs. D'Angelo."

He rolled over on his belly and slid off the chair. He went to Nina and leaned against her legs.

"Good-bye, Mickey." Irene held out her hand. The baby took hold of her fingers. "It was nice meeting you." She let go of his fingers and leaned forward and cupped his chin. She looked at his eyes and tried to memorize their colors. She wanted to tell him about her grandpa and about his grandpa and about his mama who would have loved him and taken care of him if she only knew how. But she knew he wouldn't understand, and she knew she had to leave now. She let go of his chin. "Bye, bye, Mickey. You be a good boy now, you hear?"

Mickey started waving and she faintly heard him say,

"Bye-bye."

Irene opened the door and walked quickly down the stairs and up the driveway. She kept walking up the street to Titus and Willow. She walked past the bus bench and walked up Titus to Seneca to catch the bus. She held her hand next to the picture in her pocket, and she never looked back.



(1949)

Sister Florence Marie began writing arithmetic problems up and down the blackboard. She stretched to reach the top, and Mike noticed how the sleeves of her black habit stuck to her arms like feathers as she moved quickly from one long column to the next. He watched her bird arms wave up and down again and again as she moved from left to right across the front of the room. From the back she reminded him of Dracula. From the front she looked like a big crow.

She circled to the back of the room, and Mike gave a sigh of relief when she called Pamela, Dennis, Colin, and Margaret to the board. He spun his pencil around on the desktop. It flew off and bounced twice on the floor. He bent over sideways to pick it up and turned to see if Sister Florence was watching him, but she was busy yanking Jimmy McGinnis up by the back of his hair and making him spread a big wad of wet gum across his nose. Mike turned back around. He knew what was coming next. Sister Florence would make Jimmy lean forward and stick his nose to the desk. She'd make him lie there and press his nose hard until the gum was so stuck that Jimmy would have to scrub his face red with lye soap in order to get the sticky, little pieces off. Mike's nose had been raw for a week the third time Sister Florence caught him. When he'd pulled his nose up from the desk, the gum had stretched, and, when he tried to pull it off, it stuck to his hands and neck and shirt. That time she said if she ever caught him chewing

gum again she'd make him wrap it completely around his head. Mike felt the thickness of the hair at the back of his head and imagined how long it would take to get the gum out of it. From then on, he'd stuck his gum under the seat of his desk in the morning and waited til the afternoon bell rang to put it back in his mouth. Sometimes he'd forget the gum, so the bottom of his desk had little, pink Bazooka cannonballs attached to it. When Sister Florence wasn't looking, he'd pull one of the hardened balls off the desk and sling it across the room at his buddy, Ike, or drop one down Rita Planski's collar.

The kids at the board finished and Sister Florence swept down Mike's aisle. Her habit billowed as she walked and brushed Mike's arm. The hair on his arm stood straight up and chills ran along his spine.

"All right, children, let's check these together." Sister Florence took her skinny stick with the red rubber pointer on the end and began adding the numbers aloud. "Two plus four is . . ."

"Six," Mike answered with the class.

"Six plus four is . . ."

"Ten."

"Plus three . . ."

"Thirteen," The group chorused.

"That's right." She wrote the three at the bottom of the column, then raised her pointer to the top. "Now we

carry the one to the next column." As she moved from one column to the next, Mike heard her, but her voice became distant. He quit answering with the rest of the class. He watched the rubber tip move to the top of the columns over and over again, but when she came to the middle of the board, he looked past the pointer, up her bony white hands to the clock above the blackboard. It was two-twenty-five. Thirty-five more minutes and school would be out for the weekend. Mike's eyes followed the second hand as it moved over and around the numbers slower and slower. Sister Florence's voice became fainter with each movement as Mike started thinking about his best friend, John, and their favorite place in the world, the pond.

*He dropped his fishing pole and tackle box to the other side of the wire fence behind his house, then jumped over, recovered his gear, and zigzagged through the trees and ran over the railroad tracks and down the hill toward the pond. From a distance he could see John standing at the far end of the pond getting ready to cast. Mike stood at the base of the hill and watched as John raised the pole over his shoulder. He could see the knot of worm dangling on the end of John's line and imagined feeling the tingling in his own hand as the worm swayed back and forth on the taut string. John stood still for a minute with the pole poised in mid-air; then he raised his right arm and flicked his wrist. The end of the pole snapped like a whip, and the worm flew*



through the air, then landed in the middle of the pond. The water rippled shadows of sky and sunshine. Mike watched as John rested his pole against the pile of rocks the two of them had put there at the beginning of summer; then John sat with his knees bent against his chest. Mike gave one long whistle and two short ones, and John looked up and waved. Mike ran barefoot across the soft padding of grass to the pond.

"What took you so long?" John shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Ma made me clean the back porch."

"On Saturday?"

"She's mad cause I left some sunfish back there, and they dried out and got all smelly. There were flies all over the place."

John shook his head.

"How long you been here?"

"Not long. How come it took you so long to clean the porch?"

"She found the worms in my bedroom and made me clean that, too."

"Geez."

Mike sat on the ground, opened his tackle box, and pulled out a small jar of dirt and worms. He pulled one worm from the jar and slid the hook through its thin, red body. He stood, wiped his hands on his pants, swung his



pole over his shoulder, waited a second, then gave a quick thrust of his arm. The tip of the pole whistled and whipped back when he brought his arm to a quick stop. The worm plopped about ten feet to the left past John's. The fishing line cut through the water.

John walked a few feet along the edge of the pond and picked up a Y-shaped stick and brought it back to Mike. Mike handed John his pole and pushed the end of the stick deep into the ground. He took the pole and laid the end in the stick's V. The reel made a clicking sound as he turned the handle til the line became tight. They both sat on the ground Indian style. Mike pulled up a blade of grass and held it in his mouth like a toothpick. The flat part of the grass tickled the tip of his tongue.

They didn't move for a long time. The only sound was the quiet lapping of water against the edge of the pond and an occasional caw from a crow. The breeze was making the grass brush against Mike's feet and ankles.

John broke the silence. "What'd your dad say about the worms in your room?"

Mike spit the grass out. "He don't know yet. He's at work."

"Will your ma tell him?"

"Probably."

"Will he get mad and holler?"

Mike looked at John in disbelief. "Over a bunch of

dead worms?"

John didn't answer.

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders. "And besides, hollering don't mean nothin'. It's when my dad starts chasing me and his head turns all red that I know I'm in trouble."

They both laughed. Mike picked another piece of grass and started chewing on it. They sat silently.

John broke the silence again. "Do you think your father loves you?"

Mike was surprised by John's question but didn't move and kept chewing on the grass. He thought about his father. He thought about the time he fell off the top of Mr. Wagner's house when it was still being built. His father didn't get mad even though Mike was supposed to have been at a Cub Scout meeting. His father had held ice packs to Mike's chin til the bleeding stopped and had told Mike he would have a scar but 'Not to worry, the women will think it is handsome when you get older. It will be the mark of a man.' Mike felt the little protrusion of skin just below his chin where the scar had formed. Then he thought about the time last year just a few days before Halloween when his mother and father had gone out. While they were gone, Mike had poured catsup on his chest and legs, across his face and arms. He poured a big glob of catsup in his hair. He turned the coffee table over in the living room and spread

the papers and books all over. When he heard his father's car pull in the driveway, he sat in the big, brown chair with its back to the door and put his mother's butcher knife covered with catsup along the side of his neck. The handle was sticking above the top of the chair. His mother came in the door first. She screamed and fainted. Mike's father had been so mad, the bald spot on the top of his head had gotten as red as a beet. Mike knew he'd never forget the whipping he'd gotten for that one. But he knew his father was mostly mad because he had scared his mother. He'd even told him, 'That was a pretty good trick, Mike. But not for women.'

John lay on his back with his arms crossed under his head. Mike turned on his side, bent his elbow, and propped his head in his hand so he could face John. The blade of grass was still sticking out of his mouth. He shoved the grass to the left side of his lips with his tongue.

"Yeah, I know my father loves me. I make him mad a lot, but I can tell he still loves me."

"How can you tell?"

Mike thought again about his father. "It's his eyes."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. But my dad's eyes, they sparkle all the time. And when he looks at me, I know they're sparkling for me." Mike's chest felt tight. He rolled to his back and looked at the white puffs of clouds in the sky. "Why do you



want to know?" Mike rolled to his side again to face John.

"I don't know really. My dad's different from yours, Mike. I . . . Nothing I ever do seems to make him happy. Whenever he looks at me, he always seems to be mad." John was still on his back.

Mike sat up and faced him. He crossed his legs Indian style again. "What do you mean? You get good grades all the time. My dad would faint if I brought grades like yours home! Doesn't that make your dad happy?"

"He says that's pretty good, but then he says, 'John, why did you get a B in gym class? I bet none of the other boys get a B. For a real boy, gym should be an easy A.'" John closed his eyes, but Mike saw a tear push out from underneath the corner of his left eyelid.

"What about the piano? You play the piano so good."

"It doesn't matter, Mike! Everything I try to do, he does it better. He plays the piano better, plus he can play the saxophone. I can't keep up with him."

"You're not supposed to keep up with him. He's old. He's supposed to know more."

"He tells me to cut the grass after school, and then he has it done before I can even get home. Then he makes me feel like a heel for not gettin' it done before him."

Mike didn't know what to say. He thought maybe he could make John laugh. "I wouldn't feel like a heel. He could try to make me feel bad all he wanted. I'd just keep



thinking to myself he was a sucker for doin' it."

"Yeah, I know. But I hate hearing him tell me I'll never grow up to be a man." John looked down. "I don't know what to do anymore. The only places I feel any good are when I'm with you or when I'm in church."

Mike was afraid John was going to cry. "You just can't let him get under your skin. You gotta learn to ignore what he says."

John sat up and faced Mike. "He's my father, and it really means a lot to me to know I make him proud."

"You can't take the blame for how he feels. And it seems like he don't care how he makes you feel." Mike lay back down on the grass. "You just can't let him get to you, that's all."

John lay back down on the grass, too.

Mike chewed on the grass and stared up at the sky, then rolled over on his side. "Hey, it's too bad you don't have a brother like me, huh. Then your dad would see how bad I am in school, and he'd sure have to be proud of you then."

John laughed and rolled on his side. "You're crazy, Mike." He sat up. "You don't know how many times I wish I had you for my brother."

John got up and started walking around the pond. Mike lay on the ground and watched John walk the circle around the pond. He thought about John wishing he had him for a brother. That made him feel good, but he felt bad about how

John's father made him feel.

"Hey, dummy, look at your pole!" John was jumping up and down and hollering from across the pond.

Mike bolted to his feet. The end of his pole was twitching up and down. He raised the pole slowly so the fish wouldn't feel the movement. He held the handle of the reel steady with the palm of his hand and pulled slightly on the fishing line with his thumb and index finger. There was a tug, and the line slid over his fingers.

He looked up across the pond and hollered at John who still had his hands in mid-air. "I think it's a big one! I think it's a whale!"

John jumped up and down and started running back around the pond. "Oh, boy!"

Mike turned the handle of the reel slowly and raised the tip of the pole in the air. The line got tighter and the tip bent like the top of a willow tree. "Hurry up, John! He's a real fighter!"

"Oh, wow, Mike!" Mike could hear John running from the right.

Mike held the pole steady between his hands and raised the pole further in the air. He pulled up slowly then eased it down and turned the handle of the reel to take up the slack in the line. He pressed the bottom of the pole against his stomach. He liked to feel the fish's movement in the pit of his belly. He raised the tip end of the pole

in the air then lowered it and took up the slack again and again. He knew John was right behind him. He could feel his warm breath on the back of his neck.

Mike raised the end again, and the fish shook violently over the surface of the pond. It was a big silver bass, bucking like a rodeo bull. "Holy Mary, Mother of God!" Mike shouted and turned the handle at the same time. "Can you see it? Can you see it, John?!"

"Michael! Michael Schmidt! You stop that silly daydreaming right now!" He was being hit over and over on the top of his head. He straightened his back and the hitting stopped. He could hear clearly now and knew where he was. He also knew Sister Florence Marie was really mad this time.

He looked above the chalkboard to the clock. It was two-fifty-five. He slid his hands under the desktop and slowly looked up at Sister Florence. "Yes, Ma'am?"

"Don't you 'Yes Ma'am' me like you haven't done anything wrong, young man." Her voice was high, and Mike could tell she was real mad cause her nostrils were flaring every time she took a breath. "What have I told you about daydreaming in class? Stick your hands out on the desk right now." Mike felt the palms of his hands with his thumbs. They were sweating. "Michael, put your hands on the desk now!"

Sister Florence had the ruler poised over the desktop.



Her hands and fingers were covered with little brown patches. Mike's mother told him they were liver spots. He wiped the palms of his hands against his pant legs, then inched his fingers up over the edge of the desk. He raised his hands in the air about four inches off the desk. He knew the smack of the ruler would hurt worse if he kept his hands lying on the hard surface of the desk. That made them sting for a long time.

Mike hoped Sister Florence would hit him across the top of his hands, but he knew better. She tipped the ruler up between her thumb and forefinger then smacked it across his nails and the top knuckles of his fingers. She hit him across each hand four times. Mike could feel the blood rising in his face, but he gritted his teeth together to stop tears from forming.

As Sister Florence hit his knuckles the last time, the bell rang. The other kids started to leave their desks.

"I don't remember giving anyone permission to leave the room." The students stopped and sat back in their seats. Sister Florence went to the front of the room. "Since James and Michael chose to disrupt the classroom so much this afternoon, I want everyone to write, 'I will not chew gum or daydream in class,' one hundred times and to bring it to me on Monday. You may thank your two classmates for that assignment."

The kids around Mike all stared at him and groaned



'Thanks a lot, Mike.' He could hear the kids in the back of the room doing the same to Jimmy. He felt his face burning again.

"James and Michael;" Sister Florence was tapping the ruler on the top of her desk to get the other children to stop talking. "You both will write the same sentence two hundred times and turn it in on Monday."

The other kids giggled, and Mike slid down in his seat and looked down at his red knuckles resting on the desk top. "All right, children, you may leave now."

Mike walked out of the room past Sister Florence Marie and wondered how a nun could know exactly how to make a guy feel so rotten. He wondered if Sister Florence went to confession on Saturday to tell the priest how rotten she was to the kids all week. As far as Mike was concerned, there weren't enough 'Hail Mary's' in the world to forgive Sister Florence Marie.

He usually stopped in Mr. Fussell's Five and Dime on the way home for a cherry licorice, but this time he pedalled on past. John's words, 'I wish I had you for a brother,' kept rolling over in his head. He'd been thinking about last Saturday at the pond all week long. He and John would meet there again early in the morning, and Mike wanted to figure out how to make John feel better. When he got to Cooper Road and Titus, he pedalled faster. He knew his mother was waiting for him to go with her to the public

market for chickens, and if he didn't hurry up, they'd have to go on Saturday morning instead. Mike didn't like anything to stop him from going fishing on Saturday mornings.

When he turned the corner into their driveway, he jumped off the bike and let it fall by the big maple in the front yard. His father had raked a pile of leaves around the tree, and the bike scattered them out of the pile. Just as the leaves settled, his mother opened the screen door.

"Why did you have to run your bike through the leaves, Mike? It took your dad all morning to get them that far."

"Sorry, Ma."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to rake them up again in the morning before you go off fishing."

"Aw come on, Ma. Only a couple of them flew out of the pile."

"Just think of how many more will be there by morning. Maybe that will make you watch what you're doing next time. And besides, your Dad shouldn't have to do it after working all day."

"Gee, Ma, you know the fish only bite early in the morning."

"Then I guess you'll just have to get up before the fish do so you can rake the leaves." His mother went back in the house, and Mike sat on the porch step with his elbows bent into his knees and his cheeks pressed against his

fists.

It was turning into a bad afternoon, but he knew there was no point in arguing with his mother. She was more stubborn than Sister Florence Marie. If he pushed too hard, his mother would say something to his dad, and then he might not get to go to the pond at all.

The screen door opened behind him, and the front door closed. The bells hanging on the inside tinkled faintly as they hit against the wood.

"Come on, Mike. If we're going to get chickens today we'd better get going. You don't want to have to do that tomorrow too, do you?"

Mike knew by the sound of her voice that she was only teasing, but he ran to his side of the car anyway and got in.

As they pulled out of the driveway, he moaned. More leaves were blowing off the trees onto the ground.

His mother headed down Willow toward John's house. John's father was out in the yard trimming the hedges. The leaves had already been raked, and leaf bags were lined up next to the street for the garbage men. Mike thought of how noboby should be expected to keep up with Mr. Labruda.

Mike's mother turned off Willow onto Seneca Boulevard. The street was four lanes wide, and both sides of the road were lined with big Maples covered with orange and red and yellow leaves. The ground was covered, too.



The houses behind the trees were big, and some of them reminded Mike of his own house. Some of them had windows above the garage like his bedroom window, and Mike wondered if other guys liked to climb out on the roof at night to lie there and watch the stars like he did. Or maybe they had a girl living next door, like Beverly O'Connell, who sometimes forgot to pull down her shades when she was getting ready for bed at night.

"You're quiet this afternoon, Mike. You have something on your mind?"

Mike knew he couldn't tell his mother he was thinking of Beverly O'Connell and how much he loved to watch her roll her dark stockings off the top of her slim legs, or how he waited breathless for her to turn around after she unsnapped her brassiere from the back and slid the straps down her arms and pulled it free from her body, or how his peter got hard and throbbed when she turned around and the brown nipples in the middle of her white breasts stuck out when she stood sideways in front of the mirror.

He turned his head and watched along the side of the road. Every few houses someone was in a yard raking up leaves. "I was just thinking of how I wish someone would go to our house while we're gone and rake up our leaves."

"Well, you might as well face it, that isn't going to happen, and you may as well prepare to rake them yourself."

"I know." Mike sighed, but he was really glad his



mother accepted what he'd been thinking about. He wiggled in the seat and tried to forget about Beverly's body.

"Maybe I'll have time to rake the leaves when we get home this afternoon. Would that be okay, Ma?"

"I guess. But you have to bag them up tight and put the rake away."

"I promise, Ma. I will." Mike was glad he thought about doing the leaves tonight. Maybe he could talk John into helping.

As they drove onto Portland Street, Mike turned to lock his door just as his mother said, "Lock your door, Mike." He knew she was going to say it. She always said it right after they turned onto Portland Street about a block before they crossed the railroad tracks. She'd been saying it ever since the car door had swung open when he was four and he had bounced out onto the street. He'd been watching out the window then, too, and the next thing he knew he was already half way out the door. He remembered hollering, "Ma! Ma!" and tumbling and watching the car roll down the street. He remembered his mother screaming, "Michael! Stop the car! Stop the car! Oh my god! Mickey's dead! I know he's dead!" He could see the red lights as his father slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car. He was sitting in the middle of the railroad tracks. He wasn't even crying. His mother had come running down the railroad tracks hollering, "My baby, my baby. Is he hurt, Michael? Tell me my baby

isn't hurt." His mother cried all the way to the public market holding him on her lap, rocking him back and forth. Except for a scrape on his forehead, he hadn't been hurt at all.

His father tried to tell her that Mike had so many clothes on he couldn't get hurt. "He has on a long winter coat, pants, and a hat. For crying out loud, he's covered from head to toe." When Mike thought about it now, it all seemed pretty funny.

His mother pulled around the corner onto Scio Avenue, then turned right into the parking lot where farmers had the back ends of their pickup trucks and wagons open and full of vegetables and fruits. She picked up her purse and started to get out of the car.

"Mike, be a good boy, and bring the bags off the back seat."

"But Ma, won't he put the chickens in a box?"

"I know that Mike, but I thought I'd get some rhubarb and maybe some pumpkin for pies." Mike knew then his mother was in the mood to shop, and he might as well forget raking the leaves before morning.

They walked down the first row of trucks, and his mother picked out white turnips, escarole, green beans and rhubarb. She shook the pumpkins and tapped on their sides but didn't buy any because they didn't 'sound like they were ripe,' and it was 'too early in the season.' Mike wondered

what ripe pumpkins sounded like but decided against asking.

He carried one bag to the car while his mother went down the next row. By the time he got back, his mother was already haggling with Mr. Moliari over chicken prices.

"Okay, Mrs. Schmidta, I maka you a deal you can't afford to pass up." Mike liked to hear his mother and Mr. Moliari dicker over prices. Mr. Moliari put an extra "a" on the end of most of his words and moved his hands and fingers up and down and in circles the whole time he talked. He said his mother "never had it so good" if she bought his chickens. Then he'd press his fingers to his lips then wave them in the air and say "benissimo."

He was standing in the middle of a pack of chickens in a temporary fence made of chicken wire. Every time he waved his arms the chickens clucked and flapped about. But Ma always knew how to get the best price and usually waited until Mr. Moliari gave her a really good deal.

"Today," Mr. Moliari started to wave his hands, "just for you, Mrs. Schmidta. You buy two chickens and I give you two dozen eggs for nothing. Whatta you think. Is that a greata deal or what?" Mr. Moliari was almost impossible to resist when he started to bargain. At the end of his deal he'd fold his arms in front of his belly and smile like he'd just given you a sack of gold. Even Mike's mother had a hard time turning him down.

"Okay, Mr. Moliari, I'll pick out two chickens and take



two dozen eggs."

"Bene. Very good. Bene. Which two chickens you like, Mrs. Schmidta, and I getta them for you."

Mike's mother walked a complete circle around the fence and looked at all the chickens. She picked out two of the biggest ones. Mr. Moliari grabbed each of them by a wing and tossed them in the back of his pickup parked about two feet from the fence. The chickens each gave a loud squawk and a thud then got back up on their feet and started to scratch against the metal bottom of the truck.

Mr. Moliari climbed over the fence and pulled an empty box from underneath the truck. He sat on the truck's tail end, held one of the chickens under his left arm, and twisted its neck with his free hand until Mike heard the bones snap.

He was surprised at how easily Mr. Moliari could snap the necks of chickens like it wasn't anything. The grinding of the bones gave Mike a chill, and he couldn't imagine touching the necks as the bones crushed against his palms. Mr. Moliari put the first chicken in the box. It's body kept twitching up and down and clucking. Then, he twisted the neck of the second chicken and put it in the box too. Both chickens kept clucking even though their necks were broken. He handed Mike the box. Mike held it in his arms against his chest. Both chicken's heads kept sliding back and forth in the bottom of the box, and their bodies were



straining to stand up; but Mr. Moliari had told Mike once before that the chickens couldn't stand up because they needed their necks to help pull them up. Mike still worried about a chicken flapping about and touching him. He didn't like the thought of touching something that was so close to dying.

"Will that be all, Mrs. Schmidta?"

"Yes, Mr. Moliari, that's all for this week. How much do I owe you?"

Mr. Moliari put his right finger to his temple. "Let's see. Two chickens and two dozen eggs free. Thata be one dollar anda forty-three cents."

Mike's mother pulled a dollar bill from her pouch and counted forty-three cents out in Mr. Moliari's hand. "Thank you, Mr. Moliari." Mr. Moliari handed her two grey cartons full of brown eggs.

"No, Mrs. Schmidta, thank-a you."

Mike and his mother went back to the car and put the chickens in the trunk. Their heads were still sliding around in the box. His mother put the eggs on the back seat. They pulled out of the parking lot onto Scio and turned left onto Portland again. Mike turned and locked his door before his mother had a chance to say anything. He could hear the chickens clucking faintly in the trunk of the car.

"Ma, do you think the chickens are in pain?" He turned

to look at his mother. It was hard to tell what she was thinking because the side of her glasses made it so he couldn't see her eyes.

"I don't think so. Chickens don't have the same kind of minds as people. God made chickens so men could have food. They don't feel pain the same way we do."

"How do you know, Ma?"

"Because I know God is good and wouldn't make anything suffer longer than it has to."

He thought about her answer for a minute. "But Ma, why does God make anything suffer at all?"

His mother slowed the car down and crossed the railroad tracks. As they rolled over the tracks she was biting her lower lip. "Sometimes, Mike, people have to suffer in order to grow, in order to get closer to God. If they had everything easy all the time, they'd forget about God and wouldn't feel like they needed him anymore."

Mike turned back to the front and thought about how John was suffering. John loved God. He went to mass on Sunday and Wednesday and to confession on Saturday. He never forgot about God. He prayed all the time, wore a cross around his neck, and even carried rosary beads in his pocket. There wasn't anybody who loved God more than John did, and he was still suffering. Mike thought about John and him wishing Mike was his brother.

"Ma, if two people live in different houses, can they

be brothers?"

"You're sure full of questions today. What do you mean?" They were stopped at a light, and his mother turned to look at him.

"I mean even though two people don't have the same Ma and Dad, can they decide to be brothers?"

His mother didn't talk for a minute. "According to the Bible, everyone is brother and sister."

"Do you mean you're my sister and not my Ma?" Mike didn't like that idea.

"It's more complicated than that, Mike."

"Oh." Mike didn't want to talk about God anymore, it was too confusing.

"Back in the old days," His mother started talking again, and Mike hoped it wouldn't be about the Bible, "Indians and white men used to become blood brothers."

"What's that?"

"It's where an Indian and a white man would put a little cut on their hand or arm and put the two cuts together to combine their blood so they could become brothers."

"Did it work?"

"They thought so. When an Indian and white man did that, they stood together the rest of their lives even if their people were fighting against each other."

"Wow, Mom, thanks." His mother looked puzzled, but



Mike knew now how to solve John's problem. He felt a lot better.

"Ma, can we stop at the bakery on the way home?"

"What for?"

"Maybe Dad will have some day old cream puffs he can give us."

"You know your dad will bring cream puffs home in the morning."

"I know. But wouldn't one taste good this afternoon?"

"We don't have time. I need to take the chickens home and clean them."

"Okay, I guess I can wait til tomorrow."

His mother drove down Seneca Boulevard again, and Mike looked at the bags of leaves lining the road. He slid down in the seat and closed his eyes.

"I guess since you've been such a good helper today, you can put off doing the leaves until after Mass on Sunday."

Mike turned on his seat and faced his mother. "Really, Ma! Do you mean it?" He could tell by his mother's smile that she did. "Thanks, Ma. I'll do a really good job. You'll see." It wasn't turning out to be such a bad day after all.

They turned on Willow Avenue and passed John's house again. John was sitting on the porch reading. He looked up and Mike waved for him to come down to the house. John

nodded his head and went back in his house.

Mike unloaded the chickens and vegetables and took them in the house. His mother already had water on the stove to boil. The breakfast table was cleaned off and his mother's butcher knife was lying in the middle. Mike was glad he didn't have to cut off the chicken's heads, even though they weren't clucking or twitching in the box anymore.

"Ma, can I go down to the park just for a little while with John? We won't stay out past dinner time. I promise."

"Okay, but take the trash out first. And you'd better be home in time for dinner."

"I will." Mike knew to keep the trash separated. He put one bag with papers on the back porch so they could use them in the fireplace when it got colder. Another bag was full of cans and jars, and he put it in the garage in boxes so his father could carry it to the dump on Saturday. The rest of the trash was left over scraps or peelings from potatoes and apples or stuff like lettuce leaves. He took the bucket out back and dumped the food in a big square wooden box his father made for a compost. He remembered that when he raked the leaves on Sunday he needed to dump some of them in the box. His father used the compost to cover his petunias and marigolds and strawberries. Mike thought about how, late in the fall, his mother and father would buy a slaughtered pig and make homemade sausage in the basement. Then Mike would throw pig skin and buckets of pig

guts in the compost. He was glad they waited until it was cold because the compost smelled pretty bad when it was warm, and pig guts smell bad enough in the cold.

Just as Mike finished rinsing out the scrap bucket, John opened the back fence gate. "Your Ma just finished feeding you dinner, huh?" John laughed.

"Take it back, wise guy." Mike sprayed the water near John's feet.

John backed around the corner, but Mike sprayed the wall of the house and water kept splashing all over the place.

"Okay, okay, I take it back. Now turn off the water!"

Mike dumped the rinse water from the bucket over the grass and turned the hose off. John came back around the corner. His shirt and pants were splotted with water.

"What'd you want?"

"I have something I wanted to tell you, but I don't know. Now that I know you think I eat like a horse. . . ."

"Aw, come on Mike, I was only kiddin'."

Mike knew that but wanted to make John squirm. "Okay, I'll tell you, but do you think it would be okay if you went down to the park for a while? I want to tell you there."

"I guess so. We already ate."

"Okay, take this to my ma in the kitchen, and I'll meet you back here in a minute." Mike didn't give John time to answer. He ran around the front of the house, went in the



front door and up the stairs to his room. By the time he got back, John was already in the backyard near the fence.

"You wanna go to the pond?" John jumped to the other side of the fence.

"Nah, I thought we'd go to the oak tree. The 5:45 ought to be coming through in a little bit."

"Okay." John started through the woods.

Mike jumped over the fence and caught up fast. He put his arm over John's shoulder.

"You're in an awful good mood today. You been up on the roof peeking at Beverly O'Connell again?"

"Nah," Mike laughed. "It's too early. I don't go up there til it gets good and dark."

"I guess you'll be giving Father Calahan an earful tomorrow, huh?"

"Yeah, but you know, sometimes I think he likes my confession. So, I try to tell him real good how Beverly takes off her clothes. Sometimes I hear him squirming around a lot, then he clears his throat and says in a deep voice," Mike spoke in a deep voice, "'Okay, Mike, I think I've heard enough. You need to say ten Hail Mary's and four Our Fathers.'" Then he reminds me to be sure to come back for confession next week. Sometimes I feel like I have to sin if I'm gonna have anything to say in there. Do you think he'd really believe me if I said 'Father Calahan, I have nothing to confess. I've been as good as gold.' He'd

probably make me say Hail Mary's because he'd think I was lying."

"Come on, Mike. You know that's not true. You make Father Calahan sound like a creep."

"Don't you think a guy walking around in a dress is creepy?"

"No. I think they're just closer to God than we are. They're minds aren't like ours."

Mike thought about what his mother said about the chickens not having minds like men either. He figured that maybe the chickens and the priests had the same kind of minds, but he wasn't going to tell John that. John really loved everything about the church.

Mike remembered the time Father Calahan played football with the gang in the empty lot across from St. Mary's. He didn't even get mad when Ike Alexander and Danny Copeland accidentally tackled him and his dress got torn. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Father Calahan can be an okay guy when he wants to."

From a distance Mike could see the top of the oak tree. Its leaves looked like they were spreading across the top of the hill like a huge bush on fire, all yellow and orange and gold. But Mike knew the tree was really standing between the top and bottom of the hill. The oak was the biggest tree he'd ever seen. He and John tried to stretch their arms around the trunk, but their fingers weren't even close

to touching. They did that once or twice a year to see if they're arms had grown. The tree was so big, he thought it had to be a million years old.

The railroad tracks ran along the foot of the hill. He and John had been coming to the tree to watch trains go by since they'd been in first grade. When they'd gotten old enough to reach the huge vines growing off the high branches, they'd started swinging across the tracks. The vines were so thick they could ride single or double.

Both boys sat Indian style at the foot of the tree. The spots where they sat were brown from where their backsides had worn a hole in the grass. Under the vine, there was a longer bare spot from where their feet scraped the ground to push off and stop their swinging. John fiddled with the edges of his pantlegs and watched the railroad tracks.

Mike pulled up a blade of grass and began chewing on it, then took it out of his mouth and looked at John. "Do you remember when we were at the pond last Saturday?"

"Sure. It's too bad we lost that fish." John didn't look at him.

"Yeah, I think it was the biggest one I ever latched onto." He hesitated a minute. "Do you remember telling me you wish I was your brother?"

"Yeah. Why?" John looked at the ground.

"I've been thinking about that all week. Did you mean



it?"

John swung his body around. "Sure I did. Don't you think it'd be swell if we were brothers?"

"Yeah, sure I do. But I didn't know if you really meant it. I mean, are you sure you'd want a peeping Tom for a brother. After all, I get in trouble all the time. And sometimes that might mean you get in trouble too. How'd you feel about that?"

John didn't speak for a minute. "Well, if you were my brother, I'd just have to hope that I could change you."

"Yeah, but if I didn't want to change; would you still want a brother like me?"

"Sure I would. Sometimes when I pray, I tell God to be sure and take care of my brother, Mike. After all, the Bible says we are brothers."

That was the second time today Mike had heard that. It seemed really funny how John and his mother could think so much alike. Mike figured it must be all that praying and going to church.

"Well, how would you like to make it real?"

"What?"

"Being brothers, dummy."

"How are we going to do that. Your house doesn't have enough room, and there's no way my dad's going to let you come live with us." They both sat silent for a minute.

"You're crazier than I am. I meant we could become

blood brothers like the Indians."

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"My ma said that when she was little in the olden days an Indian and a white man would mix their blood to become brothers. Then they stuck together for the rest of their lives. No matter what happened, they always stayed brothers and best friends, even when their people were fighting against each other." Mike looked down at the bare spot in between the circle of his legs. "I thought that if you really wanted to be my brother we could do that."

"Sure I want to be your brother, Mike. But . . ."

Mike looked up. John looked scared. "But what?"

"How do we mix our blood."

Mike leaned over and pushed his hand deep into his pocket. When he pulled his hand out he had his Cub Scout knife. He opened the blade. It was shiny, and he knew it was sharp because he sharpened it at least once a week on a whetstone, even if he hadn't used it.

"All we have to do is make a little cut on one of each of our hands. Then when they bleed a little, we press the two cuts together and say some words, and that'll make us blood brothers."

"You sure it'll make us brothers and won't make us married?"

"Don't be silly, stupid. You have to have a priest to get married."

"Well, where are we going to make the cuts?"

"I'm gonna do mine just below my thumb. What do you think?"

John turned his hand over and squeezed his thumb to his palm. The fat on his hand squeezed up between his palm and thumb. "Yeah, I guess that would be a good spot. But what are we gonna say."

"I don't know. I thought you could say what you want and I could say what I want. But don't say anything too long. We don't want to bleed to death."

"Okay, but give me a minute to think about what I want to say."

Mike knew that was part of it, but he also knew that John was a little bit afraid to get his hand cut. When he thought about what to say to John, he thought of how he and John were like the Indian and the white man, how he loved to sleep outside and look at the stars, and how John loved to read books and go to church. But they were alike too. They both liked to play the piano and football. And they both loved to fish at the pond and swing on the vines over the railroad tracks.

"Okay, Mike, I think I'm ready."

Mike held the knife out to John. "Okay, do you want me to cut myself first or do you want to go first?"

"You go first."

Mike held the knife in his left hand and squeezed his



thumb in his right palm with the rest of the fingers on his right hand. He looked up and John's face was all scrunched up as he watched. He held the knife over the fat of his thumb where he saw some blue just below the surface. He pushed the knife against his skin and ran it down his thumb for about half an inch. Blood pushed out along the cut onto the knife. Mike kept squeezing his thumb so the blood wouldn't stop. He wiped the knife on his pants and handed it to John.

"You need to hurry, so I won't stop bleeding."

John scooted over right next to Mike. He squeezed his hand like Mike and held the knife over his thumb. "Does it hurt?"

"No, I can't hardly feel it. That knife is so sharp you could cut wood with it."

John squeezed his right hand harder and touch the knife to it. Then he closed his eyes and pushed. Blood squeezed out all around the knife.

"Geez, it's a gusher. You didn't have to push the knife so hard."

John opened his eyes and looked. "I didn't even feel it. Golly, look at how much it's bleeding!" The blood ran down John's thumb to his wrist.

"Don't worry about it. It'll be all right." Mike took the knife from John and wiped it on his pants again and closed it. "Okay, put your hand over here, so we'll be

ready."

They faced each other and held their hands palm side up side by side. Mike thought of how their blood looked so different, probably like the Indian's and white man's. His blood was thick, deep red, ruby, like the wine church served for Communion, and John's was brighter than his, runnier like blood from raw meat.

Mike held his hand out toward John. "Okay, we're going to put our thumbs together, right on the cuts, and you say what you have to say first, then I'll go."

They raised their hands, matched them up at the cuts, and pressed. When John looked at him, Mike felt like John was looking into his soul. "With this blood you and I become brothers. I promise to honor, and love, and be faithful to you as a brother until the day I die."

Mike had to take a deep breath before he could talk. He didn't know before how much John really did want him for a brother. Mike pushed the cuts harder and looked at John. He could see his own reflection deep in the brown of John's eyes. "You and I are now brothers like the old Indians and the white men. We're like the wind and the rain, wherever one is, the other won't be far behind. I promise, John, to be your brother and your friend forever."

"Gee, Mike, that sounded just like an Indian."

They pulled their hands apart and wiped the blood off on their jeans. Mike's cut stopped bleeding fast, but John

had to hold a finger over his for a minute to get it to stop. Mike didn't want to tell John that what he said about the wind and the rain was something he'd heard his ma say all the time whenever the wind started to blow hard and she thought a storm was coming. And he knew his ma was mostly German, so she wouldn't know what the Indians said. But, he still thought what he said was pretty good.

They stood up and looked at each other like they didn't know what to say. John smiled so Mike smiled too, but he was a little surprised when John ran forward and hugged him. "Thanks, Mike, I really appreciate you bein' willing to be my brother."

Mike just stood there for a second. He didn't know what to do or say. Then he heard the train whistle. It was pretty far away still, probably coming down Lake Avenue.

"Listen, John, it's the train. I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"You climb up on the vine and stay there. I'll hold onto the bottom, then climb on and push. We can swing over the train."

John shook his head no and backed up. "You could get hurt, Mike. I'd be okay because I'm higher up, but you could slam into a box car and get killed."

"No I won't. I'm gonna wait til the engine and boxcars and tankers go by. Then when we see the coal cars coming, I'll push off. Come on, John. It'll be the first thing



we'll do as brothers. I promise I'll keep looking to my left for the caboose, and I'll stop swinging before the end of the coal cars."

"Okay, but if you get killed, don't blame me."

"I won't. Come on."

Mike held the bottom of the vine while John climbed up.

"The train's coming, Mike. Hurry up and get ready. It's a long one."

Mike put the vine between his legs and stretched his hands above his head to get a good grip and waited for the train to get in sight. The engine was a black Union Pacific. When it passed the tree, the ground shook, and Mike's ears roared. Black and white tankers rolled by, then yellow and orange boxcars from the Illinois Central, B & O, and Pennsylvania.

Mike looked up and could tell by the shape of John's mouth that he was either trying to holler go or no, but Mike couldn't hear him above the clacking and rumbling of the cars over the tracks. He decided it must be go.

He pulled the vine back and took a running start. The coal cars were rolling past now. Some were Erie-Lackawanna's and some were Louisville-Nashville's. He scrambled up the vine so the tail was flying about a yard below his feet. They swung past the trunk of the tree. It was leaning toward the train. Just before they flew over the coal car Mike inched up the vine a little more. He

looked to the left like he'd promised. There were coal cars all the way down the tracks as far as he could see.

As they swung over the car, he looked down. The coal was piled high in the center of the car and was only a few feet below his shoes. Some of the coal was shiny, blacker than anything he'd ever seen before, and some was dull black, like the soles of his shoes.

On the other side of the tracks another hill took a slope downward. Mike looked up. John had his eyes closed and his arms wrapped tight around the vine. They started to swing back toward the train and the tree and the hill. Mike felt breathless. He couldn't tell how far anything was behind him, especially the coal car. He guessed that if someone stacked the coal real high on one, it might hit his leg. Maybe rip his leg off. He tucked his legs up underneath him and floated backward over another car. When he got near the top of the hill, he put his legs high out in the front like he would on a swing to make it go higher. The vine began to move near the coal cars again.

He tried to figure out which car he'd be flying over next. If he was right, it'd be another one with the coal stacked high. He inched down on the vine and just as he flew over the edge of the car, he swung his leg out and kicked some chunks of coal off the top of the pile to the ground on the other side of the tracks. On the upswing, he held his legs out in front and looked over the hill. He

could see the flag at the top of the Merry-Go-Round in the center of the park.

He passed over the coal cars again and looked to the left. The caboose was about thirty cars back. He thought about taking one more swing, but he knew that John would be scared and mad as ever if he did.

When they swung past the tree trunk, Mike slid down the vine and ran his feet along the dirt line they'd used to stop the vine before. He held tight so he could stop John from swinging too. His body leaned back to stop the vine, and his feet were planted on the ground in front of him. The top part of the vine stopped swinging back and forth just as the caboose passed the tree. He waited for John to slide down.

"Wasn't that great!"

John scrambled down the last few feet of the vine.

"Are you crazy, Mike! What kind of stunt was that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You sliding down the vine to kick that coal. I thought you were a goner. What would I have told your ma? I'm sorry Mrs. Schmidt, but Mike's body's in a coal car somewhere between here and Albany?"

He knew John was mad, but all he could do was laugh at the thought of John telling his mother he'd died in a coal car. He knew his mother would kill him herself if she knew he was swinging on a vine over railroad tracks, let alone



over a train.

"Don't worry. I had it figured before we flew over it. I just wanted to get us something to remember the day by."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see the coal I kicked out of the car?"

"No. I closed my eyes when I saw what you were gonna do, and I waited for the rope to jerk back when you hit, and when it didn't I looked again and saw your butt swinging back toward the tree."

"Come on!" Mike started to run down the hill toward the tracks. He hollered over his head, "I got us a souvenir."

He jumped the tracks and walked around on the other side to where he figured they were flying over the coal cars. The grass was higher on that side. He got down on his hands and knees and brushed the grass back and forth. His hand stopped, and he held up a piece of shiny black coal for John to see. "See! Something to remember today by."

John was just on the other side of the tracks waiting. When he saw what Mike had, he jumped the tracks too and started looking. "Do you really think they came from the coal pile you kicked."

"Sure they did. I watched them fly over the side myself."

"Wow, Mike. You really had me scared. I thought you were a goner."

"Nah, not me. I'm too smart to do something stupid." They both shuffled around on the ground until they had all the pieces Mike had kicked off the train. It was starting to get dark, so they went to the top of the hill by the old oak tree and divided up the pieces.

On the walk home, Mike picked up a blade of grass and held it between his teeth. John was quiet. "What's the matter?" Mike stopped and was twirling the grass in his mouth.

"Nothing. I was just trying to decide where to put my souvenirs."

"What'd you decide?"

"I'm not sure. I thought maybe I'd put 'em in my nightstand drawer, but I'm afraid they might get crushed there. I think I'm going to make a slot for them in with my rock collection."

"What are you going to call them?"

"I don't know." They were at Mr. Ferguson's fence where John would climb over to go home. "I thought I'd call it Anthracite. Coal given to me by my blood brother, Mike. October 6, 1949." He looked up at Mike, then wiped his eye with the palm of his hand. He left a black mark from under his eye to his ear.

Mike left and started to walk along the fence toward his house. He turned back and watched John go over the fence. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, right?"

"Right. Six in the morning, at the pond." John was almost out of sight in the dark. "Hey, Mike."

"What?" Mike had to holler for him to hear.

John hollered back, "Try not to make a mess tonight so you won't be late like last week."

"Funny." Mike shouted back, but he knew John probably didn't hear him. But that was okay. He would have to explain to his dad where he got the black eye.

Mike jumped the fence back into his own yard. He could see his mother at the sink in the kitchen. It had to be pretty close to dinner time. He went around to the front of the house. He could smell his mother's chicken before he got on the porch. He opened the screen and ran through the foyer and up the front steps. He sat on his bed facing the mirror. He opened his hand and looked at the coal. Where was he going to put it?

"Mike! Are you up there!"

"Yes, Ma. I'm home."

"You're just in time for dinner. Hurry up before it starts to get cold."

"I'll be down in a second."

He looked at the coal again and looked around the room. Then he opened the top drawer of his dresser and put the black coal in the corner next to his pajamas and white underwear. When he saw the undershorts he thought of Beverly O'Connell. He leaned out his window and looked next



door at Beverly's window. There weren't any lights on. It was still early.

He started downstairs and hoped that dinner would be over fast. Tonight he could lie on the roof. There was no moon and the sky would be as dark as coal.

(1951)

Mike leaned over and pressed his forehead to the cool window and stared out over the grey shingles of the garage into the maple trees turning yellow and orange and gold in the late afternoon sun. Sunlight filtered through the trees, and shadows speckled the ground and the road and his father's blue Plymouth parked in the driveway. His father's Plymouth. His Father's. Father's. Father.

He rolled his head on the glass and pushed his face and body against the window. The buttons of his shirt pressed holes into his chest. How would he ever face his father again.

The maple leaves blurred and his father's round face sat in the branches. His cheeks were full and red, and grey hair flecked with brown made a circle like a wreath around his bald head. Mike didn't want to look at the eyes. He didn't have to. He knew their brownness and their sparkle and the look of hurt he'd seen that afternoon. Liar. You're a liar. He called his father a liar. Liar. Father. Liar.

Mike heard the front door open and slam. The window glass vibrated against his cheek. The paperboy, Harold, ran across the yard and grabbed his bicycle lying on the grass among the fallen leaves. He backed away from the window and watched as Harold threw his fat body over the seat and pedalled his papers heavily up the street. He walked to the bed and lay down hard in the hole his body had already made in the mattress. He turned on his side and felt wetness

against his cheek from tears he'd shed into the pillow that morning. Tears that wouldn't stop and made his eyes burn and made him sleep. He'd slept for hours. He rolled and picked out patterns of fish and crosses and flowers and kites on the ceiling. And an old man's face. Maybe his real father's face. Father.

Mike heard the creaking of the staircase and footsteps coming down the hall, and he held his breath. The footsteps stopped. He could see shadows beneath the crack at the bottom of his door. He lay still. Whoever was outside the door waited, then moved down the hall. He breathed again slowly and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed and looked up into the mirror over the dresser. Yes, it was the same face he'd looked at that morning, only different somehow. Older maybe. No, not older, just different. As if he were looking at it for the first time in twelve years.

He pulled the chair from the desk and moved it in front of the dresser. He sat leaning forward and rested his chin on the dresser's surface. His arms spread out across the top. He wrapped his left hand around the statue of Mary he prayed to every night and sometimes in the morning. He stared at his face in the mirror.

His hair was black, cut close around the ears and slicked back from his forehead. Longer than a crew cut. His



father, father wanted him to get a crew cut, but Mike had talked his father into letting it stay just a little longer on top. He pushed closer to the mirror and opened his eyes so wide his eyeballs became islands in the whites. The islands were green with flecks of gold and brown and reminded him of his cats-eye marbles. His face was clear and still a little tan, but he knew when the tan went away, his face would not be the same shade as his father's red face. No, not his father's face.

He slid Mary to the middle of the dresser and wrapped both hands around her blue and white robes. *Help me, Mary. I am only twelve years old and I don't know who I am.* He felt the hard ridges of her robes and rubbed the heads of the angels sitting at her feet.

"Mickey." No, not Mickey.

His mother's, no, not mother's voice outside the door was soft, but he jumped. He stood and backed away from the door and the mirror. Mary was heavy in his left hand.

"Mickey, are you all right?"

"Yes, Ma." Ma. No, not Ma. Not Mickey either.

"Aren't you hungry, Mickey? I have some nice corned beef and cabbage and my prune kuchen. Don't you want some?"

"No, Ma" Ma. "I'm not hungry."

"If you change your mind, please Mickey, let me get you something." Her footsteps shuffled slowly down the hall and creaked down the stairs.

He sat on the bed hugging Mary into the bones of his chest. Help me, Mary. He lay on the bed again and remembered his mother's prune kuchen that morning, the pastry hot and flaky, covered in cinnamon and sugar, filled with thick sweet prunes. And he remembered his father. No, not father.

"Mickey, we need to have a talk."

"Did I do something wrong, Dad?"

"No, Mickey, we just need to talk about something?"

"But, Dad, I'm supposed to meet the guys at the pond, and I'm already late? Please, Dad, can't we talk later. I promise I'll be home early? Please, Dad."

Mike's Dad looked at him and bit into a pastry. The prune filling squeezed out from the sides and brushed his father's mustache with the brown, gooey filling and cinnamon. His father set the pastry in his plate and wiped the filling from his Charlie Chaplin mustache.

"Okay, Mickey, we'll talk later." His father reached across the table and pulled Mike's New York Yankees cap down over his eyes to his nose. When Mike pulled the cap up, his father was holding the flaky pastry in his beefy hands. Mike got up from the table.

"So, you're going fishing again, huh?"

"How'd ya guess, Dad?" Mike laughed as he pulled his fishing pole out from the kitchen corner and picked up his tackle box.

"Don't be such a wise guy. I thought maybe you'd like to play some music later. Not now, but when you get home. What do you think?"

"Sure, Dad, I'd like that."

"You know, Mickey, the Oktoberfest is coming up soon. I thought maybe you'd like to play a solo this year. Do you think you're ready?"

"Gee Dad, do you mean it?" The twinkle in his father's brown eyes answered the question. "Sure, I'll be ready, Dad. I promise."

"Okay, don't think about that now. Go fish. Catch a big one and bring it home. Your Ma will fry it up. But Mickey, don't be doing no horseplaying around, you hear?"

"I won't Dad. See you later."

Mike lay in the bed remembering the twinkle in his father's eyes when he had brought home the stringer full of trout that afternoon. When Uncle Marvin, Waldemar and Hans came over to play music, all his father could talk about was what a great fisherman his boy Mickey was. It was hard for Mike to believe that today was still the same day. How could a day that had started out so good turn out so bad?

His father played the zither while Uncle Martin played the piano; Hans played the guitar, and Waldemar played the harmonica. Mike played the accordion and when he missed a note, his father squeezed his nose with his fingers. The men all laughed and Mike could feel his ears burn.



"That's why we have to play in the basement." His father teased. "Your mother won't let us in the living room."

Mike remembered the feel of his father's belly against his back when his father wrapped his arms around Mike's skinny body. His father's breath was warm against Mike's cheek. His father's fat fingers covered Mike's own while he showed him how to finger the keys correctly.

"Feel the music, Mickey, don't force it. Don't you play the music, let the music play you."

His father sat on the piano stool and watched Mike play. His heavy legs bounced up and down to the music, his left arm swung a brown bottle of homemade beer, he held a cigar in the right. How could that have been today?

Then Mike remembered his father's hand on his arm, stopping him from going up the stairs after everyone left. His father's palms were sweating.

"Mickey, it's time for us to have that talk now."

"You're sure I'm not in trouble Dad?"

"No, Mickey, you're not in trouble."

Mike sat on an old trunk across from his father's piano stool. The basement was cool and dark in the early afternoon. It smelled like bleach and beer and homemade whiskey.

"Listen, Mickey, what I'm going to tell you is going to be hard. It's going to be hard for me to say, and it's going



to be hard for you to understand." His father scooted the stool so close he was holding Mike's knees together with his own. They were both dressed in knee pants and suspenders. The stiff dark hairs on his father's legs brushed against Mike's white, bony knee.

"You know, Mickey, sometimes grown-ups have a hard time deciding what's best for their children. And sometimes they put off doing something that maybe they should have done a lot sooner. You know how that is, don't you Mickey? You know how when your Ma tells you to clean your room you want to put it off until the next day or some other time."

Mike shook his head yes.

"Well, Mickey, I need to tell you something about yourself and your ma and me that you might not understand at first, but I hope you'll be able to understand it someday soon, okay?"

Mike looked at his father's eyes. They weren't sparkling like they usually did. They were darker. Mike's hands began to sweat. He shook his head yes.

"Mickey, I don't know how to say this other than to just say it the best way I can." His father leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and held Mike's sweating hands in his own. Mike could feel the sweat on his father's hands, too. His father squeezed Mike's knees tighter with his own.

"Mickey, your ma and I have loved you for a long time,

since you were a little tiny baby that I could hold in the palm of my hand. But Mickey, your ma could never have babies of her own, and we had to get our baby from somewhere else. Your ma wanted so bad to have a baby to take care of. Do you know what I'm saying to you, Mickey?"

His father's forehead was sweating and his face was redder than Mike had ever seen it before. But Mike couldn't put the words together. He shook his head no.

"Your ma and me, Mickey, we love you like you were our own, but we're not your real parents, Mickey. We don't know who your real parents are." His father was watching him. His voice was low. "We're your foster parents, Mickey. And the welfare department says you're getting to an age where we have to change some things."

His father's forehead was creased, and his face was even redder and sweating.

"I don't know what you mean, Dad. Are you saying I'm not your son?"

His father looked away to the basement wall.

"That can't be true, Dad. I have your name. My name is Michael Schmidt. I was named after you, Dad. How can I be named after you if I'm not your son?" Mike stood up. His father pulled him back down.

"Listen, Mickey, we got you when you were two weeks old. We don't know what happened to your real ma or pa. The welfare department gave you to us so we could take care of

you. You've been happy here, haven't you Mickey?"

Mike looked up in his face. "If I'm not really your son, then who am I? Is that really my name?" Mike's voice was getting louder. He was scared.

"No, Mickey, that's not really your name. It's just that when you came to live with us you were so little, we thought it would be good if you could come into the family as our own. We thought we would be able to adopt you some day. But the welfare department wouldn't let us." Mike tried to pull his hands from his father's. His father squeezed his hands and knees tighter. "They said the people that gave you up wouldn't sign the papers for you to be adopted. They just wanted you to be taken care of. I would have made you my real son if I could have, Mickey."

"If I'm not really your son, who am I then?" He looked into his father's eyes.

"Your real name is Joseph?"

"Joseph what?" Mike pulled his hands from his father's.

"Joseph Buchanan, Mickey. Your name is Joseph Henry Buchanan."

Mike looked away from his father to the wall. "Is that my father's name or my mother's?"

"I don't know, Mickey."

"Why are you telling me all this now?" Mike stood up and squeezed past his father's knees.

"I told you, Mickey. They said we have to change some



things."

"Like what?"

"The welfare department said you can't use our name anymore. They said it isn't legal. They said if we didn't tell you the truth, they were going to. They said you have to use the right name for school and for the doctor and for your medical records."

Mike looked down at his father through the darkness. "Why didn't you tell me before? Now all my friends will laugh at me and call me names? Why didn't you tell me before, Dad?" No, not Dad.

"We should have told you sooner, I know. We made a mistake. I'm sorry, son."

"I'm not your son! Don't call me, son! I'm not anybody's son. You lied to me, Dad! You lied to me. You're not my dad. I'm not anybody's son. Why'd you lie to me, Dad? It's not fair, Dad. You said it's wrong to lie." His father leaned on the stool, his head cradled in his palms, his arms supported by his knees. His father was crying. He had never seen his father cry before. Mike started to cry; his head hurt, too. The bleach burned his eyes and the smell of the beer and whiskey made him want to throw up. Joseph Buchanan. Who was Joseph Buchanan? No parents. Whiskey. Lies. Everything he ever knew was a lie.

He ran up the stairs. His mother was standing in the doorway to the basement. She was crying. He shoved past



her.

"Mickey, please listen."

"No, I'm not listening to anybody! It's all a bunch of lies. Just everybody leave me alone!" He ran out of the kitchen, through the living room, and up the stairs into his bedroom through a blur of tears and a headache. He slammed his door and locked it and flung himself across the bed, sobbing into the pillow.

Mike remembered the day like it was a movie that kept playing over and over in his head. It was dark outside. He began thinking about his mother, not his ma, but his real mother. How could she give him away? What did she look like? He swung his legs to the side of the bed and looked in the mirror again. He couldn't even think about his father, his real father. He couldn't get the picture out of his mind of his other father sitting in the dark on the piano stool with his head in his hands. He hated his real mother for giving him up. For naming him Joseph. For making his other mother and father suffer. For making him suffer. For having him. He called his mother a whore and a prostitute. It was the only answer there could be for what she did. Only a low-down, whoring prostitute would have a baby and give him up to the welfare department. He lay across his bed and beat her names into the pillow with his fists. He slept again.

When he woke it was dark in his room but he could see the light from the bathroom making a white shadow across the

hall wall. His father had unlocked the door from the outside and was sitting on the edge of his bed. Mike lay still and watched his father, no, not father, through the darkness. His father's elbows were on his knees and his head was cradled in his hands. Mike remembered the basement. He remembered his father's red face and tears.

Mike sat up and put his arms around his father's neck and wept. "I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean what I said. I've always been happy here. Please forgive me, Dad."

His father cradled him against his chest. Mike could feel his father's heart beating fast and hard. "It's okay, son. I understand. It was a shock to you, but everything's going to be okay now. You'll see." He squeezed Mike hard.

Mike leaned back and wiped his eyes with the back of his arm. "Dad, do you think Ma still has some of the prune kuchen? I'm starving."

His father laughed. "You know, I haven't had any of that either. Let's get your ma to fix some. Maybe we can talk her into throwing a scoop of ice cream on top."

Mike swung his legs over the side of the bed and put Mary back on the dresser and followed his father, not father, down the stairs to the kitchen.

(1953)

It had been two years since the last time he had locked himself in his room. Two years since he had stared out the window down into the yard angry at his father. But the trees were yellow and orange and gold then. And now they were bare. Two years since he found out his father wasn't really his father and his mother wasn't really his mother. Two years since Mike had taken his father's name for confirmation. In the church he was Joseph Henry Michael Buchanan. In his heart he was Michael Schmidt. His mother and father called him Mickey and his friends called him Mike. He remembered his father's, yes, father's, hand on his right shoulder during confirmation. Heavy and warm through the shirt. The church was dark, but Mike could see his father's eyes. The smell of cigars from his father's pocket mixed with the musky, sweet scent of lilacs on the altar.

Mike pulled the chair from the desk and sat in front of the dresser as he had two years earlier. He ran his fingers across the top to the center in front of the mirror. He traced the letters he had carved into the top three mornings earlier . . . March 3, 1953 8:31 am. He pulled Mary from the corner of the dresser and prayed *Help me Mary. Help my mother, Mary. My father is dead, Mary. What will happen to us now.*

Mike moved to the bed and sat on the edge looking into the mirror. He closed his eyes and remembered his father the night before he died. It seemed like his father knew he was



going to die. When his father had gone up to bed the night before he died he had stood on the stairs looking down into the living room for a long time. He was rubbing his arm. "Nina, whatever you do, don't sell the house." Mike's mother just looked at him and nodded her head slowly. Mike wondered if she knew, too. In the morning, his father went to work as usual, like nothing was wrong.

Mike had been excited to go home when they called. No one said why he had to leave, just to get home as fast as he could. He pedalled home slowly down Cooper Road to Titus Avenue. He stopped at Glee's Delicatessen and got a Milky Way. He weaved in and out of the driveways down the rest of Titus til he got to Sequoia. Then he remembered his father and what he had said: *Nina, whatever you do, don't sell the house.* And the rubbing of his arm. Mike pedalled faster, down Titus to Willow Avenue. He turned down Willow and pumped harder and harder to the house. *Don't sell the house.* He turned in the driveway and jumped off the bike. It kept going and bounced off the chimney. The street along the front of the house was lined with cars, most of them familiar. Uncle Marvin, Uncle Nick, Aunt Melinda, Waldemar.

Mike yanked the screen door open and ran into the living room. Ma wasn't there. Where was she. Oh, yes, she had to go to a funeral that morning. Aunt Melinda and Aunt Bertie were sitting on the couch crying. Uncle Marvin and Uncle Nick were huddled in the dining room over the table. Mike

looked at them. They looked up at him and Uncle Marvin started to come toward him. *Mike, I'm sorry. No. You stay away from me. Don't you come near me. You're not my father. My father's not dead. You hear me, he's not dead.* Mike turned and ran from the room up the stairs into his bedroom. He locked the door and took his knife out and carved letters into the chest of drawers. He lay on the bed and slept.

When he woke, he heard his mother crying. He opened the bedroom door and listened through the crack. *Where's Mickey? Upstairs locked in his room.* He heard his mother on the steps, crying. Mike ran down the steps and grabbed his mother around the neck. *It's not true, Ma, tell me it's not true. He's not dead is he, Ma? Tell me Dad's not dead.* She hugged him. *Yes, Mickey it's true. He's dead.* She was dressed in black from the funeral of another woman's husband. They sat on the steps together and cried.

His father's body had been lying in the casket in the living room for three days now. Mike stayed in his room during the day and crawled out the window and down the garage roof at night and slept in the park over the back yard fence. He used a ladder to climb back in in the morning. He went into his mother's room each night and kissed her.

"Mickey, won't you sleep in the house tonight? You can sleep here in my room."

"No, Ma, I can't." He couldn't sleep in the room where his father had lain every night of Mike's life. His smell

was in the room. Cigar smoke was in the drapes and on the pillows. His hair oil was in his brush and along the teeth in his comb. His foot powder in the carpet. His sweat was hanging with the clothes in the closet. Mike felt like he would smother if he had to sleep in the room that smelled like his father. And he couldn't sleep in his own room knowing his father was lying dead in a casket in the room at the foot of the stairs.

Three days had passed now and today his father would be buried. Mike held the statue of Mary. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.* "Mickey." His mother's voice was low on the other side of the door.

Mike put the statue over the carved letters and opened the door. His mother was dressed in black again. Four days now. She walked into the room and stood at the window. The sunlight showed the lines in her face and the bags under her eyes. "Mickey, I want you to come downstairs with me now and say goodbye to your father."

"I can't, Ma. I just can't say goodbye. I just don't want to see Dad lying there like that. I'm sorry, Ma."

She turned toward the window and a tear ran from underneath her glasses. "Mickey, you're the man of the house now. I need you to help me through this. Please, Mickey, I need you to go down with me." Her shoulders were shaking now. Mike ran to her and pulled her head down to his



shoulder. He held her and she cried freely.

"I'm sorry, Ma. Dad would be ashamed of me."

"Don't ever think that, Mickey. Your father loved you very much. You were his pride. He knew he could count on you for anything." She held his face in her hands. They were cold and dry. She looked tired, her face was red and swollen and wet. "I know I can count on you, too, Mickey."

"Come on, Ma. I'll go down with you."

The casket was open in front of the fireplace. It was like a black mirror. There were people along the sides of the room. Mike could feel their stares, but all he could think of was his father lying in black in the black coffin twenty feet away. He moved toward the coffin. He couldn't blink. His mother held his hand and walked with him. His hand was sweating, hers was cold. They kneeled at the coffin and gave the sign of the cross. His mother stayed on her knees and began to pray and sob.

Mike stood and looked at his father's hands. The skin looked loose and the veins didn't stand up anymore. He reached and touched his father's hand. It was colder than his mother's. The skin was soft like it would be when his father came home from the bakery with flour still on his hands. Mike's eyes moved up his father's body to his face. The skin was loose around his neck. His face was whiter than Mike had ever seen it. He looked so pale. There was red in his cheeks, but Mike knew it wasn't real. Mike noticed for

the first time that his father's eyelashes were lighter than his hair, and his hair looked soft; Mike reached and touched the bald spot on his head. He stroked it. He leaned forward and kissed his father on the cheek, and his tears fell on his father's face. He stooped over and held his mother's elbow and helped her to her feet.

All Mike could think of during the funeral service and at the cemetery was his father's cold hand in the casket and his father's heavy, warm hand the day of his confirmation. His mother looked tired on the ride home and Mike knew she needed to sleep.

When they got home the doctor came and gave her a shot. Mike sat beside her bed while she cried until the shot finally put her to sleep. There were people in the house downstairs preparing food and cleaning. He couldn't wait to get behind the locked door of his room. He touched his mother's hand. It was still cold. He remembered his father's cold hand. He went to her closet and pulled a blanket down from the shelf. A bottle fell over. Mike pulled the bottle out, unscrewed the cap, and smelled the brown liquid inside. It was homemade whiskey. The smell reminded him of the smell of the basement two years earlier when his father told him he wasn't his son. He dropped the blanket and tipped the bottle to his lips. The whiskey touched his lips and burned. He opened his mouth slightly and let the liquid roll over his tongue and down his throat.

*you're the man of the house now, Mickey.* It burned his lips and tongue and the warmth went down his throat and spread over the inside of his belly. Tears burned in his eyes. He tipped the bottle again and took a longer sip. It didn't burn as much. He filled a glass from his mother's bedroom half full and capped the bottle and put it back in the closet where he found it. He took the glass to his bedroom and locked the door behind him. He sat in the bed and sipped the warm liquid. Each time he drank, it burned a little less and soon everything blurred--his father's death, his mother's suffering, and the whore who was his real mother. When everything blurred and the whiskey was gone, he slept.



(1957)

Slits of light made their way across the ceiling over John's bed. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd seen daylight or anyone that wasn't wearing a white coat with a name tag pinned to the lapel. All he knew was he wanted to leave, wanted to go home to his own house and his own room, to see his priest, to confess, to try to put the last year and five months behind him, and somehow to make peace with his father. If he ever could.

He got up and stood in front of the sink and looked in the mirror he knew wasn't real glass. He hardly knew himself. All he saw now was a failure. A failure to his father, now a failure to his country, too.

He sat on the bed and opened the drawer to his night table. The rosary beads he'd had since he was eight were spread across a stack of cards and letters from his mother, Father Callahan, and Mike.

John couldn't get over how much Mike had changed since he'd gone in the service. How they both had changed. Mike would be discharged any day now, a free man after making it to Platoon Sergeant. And here he was sitting in the psychiatric ward of the Buffalo VA hospital, the nut house, almost court-martialed, twice now.

He picked the rosary up out of the drawer. He held the first large bead in his hand and automatically began to mouth the paternoster. *Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. . . .* He turned the bead over and over between his

fingers. He remembered his mother giving him the rosary the morning of his first Holy Communion. He had loved the feel of the small, brown and white shell beads running over the ridges of his fingers as he said his Hail Mary's. He'd rolled the beads to a ball and clutched them as he walked toward the altar. He remembered kneeling as Father Callahan walked along the railing placing hosts in the mouths of the other children. He waited for his own turn, seeing clearly for the first time the beauty of the church--the statues of Christ and the Holy Mother, the purple and blue and gold, stained-glass windows, the ceiling that was so tall it got dark as night near the top where it pointed its way toward heaven. He remembered breathing in the pungent smell of frankincense and lilacs. Then, finally, as Father Callahan stood in front of him, he could feel the warmth and age of the priest's black robe. He could smell the wine and the blood of Christ on the priest's breath and, when Father Callahan placed the flat wafer on his tongue, he could feel the weight of Christ's body in his own mouth and knew he would spend the rest of his life atoning for the sins of his own body and mind.

John ran his fingers along the ten small beads, the Aves. They were ivory colored now and his fingers had worn the ridges of the shells smooth. He had palmed the Gloria Patri, the largest bead, smooth too, but its speckled brown color ran deep into the shell. He held the cross on the end

of the rosary to his mouth. The silver was cold on his lips. *Father, please give me strength to bear those things I don't understand and grant me peace. I ask it in your Holy Name. Amen.*

He set the rosary on the top of the night table and reached back in the drawer. He took out the letter on top and began reading it again. It was the one he'd gotten from Mike just a week earlier. Mike was getting married. He'd known Dolores for three years, they both had . . . and yeah, she was kind of cute--a little thing with pixie-cut black hair. But Mike married?

He reached past the rosary on the night table and picked up the pack of Camels. He took one out of the pack, and as he moved to the door of his room, he rolled it between his thumb and index finger. *Forgive me Father. I know my body is a temple. But I just can't stop right now.*

He opened the door part of the way. His body was halfway in, halfway out of the room.

"Nurse!" He put the cigarette between his lips at the side of his mouth. "Nurse!"

When the nurse came around the corner, the first thing he saw was her shoes, and he knew it was Judy. She had the whitest shoes and biggest feet of all the nurses.

"What's the matter Mr. Labruda?"

John pointed to the end of his cigarette. He could see the annoyance run across her face.



"I thought you said you were quitting." She pulled a pack of matches out of her pocket and struck one across the end. He leaned into the flame and dragged hard on the cigarette. The paper burned, then turned to grey ashes. When he took it out of his mouth, he could feel the paper stick to his dry lips.

"I tried to quit. Honest." He made a cross on his chest. "I ask God every day to help me quit, but I still keep lighting them up."

Judy put her hand on his forearm. Her touch burned his dark hairs and skin, but he tried not to move. "I know God will answer your prayers some day, Mr. Labruda. You just be patient with him." The annoyance on her face had changed to something else. He could see it in the softness of her blue eyes. He could feel his forehead and underarms sweating.

She moved her arm and John was grateful. He ducked back in his room and closed the door.

As he walked toward his bed, the door swung open again. Judy was pushing the heavy door as if she had the strength to put it through the wall. Her hands turned pink from the pressure. The softness in her eyes was gone. John liked the cold professional better. No soft words. No touching. No pain.

"Remember the rules, Mr. Labruda." She continued to push the door into the wall. "If you're going to smoke, you have to leave the door open. Wide open."

"I'm sorry. I forgot." He took another long drag on the cigarette. When he took it out of his mouth, his fingers shook so hard the ashes fell onto the linoleum. He looked up. She had already swung around and was leaving the room. As she walked, the bottom of her dress hit the crease at the back of her knees. John wiped sweat from his forehead.

He took another long drag on the cigarette and thought of how Mike changed before he joined the Army. He thought of their boyhood and how close they had been. Then, when Mike learned about the Schmidt's not being his parents, things began to change. Mike was awful bitter about his real mother. He hated her. John prayed constantly that Mike would forgive the woman that was his real mother and that he would be able to go on with his life.

When Mr. Schmidt died, Mike started getting in trouble. At first it was only smoking and cutting classes at school. Then he started to drink and hang around with older guys like Clyde Bartlett and Joey Peters. John tried to talk to him. But Mike said they were okay guys and for John not to worry so much about him.

But no matter how much Mike changed, he stayed John's friend. They still talked and John still prayed for him.

Then Clyde and Joey stole a car and robbed a gas station, and Mike went along for the ride. They went through four states stealing food and robbing gas stations. Mike's mother was frantic. A police car sat in front of her house

for three days. The FBI caught up with them in Delaware. Clyde had a gun and tried to shoot it out. He got shot in the leg. Joey tried to run, but the cops found him hiding in an old garage. Mike got out of the car right away and held his hands up. They all three sat in jail for three months. Clyde and Joey were over eighteen and were sent to Federal Prison for six years. Mike was a minor, and because he didn't have the gun, he got federal probation for three years. Mike hated being on probation, so he joined the Army.

A long ash fell on John's chest. The cigarette had gone out and he hadn't even noticed. *Damn.* Now he wouldn't be able to light another one off it. Even though it was already out, he squashed the cold butt in the ashtray on the table.

He lay back on the bed and thought about how Mike had told him that being in jail was the scariest thing that had ever happened to him. John felt the same way about being in the Marines. It was the worst experience he ever had. He tried to keep up, but he just couldn't do things the way the other guys could.

The worst thing was the hollering. The Sergeant was always pointing at him, telling him what an idiot he was. *Labruda! Stand up straight! Labruda! You run like a sissy! Labruda! Right face! Left face! Labruda! Can't you do nothing right? Look at these other boys, Labruda. Don't you want to be like them? Labruda! Give me those beads, Labruda! They're not part of a Marine uniform, Labruda! In*



*the marines, Labruda, the Sergeant's God! Give me those damn beads!*

John couldn't remember anything after that. They said he broke the Sergeant's nose. Then they put John in the hospital. First the Army hospital at Paris Island, then at Quantico.

After nine months, they let him go home and gave him a medical discharge. His father couldn't look him in the eyes.

That's when the dreams started. It was like he was still in the service being drilled by the Sergeant. But the Sergeant was his father. *Can't you do anything right, John? Why can't you be like the other boys? Rake the leaves, John! Get better grades! Why a B in gym, John? When are you going to be a man, John?*

John still couldn't remember walking down the street naked. An ambulance had taken him ninety miles to the Buffalo VA hospital. His mother said they had to put him in a straitjacket. He hadn't seen his father since. Almost seven months now. His mother wrote but rarely mentioned his father. It was hard for her to make the trip alone, so he'd only seen her twice.

Now the doctors were thinking about sending him home. The dreams were finally under control. At first, shock treatments stopped him from dreaming at all. Then slowly the dreams came back. But now that he was taking thorazine, the dreams were blurry, and John could hardly see his father's

stony, grey eyes. And sometimes he would even dream about the park and fishing with Mike or about being in church and the priest would be his father and would forgive him.

He turned on his side facing the windows and started counting the slats on the blinds.

"Mr. Labruda." Someone was shaking his shoulder. "Mr. Labruda."

John jumped and turned his back flat on the bed. He'd started to doze and forgot to close the door to his room. Usually the nurses would knock. Judy was standing over him. She was bent over and her face was right over his. He could see the darkness on the inside of her nostrils. He could feel her warm breath on his face, the weight of her closeness in his chest. His heart felt like it wanted to spring from his chest, and he felt butterfly wings along the inside of his throat. He pushed his body hard into the mattress trying to put more distance between their bodies. Finally, she straightened up. John didn't realize that he'd been holding his breath until he gasped for air.

"Are you all right, Mr. Labruda?" Her eyebrows were pulled down in a crease over her eyes. He nodded his head.

"Well, you have a visitor. He's waiting in the lobby. Do you want to come out there, or do you want me to bring him in here?"

John had to close his eyes to think. He didn't want to ask the nurse who it was. If it was his father he knew he

would break down, and he didn't want the nurse see him start to panic. It might ruin his chances to go home.

He opened his eyes again. "I think I'd rather visit in my room today. Is that okay?"

"Sure. I'll be back in a minute." She turned to leave the room. The back of her dress had wrinkles in it from where she'd been sitting.

"Wait!" John leaned over the bed and reached for his cigarettes. When he turned back, she already had the matches out and was lighting one. "Thanks."

"Don't worry. He doesn't look like he bites or anything." As she turned to go out again, John could feel his face turning red. He hated the nurses knowing he was afraid. He sat on the side of the bed. He was tense, his leg muscles cramped, and his teeth were clenched together so tight he could feel the pressure in his ears. He took another long drag on the cigarette, closed his eyes, and held the smoke deep in his lungs.

"John."

The voice was low. At first John thought it was his imagination. He started to let the smoke out slowly.

"Hey, John."

John dropped the cigarette on the bed.

Mike took giant steps to the bed and grabbed the cigarette and brushed the ashes from the spread. "Hey, man, you okay?"



John couldn't answer right away. He couldn't believe it was Mike's hand on his back. Mike's voice. He stood and turned and shook hands with Mike. "Oh, thank God, Mike. It's you. It's really you."

Mike squeezed his hand harder. John put his arms around Mike and hugged him. He thought back to the day on the hill near the big oak tree when they had become blood brothers.

Mike's clothes smelled like Old Spice. His breath reeked of beer.

"Hey, man, have you got a bathroom around here? I've gotta pee like a big dog."

John pointed to the other end of the room. "Sure, in there."

"Notice I'm wearing civvies?" Mike's voice was faint compared to the loud, steady stream of his urine hitting the water in the toilet. He came out of the bathroom, zipping up his pants.

"When did they let you out?" John sat on the edge of his bed and reached for his Camels.

"You make it sound like I just got out of prison." Mike walked toward John. "Hey, you got an extra one of those?"

"Sure, help yourself. I hope you've got a light. They don't let me have any matches."

"You're kidding?"

John shook his head.

Mike reached in his pants pocket. "That's a bitch." He

pulled out a lighter. "You remember this?"

It was an old Zippo with a dent in the flip top. "Sure." John leaned into the flame, "It's the one your dad used to light his stogies with. You got it for him for Christmas one year." He stopped, but Mike didn't say anything. "You and I shovelled snow to earn the money. I bought my dad a book of music, and you got yours the lighter. I had blisters for weeks. You know, I don't think my dad ever played one tune out of the book."

"Yep, that's right." Mike flipped the top up and down up and down. "Remember how it got the dent?"

John didn't answer. Mike kept looking at the lighter.

"They said he was lighting a cigar when he had his heart attack." Mike's voice was low and soft. John had heard it before but let him go on. "That's how they knew something was wrong. Before he fell over, the lighter dropped out of his hand and bounced off a baker's rack. He didn't even have time to have a last cigar. Can you imagine that? Not even enough time for a final smoke."

Mike looked up at John and took a long drag on his cigarette. John watched as his chest blew up like a balloon ready to explode; then he blew the smoke out into the sunlight squeezing through the blinds.

John felt bad because there wasn't anything he could say.

"Not me, John. I'm not going that way. I didn't ask to

be born, but I'm sure not gonna ask to die by working and worrying myself to death. I'm gonna enjoy what time I've got left." Mike reached into his pocket and pulled out a little silver flask.

"What's that?"

Mike unscrewed the cap and raised the flask to his mouth. "Just a little pick-me-up." Mike started to cap it, then held it out toward John.

"You know me better than that, Mike."

"I know. I know." He took another swallow then capped the flask and put it back in his pocket. "I'm sorry, John. It was a long drive up here. I thought Dolores was gonna come, but her old man won't let any of them leave the house. He's on another drunk, screaming about the union at the foundry." Mike's hand came out of his pocket in a fist. "I swear John, I'd like to bust that guy's chops."

John tried to change the subject. "So, when are you and Dolores getting married?"

"It depends." Mike sat next to John on the bed. John could smell the whiskey. "When are you gonna get out of here and be my best man?"

"You mean it?"

"Who else do you think I'd get?"

"I don't know." John put his arm across Mike's shoulder. "That's great, Mike. I think they're going to let me go in a week or so. Then you watch. Everything's going



to be better between me and my dad, and you're going to get married, and everything will be great for you, too."

John watched as the cigarette Mike held trembled between his fingers. "I hope so, John. I hope so."

(1958)

When she swung it open, the gate made a grating noise that gave her goose bumps. She held the gate still and looked across the front yard to the house. She hadn't seen Irene since Mr. D'Angelo's death four year's ago, and she hadn't been to the house since before he and Irene had married. She couldn't get over the change.

The honeysuckle bushes were growing big and wild, their long, skinny stems reached out for her like tentacles. The grass was brown and hadn't been cut in a long time. Ivy was crawling over the front of the house, winding its way through the trellis where yellow and pink morning glories used to climb. She remembered years ago when she'd stood in the front yard drinking fresh squeezed lemonade, listening to Irene tell Alma how the bell-shaped flowers were the trumpets of heaven.

She looked up and there was a shadow in the window on the third floor. She was sure it was Alma. She waved, but the shadow turned and moved so she couldn't see it anymore. She kept looking up.

The eaves were rotting, and the middle of the roof sagged as if the house was carrying some weight it could hardly stand to hold. She moved her hand from the gate, set down her briefcase, and rubbed her hands together brushing flecks of black paint and red dust from her gloves. She picked the case up, walked down the sidewalk, and climbed the steps. The rotting wood bent with her weight.

The old wooden swing Alma used to love to swing in was on the porch floor now. She looked up. The ceiling boards were rotting, and there were gaping holes where the swing bolts used to be.

When she opened the screen to knock, the hinges squeaked like the gate. She felt as if someone was standing close at her back, and she turned to look behind her. No one was there, but the wind had changed direction and the honeysuckle arms were bobbing toward her on the porch. This time she shrugged the chill away.

She pulled her gloves off and knocked on the door.

She heard someone shuffling on the inside; then the door opened. The inside of the house was black, and she could just barely see the shadow of someone standing in the darkness.

"Who is it?" The voice from inside was loud and harsh. "What do you want?"

"Mrs. D'Angelo? Irene, . . . It's Mildred Batson from the Social Security office." Mildred waited for a word of recognition from Irene. "Remember? I called you at the beginning of the week and asked if it would be all right for me to come out and see you and Alma." She could hear Irene mumbling but couldn't quite make out what she was saying.

"Would it be all right if I come in?"

The door opened wider. Irene shuffled to the side and let her in.



It had been dark on the porch, but it took a while for Mildred's eyes to adjust to the greater darkness on the inside. The air was close and smelled musty like damp wood and old paper. She turned toward Irene. All she could see was the outline of her tangled hair and the round slump of her shoulders against the dull light coming from the kitchen.

"How have you been, Irene?" Irene ignored Mildred's question.

"Do you want to go in the kitchen?" Irene was hollering, and Mildred realized she hadn't answered her question because she couldn't hear. "We can go in the front room if you want." Irene coughed. "But the light's better in the kitchen." Mildred smelled Irene's sour breath.

"The kitchen will be fine." Mildred hollered back and followed her. Irene walked with a limp that made her rock from side to side.

The kitchen walls were painted yellow, and there was a yellow bulb in the ceiling fixture that cast an eerie glow over everything. It made the room look small and dingy.

Irene pulled out a chair at the table. "Go ahead and sit down." Her eyes were puffy. Her wrinkled face was yellow. Mildred couldn't tell if it was from the light or jaundice. She knew from the way Irene's chin jutted out and her lips sank that she wasn't wearing her teeth.

"Do you want some coffee?" Irene started to move toward the cupboard.

"Yes, that would be nice." Mildred sat in the chair and pulled some papers from her briefcase. She set the briefcase on the floor and laid the papers on the table. The cups rattled on the saucers as Irene poured the coffee.

She set a cup in front of Mildred. Coffee had spilled over into the saucer. "Cream or sugar?"

"Not for me, thank you. I like mine black and strong." She took a sip.

"You sound like my Grandpa. He liked his coffee so black he'd use two times the amount of beans. His coffee looked like oil coming from the pot. He'd say a good cup of coffee'd leave grinds in the bottom of the cup. Not for me though. It's too bitter. I have to have some cream." Irene set her cup down and sat across from Mildred.

Irene had told Mildred the story about her grandfather and the coffee before. Irene's coffee only had a hint of brown to it. It was mostly cream.

"How have you been, Irene?" Mildred made sure she asked loud enough for Irene to hear.

"Okay, I guess. Tired most of the time though." Irene ran her hand across the green tablecloth as if she was smoothing wrinkles. Her hands were a maze of swollen blue veins and age spots; her fingers were red and arthritic. Mildred looked down at her own hands; they were smooth and well-manicured, but at fifty-eight she had age spots too.

Irene's arms were covered with freckles and raspberry

colored bruises. Mildred had seen larger ones on Irene's legs while she was at the cupboard. And the limp.

She leaned across the table and touched Irene's arm. "How did you hurt your arm?"

Irene rubbed a spot on her forearm. Her voice was slow and shaky. "It seems like everything I touch leaves a bruise." She pointed to a long, thin one in the middle of her left forearm. "I got this one when I went out the back screen to take the trash out. I couldn't scoot out the door fast enough, and the edge of the screen hit my arm." She pointed to one near her elbow on her right arm. "I don't know how I got this one, though." Her hand shook.

"I noticed your leg was bruised too. You didn't fall did you?"

Irene turned in her chair and raised her legs out in front of her. Mildred leaned over the side of the table to look. Her skin was red and blue and angry looking. Irene lowered her feet, then turned back around and raised her arm and pulled up the short sleeve of her dress. Loose skin dangled from her upper arm. A huge, red bruise ran across the top of her arm.

"Good Lord, Irene, how did you get those?" Mildred reached out to touch the bruise but stopped herself. The bruise was probably sore and Irene's skin looked paper thin.

Irene lowered the sleeve to her dress. "I'm just getting old and clumsy I guess. Can't even sit on the porch



anymore without banging myself up."

"Surely you didn't get those from just sitting on the porch."

"I swear it's the truth. I was just sitting on the porch in the swing trying to catch a breeze last July 4th night and was hoping to see the fireworks display across the lake. I heard something crack, and before I could look up, I was on the porch floor still sitting on the swing with my legs trapped underneath." She took a sip of coffee. "The ceiling boards had rotted. I couldn't get up on my own. I thought my legs were broken. I hollered and hollered for Alma. It took a long time for her to come, though. She just sits up in her room all day anymore. Doesn't even want the windows open, not even in July when it's so hot."

As Irene spoke she looked through the kitchen doorway into the darkness where the stairwell was hidden.

"Alma?"

Mildred turned but couldn't see anything in the darkness.

"Alma. Come in and see Mrs. Batson." Silence.

"Are you sure she's there?"

"Oh, yes. She's there. But she's afraid to come out."

"Why? Doesn't she know who I am?"

Irene kept looking through the doorway. "She won't hardly come down when anyone's here anymore." She paused.

"Of course, now that Mrs. Finkey's passed away, there's

hardly ever anyone here." Irene took another sip of coffee. "Alma's not like she used to be. She's like a hurt animal."

"What do you mean?"

"She's been throwing tantrums again. Bad ones. Getting upset over nothing. If anyone comes, she backs in the corner of her room and squats there 'til they leave."

"Do you have any idea why?"

"I know I'm no head doctor, but I think I know." Irene hesitated. "You know, Mr. D'Angelo was a good, gentle man. Maybe too gentle when it came to raising his daughter, Nancy, after his wife died." Irene started to smooth out the tablecloth again. "She was already grown when we married; she was older than Alma, but she was lazy. Didn't want to work and wanted her father to take care of her. She was just waiting for a man to replace her daddy. She never did approve of me and her dad marrying."

Irene got up and took her cup to the sink. She came back to the table, sat down, and looked across at Mildred. There were tears in her eyes.

"Nancy was terribly mean to Alma. She used to bring her friends here just to show them Alma. She'd act real sweet to Alma and get her to show them her dolls or her cutouts; then they'd laugh at her and call her a baby or retard. And just as quick as they came, they'd leave, and poor Alma would be hurt and crying because they had gone and never did play with her. She didn't understand that they were all too old to

play. Nancy was a grown woman and knew better, but she was cruel."

"That's a shame."

"I think that's what started all these tantrums. She just seemed to get more and more frustrated. Now she cries at every little thing. She throws things. She broke the mirror on her dresser by throwing a shoe at it. I can't leave her alone, and she won't come out in the yard. She used to love to come out in the yard and smell the flowers. So I've just had to let the yard and the house go. Ever since I hurt my legs, I haven't felt up to it anyway. When I get my strength back, then I'll tend to the lawn and see about repairs."

"Does the house need a lot of repairs?"

"Yes. But Mr. D'Angelo's insurance just barely paid for the funeral, and Nancy took everything else. I haven't seen her since the funeral, and that's just fine with me."

"Can't you get someone to help you? What about some of the neighborhood boys to help with the lawn and the trash?"

Irene just shook her head. "You know, things have changed since my first husband, Matt, died. It used to be that neighbors helped each other. But not anymore. Don't you see how this street has run down? I'd be afraid to let any of these local boys in my house for fear what they might take or do to Alma." She stood up and looked straight at Mildred. "And I won't go through anything like that ever



again, and neither will Alma. I swear to it on my grandfather's grave."

Irene walked into the dark hallway. Mildred could hear her talking down the hallway but couldn't make out what she was saying. Mildred knew getting papers signed to continue Alma's disability checks wasn't going to be enough.

"Alma, you remember Mrs. Batson don't you?"

Mildred turned in her chair. Irene was coming down the hallway with her back to Mildred. She was holding Alma's hand pulling her along the hallway.

When they got past the doorway into the kitchen, Irene dropped Alma's hand and left her standing there. Alma's head was bent forward, but her eyes were looking up. Mildred was surprised by how young Alma still looked even though she was forty-four now. Her skin was pale, almost pasty white, but was smooth and clear. Except for the look of fear in her eyes and her clenched fists, she looked untouched, innocent. Her hair was cut just below chin level and was still pitch black. Her shoulders were broad, but she was thin. She was wearing a pleated purple skirt and a white blouse. She looked like a schoolgirl.

"Hello, Alma. Do you remember me?"

Alma hesitated then shook her head.

"Sure you do, honey. Remember how I came to see you and we sat on the front lawn and you showed me the flowers and we drank lemonade?"

She didn't answer, but after a minute, Mildred could see her relax a little. Instead of clenching her fists, Alma put her hands together in front of her and nervously twisted her fingers.

"I brought you something, honey." Mildred leaned, searched through her briefcase, and pulled out a book. "See, I brought you a new picture book." She held it up for Alma to see. Alma began to chew her lower lip. Mildred held it out toward her, but Alma backed into the hall. "That's okay, Alma. I'm not going to hurt you. Here. I'll just lay it on the table, and when I leave, you can come and get it. Okay?"

She set the book on the table and looked at Alma. Alma looked up at her, nodded, turned, and ran back up the stairs.

"Thank you, Mildred. That was a nice thing for you to do." Irene was humped in her chair.

Mildred leaned back and waited a minute before she spoke.

"Irene, we have to talk. You and Alma can't keep going on like this. You need some help."

"What kind of help?"

"I'm going to tell you. But you have to promise that while I talk, you'll keep what's best for both you and Alma in mind. Okay?"

"I'll listen, but I'm not promising anything."

"I understand that."

Mildred held up her cup. "May I?"

Irene nodded.

Mildred got up and poured herself another cup of coffee. She leaned against the counter. "Irene, what would happen to Alma if something happened to you?"

Irene didn't answer.

"Who would take care of her?"

Irene still didn't answer.

"I know you've thought about it, Irene." Mildred walked back to the table and sat down. She reached across the tablecloth and put her hand over Irene's. "I just want to make sure that Alma will be taken care of, Irene. I know that's what you want too."

Irene slid her hand from under Mildred's and leaned back in her chair. "What do you have in mind?"

"I want to arrange for care for Alma just in case anything should happen to you."

"What kind of care?"

"It's a foster care program. It's a lot like the program your grandson was put into."

"Please, don't talk about my grandson." Irene's voice was low and nervous.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have explained it that way." Mildred took another swallow of coffee. "This program is a way for people like Alma, who can't really live alone or quite take care of themselves, to live in a normal home with a family."



"What would happen if I don't apply for this kind of program?"

"It depends on who the worker is if something happens to you."

"Wouldn't you be the worker?"

"Not in this case. My job is with Social Security. I just make sure that you're receiving the benefits you're entitled to for Alma while she's living in your home. And it will only be a year or so before I retire. I want to make sure before I leave that Alma will be properly taken care of if anything happens to you. If we don't take care of it now, there is a possibility that a worker might place her in an institution." Mildred reached across the table again and took Irene's hand. "You don't want that do you, Irene?"

"I couldn't bear to think of Alma in an institution all alone, nobody to really care for her." Irene sat quietly for a minute. Mildred took more papers out of her briefcase.

"If I sign the papers, no one will take Alma from me unless it becomes absolutely necessary, will they?" Irene was slumped in the chair.

"They will only move her if you are absolutely unable to take care of her or yourself. The court has very strict regulations that protect you as her mother. In the meantime, I can arrange to get some agency help with getting the roof fixed and taking care of the lawn and fixing the steps. I want you and Alma to live together as long as you can, but in

order to do that, we have to get you well and make sure the house doesn't fall in on both of you. Right?"

"Give me the papers. I'll sign."

Irene's hand trembled as she took the pen from Mildred.

## PART II



(1967)

"What are you doing home?"

Mike knew by the tone of her voice it was going to be another one of those nights. She hadn't even bothered to look up from her book when he came in.

"I live here."

"I know that. But why are you home so early?" She still didn't look at him.

"You know, Dolores, when a man comes home from a hard day at work, his wife is supposed to say 'Hi, honey. Did you have a good day?' All you do is ask why I'm here. I live here, damnit. Remember, I'm the guy who pays the rent, and buys the food, and buys those fucking, trashy books you can't take your eyes out of."

He snatched the book out of her hand, ripped it down the center of the spine, and threw it. It hit the little shadow box hanging on the wall across the room. Miniature cats wobbled, then fell on the floor. The shadow box fell on top of them. The mirror back shattered. "And when I come home, look at me. Don't talk to me through some damn book."

Dolores hadn't moved from her spot on the couch. Her lips were pursed, and the jut of her chin and her short hair made her look mannish and hard. She had a smirk on her face that made him want to hit her. But he knew he wouldn't. His father had taught him 'You don't hit girls.' But one of these days, she was going to go too far.

"All I asked was why you're home so early. I don't see

why such a simple, little question should bother you."

"I'm tired, Dolores. I worked all day, and I still have to go to the foundry and work all night." He went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and took out a beer. He popped the top and guzzled half of it before he closed the door. He could feel himself wobbling as he went back in the living room.

"Where are the boys?"

"At Jenny's. They're going to spend the night with Tommy."

"What have I told you about that?" He could feel himself getting ready to explode. "I don't want them over at your sister's, not for ten minutes, not for an hour, and certainly not for the night! She's nothing but a tramp. There's no telling who she'll have over there. Tommy calls every guy she goes out with Daddy." He guzzled the last half of the beer and crushed the can in his fist. "She thinks it's cute. I think it's sick."

He headed for the kitchen again. "What's for dinner?"

"I don't know. What do you want?"

"Are you telling me you haven't even started dinner?"

When he went into the kitchen this time, he saw the dishes still in the sink from breakfast. He threw the can in the trash, grabbed another beer from the refrigerator, and went back into the living room. "What the hell have you been doing all day? The dishes aren't even done."

"Me and the boys went over to Brenda's. Then Jenny and Mom came over. The kids played all day."

"You mean while I'm sweating my ass off delivering furniture all day, you're so busy with your sisters and your mother sitting around talking about everybody like a bunch of dogs that you don't have time to clean the house or to make dinner? I have to work two jobs for this shit?" He reached under the edge of the coffee table and flipped it. Magazines scattered over the floor. The table landed hard breaking one of the legs.

"That's real cute, Mike. Now you can work harder to buy a new table."

Dolores still sat there with her legs crossed. She had on short shorts. They were riding up her thighs close to her crotch. Mike hated her and wanted her at the same time. It had been a long time now. She always had an excuse. Not this time. He reached over and grabbed her knee and started to move his hand up her thigh. Just when his fingers groped under the edge of her shorts, she grabbed his arm and pushed it away. Now she stood.

"You've gotta be kidding. Do you really think I'd have sex with you. You're drunk."

"That's right, I'm drunk. You oughtta be glad. That gives you a good excuse not to have sex this time. What will it be next time." He was up in her face now. Her pupils were big. "You've got a headache? You're on the rag? The



boys will hear?" He popped the top on his beer. "Or maybe is it you don't like sex? Or maybe it's just with me you don't like sex?" He took a long swallow of beer. "You know I'm just beginning to understand why your dad slaps your mother around. You're all a bunch of bitches."

She pushed away from him. "Well at least I have a mother."

Mike felt like he'd been slapped in the face. He started toward her and she backed against the wall. "That's right you frigid bitch. I'm a bastard. I don't have a mother." He pushed up against her and raised his hand to hit her. *You don't hit girls, Mickey.* He pushed her shoulders against the wall and turned. He stomped across the room, picked up the broken coffee table and threw it. He threw it harder than he thought, and it smashed the picture window.

When he turned, Dolores was walking to the couch. She picked up her cigarettes and turned. "That's it. I'm not living with a drunk anymore. I'm sick of the drinking, I'm sick of hearing about you being motherless, and I'm sick of you and your shit." She went to the closet and got her purse. "We're through. I'll get mine and the boy's stuff when you're not here." She opened the front door to leave, then turned, "By the way. I suggest you sober up and get your ass to work. Now you have a window to pay for, too."

Mike closed his eyes. When she slammed the door, more glass shattered on the floor.



(1969)

When he'd left the bar, the full moon and snow made it look like dusk outside, but Mike knew it had to be late. He never left Cheko's 'til after last call, so it had to be after 2 AM. And now the moon had disappeared, and he was stuck in a blizzard. *Shit. Ma was going to be pissed.* He'd promised he wouldn't be late again tonight.

When the snow had started to fall, the flakes were big and fell to the ground like feathers. Now the wind was coming in full force across the lake, and the snow hitting his face was more like ice pellets. He couldn't see more than two houses in front of him.

When he'd left Cheko's, he felt warm and looked forward to the long walk home. Time to clear his head before he got to his mother's. But now. Now he was cold. *Damn cold.* He wished he had his license back. *Fucking cops and their fucking DUI bullshit.* He reached in his pocket to get his gloves. They weren't there. He checked the other pocket. *Shit. Left the fucking gloves on the bar . . . or in the bathroom . . . or who the fuck knows where.* He put his hands to his mouth and blew warm air into his palms. He cupped his hands and licked his fingers with his warm tongue. The cold air hit the water on his knuckles; his fingers burned. *Shit.* He unzipped his jacket half-way and reached inside. He pulled out a bottle. There was almost half a fifth of whiskey left. *Good old Jimmy. Whoever said a man's best friend was his dog didn't know Jimmy the bartender.* He

uncapped the bottle and took a long gulp. He could feel it burning all the way down his throat to his belly. He took another gulp. It didn't burn as much this time, and his body felt warm again. He started walking again, faster, kicking the snow as he walked. He felt good again. *Fucking cops can keep the fucking license.* He didn't need it. He took another gulp of whiskey. His jacket was still half unzipped, but he started sweating. He unzipped it the rest of the way. He walked some more, then took another long gulp and emptied the bottle. He kissed the empty good-bye and tossed it onto a pile of snow leftover from the last storm. He peed on the bottle, melting a yellow stain into the snow. He kept walking. The streets were covered, and the snow was coming down heavier than before. He couldn't see anything now, but kept walking, stumbling. He was really hot now and wiped his forehead with his hand. He knew it was wet because sweat or snow kept rolling into his eyes. But he couldn't feel anything with his fingers. He wasn't sure where he was anymore. How far to Ma's. What time it was. He looked at his watch. It was gone. He looked around on the ground, through the snow. *That's right. That's right. Had to pawn it to go to Cheko's.* He heard a motor in the distance, then saw lights through the fog of snow. The motor was getting louder. He started walking toward the sound. It kept getting closer. It was really loud now. He saw the snowplow just in time to turn and jump out of its way. As snow sprayed over him, he

slipped into an old drift. *Fuck you, you blind sonofabitch!* He lay in the snow for a minute, then started to walk again. He felt tired and heavy. The noise from the snowplow was gone now. He kept walking, but couldn't see anymore. He stumbled and got back up. Kept walking. He collapsed into a snowpile. This time, he didn't get up.

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When he started to wake up, his stomach turned and he threw up. Someone was behind him, holding the back of his neck.

"It's all right, you're going to be all right." It was a woman's voice, soft, reassuring.

He threw up again and realized he was throwing up into a pan. The retching brought tears to his eyes. His mouth tasted sour. "Who are you?" He could hear the harshness of his own voice.

"Angie." She was still behind him. She put a cold wash rag on the back of his neck.

"Angie who?" He still felt sick and didn't know where he was.

"Angie Campbell." She took the rag off his neck and went to the side of the bed.

He looked up. She was tall and had short blonde hair. He looked down again. He was covered with a sheet and



realized he was naked under the sheet. "How'd I get here?" He looked up again. Her cheeks were red.

"My dog found you next to the street in a snowpile." She took the pan away.

"Do you always bring home drunk men who fall into snowpiles?" He looked at her.

"I . . . I . . ."

"I'm sorry, I had no business saying that." He lay back in the bed. "Don't you know it's dangerous for a girl to take a stranger in her house. You don't know who you might get. I could be a murderer or a rapist or something." He looked at her. Her head was bent down.

"I couldn't just let you freeze to death in a snowpile."

He sat back up and looked at her. "Yeah, okay. But you see what I mean don't you?"

She nodded her head.

"Did you get me in here all alone." He looked toward the door.

"You helped a little. But once I got you on the bed, you were out cold. . . ."

He looked around again. "You don't happen to have a cigarette do you?"

She left the room for a minute, then came back and handed him a cigarette. "Here." She lit it.

"Thanks." He took a long drag.

"Could I ask you something?" She looked down again.



"Sure." He raised the sheet and looked under at his nakedness. He lowered the sheet and took another drag on the cigarette. "Why not, right? Since we know each other so well. Or since you know me so well, that is."

Her face was red. "What's your name?"

He couldn't believe it. "You mean you don't know my name? Didn't you look in my wallet for any identification?"

"Yes. But the only thing I could find was a picture. There wasn't a driver's license or anything else."

It dawned on him that she was right. "Oh, yeah. The justice system and I are having a little dispute over my ability to operate a motor vehicle at the moment." He held out his hand. "My name's Joe, Joe Buchanan. You can call me Mike." He could see he was confusing her. "My name is Joe Buchanan, but my confirmation name is Michael. It's a long story. But, to make it short, all my friends call me Mike. And . . . since you rescued me, I guess you would qualify as a friend, don't you think?" She shook his hand. Her hand was soft and warm. She smiled, not just with her lips but with her eyes. He liked her smile.

She let go of his hand and looked at the floor again. "The picture in your wallet . . . is that your wife and children?"

He looked down at his hands. "Ex-wife and children." He looked back up. "We broke up two years ago. I hardly ever get to see my boys anymore." She was looking at him.

"Sorry."

He could tell she meant it. "What about you?" He looked around. "You got a husband and kids hiding in the closet?"

She smiled. "No. There's just me and my dog."

"Oh, yeah. Where is Fido? I guess I should be thanking him, too."

"It's Buster, and he's sleeping in the kitchen."

"Well, I guess he earned the rest." He took another drag on the cigarette. She handed him an ashtray from the top of the dresser. "So, Angie, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm working for a 'temporary' agency. You know, a receptionist one day, a stock person the next." She leaned against the dresser. "I'm looking for a full-time job." She hesitated. "What do you do?"

"I drive truck for the post office. But I'm not sure how much longer I'll stay there."

"Why?"

"They aren't too happy about me losing my license. So they're making all kinds of nasty threats."

"I know what you mean."

"Why's that?" He looked at her. She looked down.

"I lost my last job, too."

"How come?"

"My boss didn't like some friends of mine."

"You're kidding?"

"Well, they were starting to be a problem."

"How?"

"It's a long story. Let's just say I got mixed up with some people that are a lot more street-wise than I am, and they knew it and took advantage of it." She moved to the window. "I lost everything . . . my job, my savings, my car, my family . . . ."

He watched her. "How'd you lose your family?"

She turned, but she wasn't looking at him. "My parents didn't like the idea of their daughter associating with inner-city people." She smiled. "When I lost everything, I wanted to go back home, but they didn't think it was a good idea." She looked at him. "So here I am."

She seemed young and innocent to Mike. "How old are you, Angie?"

"Nineteen. I'll be twenty next June." Her hands were clasped in front of her. "How old are you?"

He chuckled. "Thirty." He added. "I'll be thirty-one in March." They both laughed.

"Can I get you anything to eat or drink?"

"No, my stomach's not up to food just yet. I'd like a glass of water." She started to leave the room. "But, if you'll give me my clothes first, I could go ahead and get dressed."

She went to the closet and pulled out his pants and

shirt. She brought his underclothes from the top of the dresser.

"Thanks." The clothes were still warm from the dryer.

"Your jacket and wallet are in the kitchen. They should be dry by now." She started to leave, then turned. "I'll get your glass of water." She closed the door as she left the room.

Mike knew he could have frozen to death. *Jesus. Was the whole fifth of whiskey gone?* He couldn't remember. He put his pants on. They were still warm.

There was a knock. "Come in." He was buttoning his shirt when she came in. "These clothes really feel great. They must be right out of the dryer."

She handed him the water. She was holding his jacket and wallet. "They've been out for a while. I kept the heat up, just in case you were cold."

He looked at her. He was just a little taller. Her eyes were green. "Sorry I've put you to all this trouble, Angie."

"I'm glad you're okay."

She looked down again. He took his jacket and put it on. He took the wallet and put it in his pant's pocket.

"Well, I guess I'd better be going now. I'm staying with my mother, and she's probably worried about me."

"Do you want to call her?"

"No. I'll be home shortly, and then I only have to get



hollered at once." He put out his hand. She shook it.  
"Thank you again." He kept holding her hand.

"You're welcome." She was blushing.

He looked at her eyes. He didn't want to let go of her hand. "Angie . . . would you consider going out with an old man like me sometime . . . uh . . . to a movie or out to eat or something?" He put his other hand over hers.

"Sure, I'd like that." She smiled again and moved her hand.

Mike felt jittery. *What the hell am I doing? Robbing the cradle?* "Well, I'd better go." She led him out of the bedroom to the front door. He opened the door. The handle was cold compared to her hand. He turned. "Thanks, again."

"You're welcome." Her voice was soft.

He started down the steps, then turned. She was still standing in the doorway. "Angie, will you go out with me tomorrow night? We'll go to the movies and out to eat."

"Okay, I'd like that." Her cheeks were red, but she was smiling again with her eyes.

"Okay, great. I'll be here tomorrow night at seven." He turned and ran down the stairs and started walking down the sidewalk toward home. He was halfway down the block, then remembered he didn't know the house number. He ran back and and got the number from the mailbox. The door was closed. *The number's 439 Lake Avenue. Angie Campbell.* He repeated the house number and her name all the way home.

(1971)

When she held the pencil, Alma had to squeeze the wood really hard so it wouldn't flop up and down between her fingers uncontrollably and leave thick black streaks across the page. Even though it made her fingers ache, she squeezed and tried to copy the lines her mother had made on the other piece of paper. Practice. Her mother told her to practice and soon she would be able to print her own name and read it. When you were a little girl, Alma, you used to go to school and you could read and write your name. Her mother had said that. Alma tried to imagine herself going to school like the children she watched go past the house every morning. How did she find the school? And how did she find her way home to her mother? She couldn't believe she had gone to school. But the paper with its big, wide lines and the thick, black pencil looked familiar, like she'd seen them before. But they were new, weren't they? When she thought about it too hard it made her head ache.

Alma practiced drawing the lines straight like her mother showed her, but some of hers were wavy and didn't look pretty like her mother's.

"Are you still writing, Alma?"

"Yes. Fingers hurt."

"Well, maybe you'd better stop for a while." Irene had a can in her hand.

"What's that, Mama?"

"It's some coffee grounds I saved to put around the

petunias. Do you want to come out while I spread them around?"

"Flowers like coffee?"

"No, honey. It just helps them to grow pretty."

Her mother's voice was shaky and Alma noticed that her hands were shaking too.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"I'm just getting old, honey."

Alma looked at her own hands. They looked different than they used to. Maybe she was getting old, too. "Am I old, too, Mama?" Alma looked up at her mother.

Her mother hugged her around the shoulders. "Not old like me but older. We all have to get old sometime."

Alma thought her mother looked at her funny when she said that.

"Come on, Alma. Are you going to help me spread the grounds?"

"No, Mama. I don't go out."

Her mother hugged her. "That's all right. I'll be back in a minute, and if you want to, go in the living room and pick out a book and I'll read it to you when I come in."

"Thank you, Mama." Alma dropped the pencil on the table and ran into the living room where her stack of books was lying on the floor next to her mother's rocker. Alma sat on the floor in front of the rocker and picked the books up one by one to look at the covers. She knew what the stories were

by the pictures on the front. She loved to hear about pinocchio, and Winnie-the-Pooh, and Robin Hood, and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, but her favorite book was Alice in Wonderland. She especially loved to hear about the tea party. And she loved to think of how much her name and Alice's sounded alike.

"Did you decide, Alma?"

Alma jumped. "Yes, mama. Read Alice."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Alma scooted over to the sofa and leaned her back against the front. She watched her mother. Her mother's footsteps were slow, and she held on to the furniture as she moved across the room. When her mother sat in the rocker, Alma could hear her bones crack, and saw how tired her mother looked and how her mother's back was bent. Her mother's fingers were slow and shook as she turned each page. Alma listened to her mother. Her voice was shaky but she read the words so softly and tenderly that Alma cried. She was afraid, and didn't know why.



(1975)

Angie ran along the edge of the street pushing the old stroller through puddles and potholes with her left hand. Her arm was numb from juggling Andy under her jacket with her right arm, and Tammy kept pulling her back by the hem of her jacket. It had started raining while they were still three blocks from the house. Joey was stuffed in the stroller seat with a large, pink box of Pampers. The hood of his jacket had fallen and his blond curls were plastered to his forehead.

"Mama," Tammy whined and pulled back on the hem of Angie's jacket, "I don't want to go home. I'm scared." Angie stopped the stroller and turned to Tammy. Raindrops and tears mixed and slid down Tammy's face. They were only half-a-block away now and Angie knew Tammy was watching the house. Angie turned to look, too. She could see why anyone would be afraid, especially a five-year-old. The old house looked like something out of a horror movie. It was so badly weathered all the wood slats were grey like a barn, and the roof sagged, and half of the shingles were missing.

"Come on, Tammy. Please. We're almost home." Angie had to lean forward and push extra hard in order to pull Tammy along.

"I'm scared, Mama. I don't wanna go in that house." Angie could feel Tammy pulling her back by the hem of her coat.

"Tammy, come on! Your daddy will be home in a few

minutes, and everything will be okay, you'll see."

By the time Angie got the kids up on the porch, all three were crying. They were soaked, and both boys' diapers were dirty.

Angie ran Tammy and Andy into the house and came back and pulled Joey out of the stroller and grabbed the box of disposable diapers from the rack underneath the baby's seat.

The cardboard box was swollen by the water. She hoped the diapers weren't soaked before she could even get them on the boys' bottoms.

When she went back in, Tammy was standing in her bedroom doorway. Her big, brown eyes were open wide, and her face was streaked with tears. She had her fingers in her mouth.

Angie stood Joey on the patchwork carpet she and Mike had made from carpet store, dumpster scraps nailed to the kids' bedroom floor. She felt something on her arm and looked down. It was a flea. She squeezed the flea between her thumb and index finger to kill it. Her arms were marked all over from their bites. She listened to the rain beat on the roof. It was raining harder now, and there were small puddles forming in the room that was supposed to have been the dining room. Soon the old, gummy floors would be so slick she wouldn't be able to get through to the kitchen.

"Tammy, be a good girl and go in the bathroom and wash Your face and hands; then rinse out your washrag and bring

it to Mommy so I can clean Joey and Andy."

"Mama, I'm scared. The worms will be there."

"Come on, baby, look. The floor isn't all wet yet, and the worms won't come out until the floor's all wet. You know that."

Tammy kept staring through the dining room into the kitchen. "I'm scared, Mama."

Angie knew she wasn't going to be able to convince Tammy to go to the back of the house. "If I go and get it, will you watch Joey and Andy for Mama?"

Tammy nodded her head.

Angie walked around the puddles in the dining room and stopped at the kitchen door. She leaned through the doorway and looked around. She was afraid, too, of the slugs that came out in the rain to crawl up the stove and refrigerator. But she couldn't let Tammy know that. There weren't any out yet, so she ran through the kitchen into the bathroom and ran warm water on two washrags. As she came back through the kitchen, she grabbed a box of salt. It would melt the slugs when she had to come back in the kitchen to make dinner.

When she went back in the kid's room, Tammy had already taken Joey's diaper off.

"Thank you, baby." She hugged Tammy. "You're such a good girl. What would Mama do without you?"

She tried to get Joey to go to the potty while she



changed Andy's diaper. Andy's legs and arms were covered with the bites, too. "Come on, Joey, you can do it." She put calamine lotion on Andy's bites. "Remember, be a big boy like Daddy and go to the potty."

Joey just looked at her blankly, then stood up from the potty and peed on the floor.

*Yeah, that's just like Daddy all right.*

She put Andy in the small bed. He was almost asleep. She put a new diaper on Joey. His and Tammy's arms and legs didn't have any bites. She took Tammy and Joey in her room to watch Sesame Street on the small black and white television.

"You two stay here while Mama makes something to eat, okay?"

Tammy nodded her head; Joey kept staring at the television.

She grabbed the box of salt and went back to the kitchen. She couldn't see any slugs yet, but just to be sure, she sprinkled salt on the floor in front of the refrigerator and stove.

*Thank God it's payday. She fixed the kids farina from the supplemental food office. Maybe we can eat at McDonald's or have something other than farina and peanut butter crackers.*

A loud clap of thunder shook the house and the lights flickered. Both Tammy and Joey started to cry and holler,



"Mama!"

"Shit." Angie grabbed three bowls, margarine, sugar, peanut butter, crackers, spoons, and a knife and ran for the bedroom. She set the knife on the crates that were make-do dressers, dropped the rest on the bed, and ran back to the kitchen for the farina, milk, glasses, and baby food jars of Beef'N Macaroni and applesauce and a bottle for later when Andy would wake up.

By the time Angie got the kids fed and ready for bed, it was after seven o'clock and Mike still wasn't home from work. *Where is he?* She knew where he was but kept hoping she was wrong.

She put Joey to bed at eight o'clock and let Tammy lie with her a while. Tammy fell asleep near nine, and Angie carried her to bed. Andy wasn't in his bed.

After tucking Tammy in, she went over to Andy's bed and got down on her hands and knees and looked under the bed. Andy was under the bed curled up with his blanket and with his thumb in his mouth. Joey had rocked the last three cribs apart, and Angie and Mike didn't have the money for another one, so they put Andy in a small bed they already had. Now every night or two in the middle of the night when she heard a small thud, she knew it was Andy falling out of the bed. She put him back in the bed, gave him a bottle, and tucked his blanket under the mattress, hoping that would hold him in.

Mike still wasn't home by ten o'clock, so Angie put on her nightgown and lay in bed trying to read The Exorcist, but she couldn't concentrate. She wondered where he was and thought about how things had changed so much over the last five years. She remembered the night she pulled him out of the snow and how sweet he was the next morning. They'd had so much to talk about in the beginning: his marriage, his boys, how he felt about his foster parents and his real mother, her family, work, Buster. Angie thought of how lonely he seemed--how lonely they both were. She thought of how her mother said he was just like the people who made her lose everything and how he wouldn't change. She remembered how she had thought her love could change his drinking and his bitterness over his real mother, but she knew the drinking and everything else was getting worse.

She had just drifted off when there was a loud crash at the back of the house. Angie bolted out of bed, and Tammy and Joey came running into the room and jumped on the bed. Andy was crying in the other room.

Angie headed for the bedroom to grab Andy when she heard a yell from the back of the house.

"Hey, anybody home! Where is everybody? Daddy's home!"

Angie looked through the rain in the dark dining room into the kitchen that was lighted at the back of the house. Mike was laying on top of the door on the floor next to the

bathroom at the back of the house. The door had been nailed shut. He was obviously drunk. A six-pack of beer was lying on its side on the floor in front of the sink cabinet.

"Are you crazy?" Angie hollered. "You scared the hell out of every one of us. Where have you been? I've been worried sick."

"Ah, honey," Mike slurred, "I just went out for a little while with some of the guys from work."

Angie ran through the dining room into the kitchen. "Look at what you've done to the door! I want it fixed!"

Mike crawled into the bathroom and tried to get up to use the toilet and fell into the tub. Angie looked through the kitchen, across the blackness and through the dripping water in the dining room. Tammy and Joey were standing in the doorway looking into the kitchen. She picked the door up off the floor and leaned it against the doorjamb.

"Don't worry, Mommy will put the door back on in a minute."

She went across the slippery dining room again.

"Mama," Tammy asked, "Why did Daddy break the door down and scare us?"

"He wasn't trying to scare us, honey; he was just trying to get in. It was dark outside and he couldn't find the front of the house." She scooted them to their bedroom. "Come on now, Daddy's home and everything will be okay. You can go back to bed now."



"Can't we stay up and say hello to Daddy," asked Tammy.

"No, honey, Daddy's tired. Maybe you should wait and say hi to Daddy in the morning when he's had a chance to get some sleep. Okay?"

Tammy was reluctant but finally gave in and let Angie tuck her back in bed. Joey fell right asleep, but Angie knew that Tammy would be listening.

Angie made her way back across the dining room floor and looked for the hammer and nails to put the door back. She didn't like to admit it, but the house scared her, too. What was outside the house, though, scared her even more.

Mike came out of the bathroom and leaned against the wall while Angie drove nails into the doorframe.

"I'm sorry, honey, I didn't mean to scare you." He tried to put his arms around Angie.

"Leave me alone, Mike." She shrugged him off. "I don't think it was funny. And neither did the kids. I thought you told me you'd be home right after work. You promised you wouldn't drink this weekend. You promised." She was near tears.

"Dammit Angie, I work hard all week long. What's the matter with having a few beers?" His speech was slurred.

"Just out of curiosity, how much did those few beers cost this time, huh?"

"I don't know. Here, you can have all the money I have." Mike pulled a bunch of wadded up bills out of his



pocket and gave them to Angie. "There, does that make you happy?"

Angie counted the bills. There was a total of sixty-eight dollars. She was stunned.

"Sixty-eight dollars, Mike? Where's the rest?" She was panic-stricken. She'd told him the electric and rent were due this week. The rent was fifty dollars and the electric was forty-six. They could maybe put off the rent, but the electric company had already sent a final notice. If they paid that, how would they feed the kids for another week?

"Goddamnit, Mike," she yelled, "Where's the rest?"

"I don't know. I guess I spent it. A bunch of us were drinking, and then I left and started walking home, and it started to rain. I fell asleep in the park for a while. I don't know where it went, Angie. I'm sorry."

"'Sorry' isn't going to feed the kids next week, is it? What the hell kind of mother and father does it make us when we can't even feed our own kids? Don't you think it's wrong for you to take food out of your own children's mouths?"

"Hey, it's not my fault!" Mike was hollering and crying as he made his way toward the bedroom. "At least they know who their fucking mother and father is. They ought to be glad they at least know that. It's more than I got. All I got was a whore for a mother."

Angie followed him. "You don't know that. I've told

you a thousand times, you don't know why your mother gave you up. Look at your foster parents. You couldn't have asked for a better home. Look how much better off you were than your own kids are."

He went into the bedroom and fell across the bed in his clothes. In a matter of seconds he was asleep.

Angie fixed the door. Before she went to the front of the house, she popped the lids on the five beers and turned them upside down in the sink. She was exhausted and went to bed. She tried to figure out how they were going to make it for another week on sixty-eight dollars. She knew they couldn't keep living like this. When she fell asleep, it was almost three o'clock. She woke again near six. Mike was snoring and she was soaked from where he'd wet the bed again.

(1981)

They sat in the tractor-trailer in the parking lot for almost an hour. The wind was blowing in from the north. Mike couldn't get over how bitter cold it was in Rochester. He couldn't remember it being this cold in late November when he was growing up. But maybe he'd just forgotten. Maybe he'd been living down south too long.

Inside the truck it was warm. And quiet. He leaned over the steering wheel, propped his head on his arms, looked out the window across the parking lot to the funeral home. He needed to go in. But he just couldn't.

Angie sat silent in the passenger seat. He was grateful.

He turned his head and looked at her. She was looking at him, too. He reached across and took her hand. It was warm and made him think of her the night before. Holding him while he cried. Then him loving her. Her body soft and giving. Him moving in and out of her, his tears dripping on her belly and breasts. Her letting him pour his grief into her. Now he squeezed her hand gently. She smiled at him but was still silent.

He let go and took a pack of cigarettes from the dash and lit one. He took a long drag, held it in, then blew smoke into the windshield. "Come on, I guess we'd better go in now." He opened the door, swung around, and jumped down.

By the time he got to Angie's side, she was already turned and climbing down the stairs of the tractor-trailer.

He flicked the cigarette across the parking lot, then reached up and held onto her waist so she wouldn't lose her balance on the last step. It was a long way to the ground.

When she got down, she turned and faced him. "Ready?"

He turned his head and looked at the funeral home. "I guess."

"It'll be all right. You'll see. Just remember how proud she was you weren't drinking these last five years." She was looking up at him. He could see his own face, and the truck, and the sky in her eyes. "How proud we all are."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight against him. When he backed away, he took her hand, and they walked across the parking lot to the door.

The inside was carpeted in red, and the walls were paneled in walnut. He expected it to smell like formaldehyde, but it smelled like flowers. He should have known that. Ferns were sitting on pedestals between doorways that opened into large parlors. At the end of the hallway, Mike saw John standing in the last doorway to the right looking at him. He stopped. John walked toward him, and when he got close, Mike could see he'd been crying. They hugged.

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"I know, John. I know." Mike could feel himself beginning to break already.

"But you know she's gone to a far better place."

Mike squeezed John, then backed away and took a deep



breath. He cleared his throat. "How have you been doing?"

"Okay, I guess."

"You working?"

"No, I haven't been able to yet."

"How's your dad?"

"You know." John put his hand to his lips. "Same old . . . same old."

Mike knew what he meant. "Who all's in there?" He looked down the hall at the doorway.

John turned to look too, then turned back to Mike.

"Everybody, Mike. Your Uncle Marvin and Aunt Bertie, Aunt Melinda, Waldemar, Hans, Father Callahan, most of the German Club, people from church." John hesitated. "Mike. . . ." He looked down. "Dolores and the boys are here, too. And her sisters."

Mike turned and looked at Angie. He could see doubt in her eyes now. He knew she was feeling insecure. He took her hand again. He felt insecure, too. It had been ten years since he'd seen his boys. He thought a minute. They were twenty and nineteen now. He wondered how they would feel seeing him and wondered what they looked like. He wondered if they knew he left New York partly for them. He'd been a drunk and could only have hurt them. "Thanks for warning me, John."

Angie squeezed his hand. "Come on, honey. We need to go in."

As he walked down the hallway, he thought his lungs were going to burst.

When they turned the corner, he could feel their stares but couldn't see their faces. All he could see was the open casket at the far end of the room. He couldn't move his eyes away from it. He squeezed Angie's hand hard now. He had to hold on to something. He felt like he was fifteen again holding onto his mother's hand as he walked toward his father's casket. But he wasn't fifteen anymore. When he stood in front of the casket, he took his mother's hand in his left hand. He let go of Angie's, knelt, gave the sign of the cross, and prayed. *Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou, blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

He stood and looked at his mother. She was beautiful. When he'd seen her at the hospital just two weeks earlier, the stroke had made her mouth and eye on her left side look like they were sliding down her face. He thought of how frustrated she was that she couldn't do anything for herself after the stroke. She couldn't even reach the water or phone next to her bed.

Her left side was paralyzed. He thought of how proud she always was and how degraded she felt being tied to a chair so she could eat. How grateful she was that Angie and the kids were going to go back to Rochester to take care of her. But it never happened. There wasn't time. She got pneumonia and was gone before they even had time to pack for

the move. But now she was beautiful. She looked fifty instead of seventy-eight.

Mike leaned over the casket and kissed his mother's forehead. "I love you, Ma." He laid her arm back at her side. He leaned over the casket and made sure her wedding rings were still on her hand. She had always made him promise they would be.

Mike turned and looked at Angie. Tears were streaming down her face. He took her hand and hugged her. They walked to the front row of folding chairs and sat down. He placed Angie's hand in her lap and squeezed it. He bent forward on the seat, put his elbows on his knees, and cradled his forehead in his hands.

He tried to pray but couldn't. He kept thinking of all the years with his mother after his father died. Of how much worry he'd caused her. Running off and getting in trouble with Clyde and Joey. Drinking all the time. Borrowing money. Breaking up with Dolores. Leaving the boys. Then leaving Rochester with Angie. But Angie was right. He's made her proud of him these last five years. She told him. Proud because he'd quit drinking. Proud that he was working, driving a truck all over the country. She was glad that he could come see her when he came north or when he drove coast to coast. But she was most proud about him not drinking. And as he thought about it now, he was proud too. If this had happened six years ago, he knew it would have sent him on

a drunk for weeks. But he hadn't even thought about having a drink.

"Mike, I'm so sorry about your mother. She was a good woman."

Mike looked up. It was Father Callahan. He looked old. Mike stood up and shook his hand. "Thank you, Father Callahan."

"She was proud of you, Mike. Every morning we'd talk for a minute after mass. She never failed to mention your name."

"Thank you, Father."

Father Callahan started to turn away, then Mike remembered. "Father?"

Father Callahan turned around.

"Were you able to see her before . . . before. . . ."  
Mike was afraid of his answer.

"Yes, Mike. I was there. The hospital said you and Angie said to call me." Father Callahan put his hand on Angie's shoulder. "I was in time to give her Last Rites. That was a wonderful thing for you to remember to do for your mother when you knew she was dying. She would be very grateful."

"Thank you, Father." They shook hands again, and Father Callahan left. Mike was relieved. That was a promise he'd made to his mother.

He took a deep breath. "Come on. I have to get out of



here. I need a cigarette." He put his arm around Angie's shoulder and tried to walk out of the room without looking at the casket. Aunt Melinda was sitting on a sofa, sobbing; Uncle Marvin was bent over her trying to calm her down. Mike wanted to run out of the building.

"Mike."

The voice came from behind him, but he knew it was Dolores. He took Angie's hand, and they turned around.

Dolores had aged, too. Her hair was still short, but now it was almost all grey. Her face still had the same hard, almost manly set to it. Her sisters were standing behind her. They were all dressed in black. Judy's hair was still bleached blonde, and she was so skinny her hooked nose stood out like a beak between her hollow cheeks and eye sockets.

"Hello, Dolores."

"I just wanted to let you know I'm sorry about your mother. I didn't see her very often over the last few years, but I still wanted the boys to come."

"Where are the boys?"

"I don't know. They're here. They're nervous about seeing you. After all, it's been ten years."

He could hear the sarcasm in her voice. Mike tried to keep his voice at a whisper. "Do you think I don't know that?" He squeezed Angie's hand harder. "What have you told them?"

"I haven't told them anything. I figured that when they finally got to see you, you'd be drunk, and they could decide for themselves. You can't imagine how surprised I am to see you sober."

"My drinking wasn't the only problem we had, and you know it." He figured that's what she had told the boys. "And I haven't had a drink in five years."

"Yeah, I bet. You probably have a beer waiting out in the truck."

He wanted to say something, but Angie squeezed his hand.

"You're wrong. He quit drinking on June 10, 1976. And his mother knew it, and I'm sure if you let her see the boys, they know it, too."

"Yeah, I'd heard it, but I can't believe it."

Mike put his arm around Angie. "I guess it just took a better woman than you to make it happen." He and Angie turned and walked out. Mike could feel sweat on his forehead. John joined them in the hall.

"Is there any place we can have a smoke?"

"Yeah, downstairs. There's a small lounge."

Mike started for the stairs. John stayed in the hall.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Not now, Mike. I need to talk to Father Callahan for a minute. I'll see you when you come back up. Okay?"

"Okay, we won't be long."

Angie went down the staircase first. At the end of the

stairs there was a bench and a water fountain. Mike lit a cigarette and sat on the bench. He scooted over to make room for Angie.

"Will you be okay if I go find the ladies' room?"

Mike saw how tired she looked. She had dark circles under her eyes. "Sure, I'll be fine. Take your time. I just needed to get out of there for a few minutes."

Angie bent and gave him a kiss. He watched her as she walked down the hall and turned the corner. He didn't know what he would have done without her the last few days. She was the one who got the call from the hospital when his mother turned critical. Then she had to have the Florida police find him in Jacksonville where he was delivering a load. And she had to get everything ready to go to New York. Had to get a sitter for the kids. Had to buy him a suit jacket and dress shirt. He didn't know what he would have done without her the last twelve years. She'd stood behind him through everything, the drinking, the lost jobs, living in dumps, everything. He took a long drag on the cigarette, then put it out. He leaned his head back on the wall behind the bench.

He had just started to drift off when someone stepped on the pedal of the water fountain. He opened his eyes and looked up. It was his oldest son, Dave. Mike stood. Dave was taller than him now. *My God, he must be six feet two or three.* Dave looked a lot like Mike when he was younger. He

was built, too; he looked like a football player. His eyes were red from crying. It made him look like the little boy Mike remembered.

Dave cleared his throat again. "I'm sorry about your mother . . . about Grandma."

Mike could tell he was trying not to break down. "Thank you, Dave. I know this must be hard on you, too." Mike didn't know what to say. "Did you get to see your grandma before. . . .?"

"I saw her while she was in the hospital."

"Good." Mike started to take a cigarette from the pack.

"Have you got an extra one?" Dave's fingers were shaking.

"How long have you been smoking?" Mike flicked the pack so Dave could take one.

"Since I was seventeen." Dave hesitated. "That was three years ago."

Mike knew that was supposed to be a dig, but he let it slide. "So what are you doing now?"

"I'm going to school for computer engineering."

"That's good. Did you play football in high school?"

"I was a lineman my junior and senior years. We played in the state tournament my junior year. I played soccer and baseball, too. Pitcher."

Mike thought of how much he'd missed and knew he had to say something. "Do you understand why I left, Dave? Why I



stayed out of your lives?"

Dave looked down. "Maybe I understand a little. But I can't forget it. Rick and I had to grow up without a father."

Mike could hear the bitterness in his voice. It was almost like Dolores's. "I was a drunk, Dave. An alcoholic. And your mother and I, we had other problems, too, from the beginning. But I haven't had a drink in over five years now."

"Grandma told us. But I couldn't believe it. If it was true, why didn't you come see us?"

Mike was stunned by his question and didn't know how to answer. He turned and cleared his throat. "When I left, the first five years were really rough. I was drinking more and more, only I was into the hard stuff by then. I missed you and Rick, but I wouldn't have been any good for you. I had a lot of problems. It was really hell on Angie and the kids, and on me." Mike took a long drag of the cigarette. It seemed funny to watch his own son do the same. "Then when I quit, I was in therapy for over a year. It was a hard thing to do, and everyone had to make a lot of adjustments. But then, when I got strong enough and knew I wouldn't drink anymore, I wanted to see you and Rick so bad, but I was afraid it was too late then, and I didn't know how to approach you." Mike ground his cigarette out in the buttstand. "Can you understand that, Dave?"

"I don't know." Dave ground his butt into the sand. "It's hard to forget all the times I wished you had been there. I needed a Father. Mom tried the best she could, but I needed a Father."

Dave was crying now. His shoulders were shaking. Mike wanted to hold him like he did when he was little when he was hurt, but he didn't know how Dave would react. He put his hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Dave. I wish things could have been different, but you have to believe I wanted to see you. I just wasn't in any shape to be a father when I left."

"What's going on?" Rick came up from behind Dave. He was just as tall, only slightly built, like Dolores, and he had the same hard features.

Dave wiped his eyes. "We were just talking."

"About what?"

"Grandma. And some other things."

"What other things?" Even his voice sounded bitter.

"We'll talk about it later."

Mike could tell Dave was uncomfortable with Rick's attitude.

"What kind of shit has he been feeding you, Dave?"

Mike looked away. He knew Rick would never forgive him. He could feel his chest tighten.

"Lay off, Rick. For Christ's sake, we're at Grandma's funeral."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry about Grandma, 'Mike'." Rick said

"Mike" hard and loud.

"Thank you." Mike knew it wouldn't do any good to talk to Rick.

"Come on. Mom's ready to go." Rick started up the stairs.

"Tell her I'll be there in a minute." Dave looked up at Rick. Rick shrugged his shoulders and kept going. "I'm sorry he acted like that. He's really close to Mom."

"It's not your fault, Dave. It's mine. I just hope that someday you'll be able to forgive me and want to know me the way I want to know you both."

"I'd . . ." Dave started, then stopped. "I don't know. We'll have to see." Dave held his hand out to Mike.

Mike took it in his own hand. Dave's hand was bigger. They shook hands, then Dave moved toward him. Mike felt like Dave was moving in slow motion. They hugged for a long time, then Dave let go. "I have to go now."

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

"Rick and I are going to pallbear." He was starting up the stairs now.

"That would have made your grandma happy, Dave. Thank you."

Dave turned and went up the stairs.

Mike sat down on the bench. He felt drained.

"You okay?" Angie was coming up the hallway. "I saw the boys and didn't want to interrupt." She smoothed his

hair and rubbed his head. "How'd it go?"

He leaned back on the wall again. "Okay with Dave, I think. But Rick won't even talk to me. Calls me Mike. He's really bitter."

She sat down next to him.

"I guess I should have expected that, though, huh? I guess that's what I deserve."

"Come on. You know better than that. You're a good man and a good father. You did what you thought was best at the time. You had a lot of problems they don't understand. Now maybe the door is open again. At least with Dave. Just give Rick time. Things will change."

"I hope so." He stood and took her hand again. "Well, I guess we'd better go up and face everyone else. Maybe the worst is over now."

"I'm sure it is."

Mike hesitated and turned to Angie. "Will you help me find my mother?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when I was drinking and I used to say how I didn't know my real mother, and I'd say she was a whore. Remember how you used to say I shouldn't say that? You said I didn't know why she gave me up."

"I remember."

"When I listened to Dave it made me think of how I've been unfair to my real mother. They don't understand all



the problems I had, and maybe there's something more to my real . . . my biological mother giving me away than I've been able to see or understand." He put his hand around Angie's shoulder. "My real mother will always be Mrs. Schmidt . . . she's the woman that took care of me and nurtured me. But I still wonder about my mother . . . my natural mother, and I'd just like to know what she's like or why she gave me away." He looked at Angie. "Will you help me?"

"I told you before I would. I'll start when we get home."

He kissed her on the forehead and held her hand as they went back up the stairs.

(1982)

Mr. Avery had told her to be watching for him, so Mrs. Grant had to run back and forth from the front door to the living room to look for his car and to straighten up the house at the same time. She always kept the spare room upstairs ready just in case, so she wouldn't have to run up and down the stairs. She was sure glad about that.

As she dusted, she wondered about the woman Mr. Avery was bringing. All he'd said on the phone was he was bringing a white woman in her sixties who needed to be taken care of. This would be the first time Mrs. Grant had taken in a white woman, and she worried over how the white woman would feel living with a black woman. *And what about this white woman's family? Sure didn't want a hard time from the family. It's hard enough taking in a stranger without having to deal with somebody's family, too.* She heard a car door slam. She went to the door and pulled back the front curtain. Sure enough. There was Mr. Avery getting out of his car and walking to the other side.

Mrs. Grant opened the door and hollered, "Anything I can help you with, Mr. Avery?"

"Not now, Mrs. Grant. I'll bring the other things in later."

Mrs. Grant stood on the porch and waited. A woman was walking up the sidewalk with Mr. Avery. She wasn't just white. She was real white. Mrs. Grant thought she must have the whitest skin she'd ever seen. She had on a faded, flower

print dress and her socks were sliding down her calves. Her hair was in a bun, but the black and grey hairs were all pulled out and tangled. They came up the stairs.

"Hello, Mrs. Grant. Nice to see you again."

Mr. Avery looked the same way he always did. Like somebody had starched his underwear and ironed his lips.

"Mr. Avery."

"This is Alma Buchanan, Mrs. Grant. She's going to be staying with you a while."

Mrs. Grant looked at Alma closer this time. She sure was a pretty thing. It was hard for her to believe this woman was in her sixties. "Hello, Alma." Mrs. Grant held her hand out to Alma. Alma just looked at her and stood there. Mrs. Grant moved forward and took Alma by the arm and led her into the house. The poor woman's arms were freezing. "Are you cold, child? On a hot day like today?"

Alma didn't answer her. Mrs. Grant took her in the living room and led her to a chair. Alma sat down. Mr. Avery had followed. Mrs. Grant looked at him and motioned him to the hall. When she followed him, she noticed he didn't look like he had a butt at all.

"What's the matter with her?" Mrs. Grant tried to talk in a whisper.

"She had scarlet fever when she was a girl and it made her slow."

"She don't just look slow. She looks like she don't

know what's going on at all. Now you tell me what's going on, or you take her somewhere else."

"All right, all right. You don't need to get all upset." Mr. Avery pushed his glasses up on his skinny nose. "I just took over her case today. Before this, she's been listed with the Social Security Disability office. Up 'til now, her mother's been taking care of her. Her mother had a stroke, apparently yesterday in her backyard. The garbageman found her there this morning. The woman's in her nineties. Anyway, when the paramedics got there, they moved her into the house. When the police got there, they searched the place and found Alma in her bedroom squatting in the corner. When they tried to take her downstairs, she fought like a wildcat. Scratched one of the patrolmen's arms to pieces. She just kept hollering for her 'Mama.' They figured out there was something wrong with her and called us. Come to find out, her mother had signed some papers, years ago, saying she could be taken care of in a foster home, but that she couldn't be institutionalized. If it'd been me, instead of some soft, old woman worker, I'd have made the old lady commit her." He turned and looked at Alma. "And if she gives you any problem, you let me know, and I'll make sure we put her someplace where she won't cause no trouble."

Mrs. Grant wanted to slap him. Some welfare worker he was. *He doesn't care nothing about that poor woman.* "How is her mother? And what about other family?"



"Not good. But you know how those old people are. She could hang on for weeks. And as far as family goes, there's a step-sister, but she doesn't want anything to do with her."

Mrs. Grant wanted to get him out of the house. "Well, why don't you go ahead and bring in the rest of her things?"

"Aren't you going to help?"

"Why, Mr. Avery. You don't want me to leave her alone in here do you? You know she might go off and break everything in my living room. Now if she does, is the welfare office going to repay me?"

He cleared his throat. "You're right, of course." He started out the door. "I'll be right back."

When he shut the door, Mrs. Grant stuck her tongue out at the door and went back to Alma. "Don't you worry about that stupid man, Alma. We'll get along just fine."

Alma just sat and looked up at her.

"Are you hungry, Alma?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes were big and frightened.

Mrs. Grant put her arm around her. "You don't need to be afraid here, honey. Nobody's going to hurt you here." She could feel Alma relax a little. "Are you hungry?"

She nodded.

"Well, what do you like to eat?"

"Soup." Her voice was soft and child-like.

"Soup, child? No wonder you're so white and have no meat on your bones." Mrs. Grant bent over and lifted the lid

to a glass dish on the coffee table. She took out a piece of peppermint candy and brought it back to Alma. "Here, honey, you have this now, and when he goes, we'll have us some ham and beans and cornbread. Okay?" She gave the candy to Alma, and Alma smiled.

"Thank you."

"Honey, you and I are gonna get along just fine, just fine." Mrs. Grant knew there wasn't an ounce of prejudice in this white woman's body.

Mr. Avery was banging on the door. When Mrs. Grant got to the door, his arms were loaded with one suitcase and a big box. She walked to the door slowly and opened the door and took the box from him. It was loaded with shoes and balled-up dresses and paper dolls and a toy bank and a doll.

"This is everything."

"You mean this is all she has?"

"Well, what else does she need? It's not like she's going to give a speech or go to the ball, is it?" Mr. Avery laughed.

"Well, I guess that's all we'll be needing you for now, Mr. Avery." Mrs. Grant walked to the door and opened the screen. "You'll be sending my check and her Medicaid card in the mail, is that correct?" She hoped to God that he wouldn't bring it in person.

"Yes, that's right." Mr. Avery walked out the door and turned on the porch. "Now remember, if she gives you any

trouble, you call me, and I'll see she gets put somewhere proper."

Mrs. Grant went back in and slammed the door.

When she went back in the living room, Alma had moved to the rocker in front of the fireplace. "Do you like the rocker, Alma?"

"Where's mama?"

Mrs. Grant could see she was afraid and near tears.

"Honey, your mama's sick and she had to go to the doctor."

Alma rocked for a minute. Mrs. Grant went into the hall and pulled the doll out of the box. It was a Gerber baby doll. She had given her daughter one when she was a little girl. She hadn't seen one in years. She took it back in the living room. Alma's eyes lit up when she saw it.

"Is this your doll, Alma?"

Alma nodded her head.

"What's her name?" Mrs. Grant took it to Alma and handed it to her.

"Baby."

"Oh, you call her Baby. What a nice name." Mrs. Grant looked into Alma's round, hazel eyes. She was like a sweet child. "Come on, Alma, and we'll go get cleaned up a little, then we'll have some lunch, okay?"

Alma stood up from the rocker and took Mrs. Grant's hand. "Alma, why don't you call me Ginny? It's short for Virginia." She looked at Alma, but she wasn't sure Alma

understood. "Would you like to stay here and be my friend, Alma?"

"Mama come?"

"Maybe after she gets better, okay?"

"Okay."

Mrs. Grant smoothed Alma's hair with her other hand. After lunch she would run her a bubble bath and find her something fresh and pretty to wear.



(1984)

She was breathless from running up the stairs when she got into the apartment. She threw her keys and books and all the mail on the table except one long envelope. There was a piece of notebook paper on the table with Tammy's handwriting scrawled across it. 'Mom, We came home and cleaned our rooms. I threw a load of wash in and the boys took out the trash. The boys went to the Community Center to play basketball, and I'm at Phyllis's babysitting. I'll be done about 5:00. I told the boys to be home at 4:30. Love, Tammy." The note threw her off track; she told the boys to stay home after school today. Now that she was in school, they kept skipping out without doing any homework. She was going to have to talk to Mike about it. She remembered the letter. She read the return address again. It was from the Department of Social Services in New York. She pulled off her coat and threw it on one of the dining room chairs. She was almost afraid to open it. This was her last hope. She'd been trying to find Mike's real mother for almost three years now. She tried every hospital in western New York, every adoption agency, every Catholic church. Then she tried the Driver's Licence Bureau, and the city directories. She called every Buchanan listed. For a while, their phone bill was a disaster. Then she tried the social security people. That's where she got her lead to the Department of Social Services. She sat down at the table, carefully opened the envelope, and took the letter out. She read the letter fast.

she felt sick at her stomach. This was it. Oh my God, this was it. She had found her.

Angie paced back and forth across the room waiting for Mike to get home. She sat down and read the letter again and again; then she stood up and paced the room some more. Finally, it dawned on her she hadn't even started dinner. At least that would keep her busy.

She made stroganoff. It was quick and easy. She fried bite size pieces of round steak. The kids complained if she used hamburger in it instead of 'real beef.' She used lots of garlic. Mike liked it that way. Every few minutes she stopped to reread the letter. She wondered how Mike would react. He thought they would never find her. While the noodles boiled, she opened the curtain in the dining room and watched for Mike to walk through the breezeway. The noodles were cooked, so she dumped them in the colander and rinsed them with cool water. She folded sour cream in with the steak, and garlic, and mushrooms and let it cook on low. She sat at the dining room table and waited.

Finally, she saw him through the window. He waved. She looked at the clock. It was 3:45. He was right on time. It seemed to her like it had taken forever for him to get home. She opened her psychology book and slipped the letter inside. He opened the door.

"Hi."

"Hi. Have a good day?" She tried to sound casual.

"Cold day." He leaned over and gave her a kiss. She held his hand. It was freezing.

"I know. Where are your gloves?"

"At work."

"That's a good place for them. They'll really keep your hands warm there." She tried to rub his hand warm. "Was trash heavy?"

"Just a little. What's for supper?"

"Stroganoff."

"With hamburger or with real beef?"

"Now I know where the kids get it. I'll tell you the same thing I tell them. Hamburger is real beef."

"I know, but it doesn't taste the same." He was heading for the kitchen. She turned and watched him.

"This time I cut up a round steak."

"Good." He was bending over the pan blowing a spoonful of stroganoff, trying to cool it. He ate too soon; his chewing was exaggerated as he tried to roll the hot food over in his mouth to cool it.

"Is it okay?"

"Good." He waved his hand in front of his mouth. "But hot." He got a glass of water and came back to the table.

"How was school?"

"Okay. I skipped psychology. I think I'm going to drop it. The instructor needs therapy more than he needs to be teaching about it."

"Any good mail?"

The rest of the mail was still lying on the table unopened. Angie shuffled through it quickly. "You know, I forgot to open it all."

"You're kidding. I've never seen anyone rush home like you do to get the mail. You're a mail maniac."

"Very funny." She looked through the mail. "All good news, of course. Let's see, here's the overdue electric bill. . . ." She kept shuffling. "And here's the bill from Dr. Cohan for Andy's strep throat . . . and here's a flyer to buy furniture."

"Well, the bills can wait 'til Friday, and the furniture can wait forever. Where are the kids?"

"Tammy's babysitting for Phyllis 'til five. And the boys are at the community center. You're going to have to talk to them. If I'm not home when they get out of school, they throw their room together; then they head out. At least Tammy does her homework. I haven't seen either of the boys do homework in weeks."

"I'll say something to them when they get home." He started to get up.

Angie grabbed his forearm. "Wait a minute, I want to show you something. I said I hadn't opened all the mail, remember."

He sat back down. "Not more bills . . . please."

"No." She opened her psychology book and took the



letter out. She handed it to him. She watched his face. "Mike, I think I found your mother."

He stopped and looked at her. "You're kidding." The color drained from his face. "Really?"

"Really. Read it."

She could see the strain on his face as he read. The paper was shaking.

"Is he sure this is my mother?"

"I guess so. He seems pretty sure."

"Alma. My mother's name is Alma." He read the letter again. "And my grandmother's still alive, too? Her name's Irene D'Angelo." He leaned over to Angie with the letter. "Look at their addresses, Angie. They're in Rochester. Both of them. I can't believe it. But their addresses are different. I wonder why? Is this guy sure?"

"I think so."

"What does it mean? Am I allowed to see her, or what?"

"I don't know. But you noticed Mr. Childress said he can't give us any more information. I think we were lucky to get that from him."

"What do you think we should do next?"

"I've been thinking about it since I got home. Why don't we try to call them?"

"I don't know yet. What if they say they don't know what we're talking about, or what if they don't want me to bother them."

He sounded like a scared child. She leaned across the table and took his hand. "I don't think that would happen. And if it did, they're stupid and don't know what they're missing. But we'll never know if we don't try, right?"

"Right. Will you call?"

She could understand his hesitation. After so many years of wondering, she'd be afraid, too. "I'll call." She went into the kitchen and picked up the receiver and stretched the long cord to the dining room chair.

"Now?"

"We may as well."

Angie dialed information in New York and asked for the number for a Buchanan at the first address. There wasn't any. She wasn't surprised. She'd called all the Buchanans in the Rochester book before. None of them claimed to be related, and none of them were at that address. Then she asked for a number for Irene D'Angelo at the second address. That number had been disconnected. "Maybe your mother's married and the address and phone is in her husband's name. And maybe your grandmother lives with them now."

"In other words, another dead end."

She could tell he was disappointed. "Let me think about it a while. I'll think of something." She walked to the back of his chair and kissed the top of his head. "You know me." She hung the receiver back up in the kitchen. "Why don't you go ahead and get cleaned up, and I'll set the

table." She looked at the clock. It was already 4:55. "If the kids aren't here in ten minutes, you can go ahead and pick out the biggest mushrooms."

"Sounds like a good deal to me."

He went to their bedroom in the back. Angie pulled dishes and silverware out from the cupboards. She tried to think of what they could do now. She carried the dishes into the dining room and set them on the end of the table. She cleared the mail and put her books on the floor next to her library books. Library books. The library.

She ran to the back bedroom. "I know what we can do next."

Mike was buttoning up a clean shirt. "What?"

"Every city library keeps a directory of phone numbers."

"What good does that do? We don't have her last name."

"No. Not that kind of directory. This is a directory that's listed by addresses."

He still looked puzzled.

"Don't you see. All we have to do is call the Rochester Public Library and ask them to look up your mother's address, and they'll give us the phone number." Angie was excited. She knew it would work.

"Do you really think it'll work?"

"Sure it will. At least it's worth a try."

"Okay. Try it."

She went back to the kitchen and called information

again and got the number for the reference section of the library in Rochester. When she called, they were getting ready to close. It was 6 o'clock there, but the lady said she'd look the numbers up since Angie was calling long distance.

Angie gave the woman Alma's address on Flander's Street. She went into the dining room, got a piece of notebook paper, and sat at the table. Both boys came in. Angie held her finger up for them to be quiet. Joey was wearing his jacket but it wasn't zipped up, and Andy wasn't wearing a jacket at all. Angie said the number aloud, "621-6478. Do you have a name listed with that address?" She wrote again, then gave the woman the other address. It was on Remington. She drummed her fingernails on the table while she waited. "Okay, thank you." She hung the phone up in the kitchen. She came back in the dining room and looked at Mike. "I have the number for your mother's address. It's listed in the name of V. Grant, but there isn't a phone at the address the man gave us for your grandmother." Mike's eyes were bigger than she'd ever seen them.

"What's going on?" Joey started to take off his coat.

Angie turned her attention to Andy first. "Andy, where is your jacket?"

"In my locker."

"What in the world is wrong with you? Are you crazy coming home without your coat on a day like today?"



"The school's only across the street, Mom. Besides, it's warmer than it was this morning."

His cheeks were dark red.

"What about tomorrow morning though. Do you think it'll be warm then too?"

"Oh well, I'll bring it home tomorrow." Andy just shrugged his shoulders. "What's for supper?"

"Stroganoff."

"Good."

"With hamburger or with real beef?" Joey took off his jacket and put it on top of hers on the dining room chair.

Angie rolled her eyes. "Real beef, and don't forget to hang your coat up. And what's the matter, have you broken another zipper?"

"Nah. I just didn't have time to zip it up." Joey picked his coat up to hang it up. "I suppose you want me to hang up your coat too, huh, Mom?"

"Well, it probably wouldn't kill you, would it? When are you kids going to think more with your heads than you do with your stomachs?"

"What do we do now, Angie?"

She walked around the table laying out plates and silverware. She looked up at him. "Do you want to call or do you want me to?"

"Call who, Mom?" It was Joey again. "What's going on?" She scooted him and Andy down the hall to their bedroom.

"Don't you worry about what's going on. Your sister told you to be home at 4:30. You're forty minutes late." They started to protest. "I don't want to hear it. And before you get anything to eat, you're going to clean out the stuff you threw under the beds and in the bottom of the closet. Don't come out of the room 'til it's done." She closed the door and hollered through it. "Then we'll discuss homework."

She went back in the dining room. "Do you want to call?"

Mike shook his head. "I wouldn't know what to say."

"Then I'll call." She went and got the phone again.

She sat down at the table and dialed the number. The phone rang four times before someone picked it up.

"Hello."

Angie answered. "Hello. May I ask who I'm speaking to?"

"This is Mrs. Grant. Who am I speaking to?"

"Mrs. Grant, my name is Angie Buchanan, and I'm calling long distance from Tennessee."

"Tennessee?"

"Yes. I'm calling because I was given this as the address for Alma Buchanan." Angie hesitated a minute, hoping Mrs. Grant would answer.

"Yes. This is Alma's address. But, who are you?"

"Mrs. Grant, it's kind of a long story, but I'm actually calling for my husband, Joseph Buchanan."

"I never heard of no Joseph Buchanan."

"I know, Mrs. Grant." Angie wasn't sure of what to say. "You see, we've been searching for my husband's mother for five years, and we have reason to believe that Alma might be her."

"What!? Alma can't be nobody's mother. I think I'd better let you go now."

Angie was afraid she would hang up. "Mrs. Grant, please. Wait. I have a letter here from a Mr. Childress from the Department of Social Services. He states that my husband's mother's name is Alma Buchanan."

"I never heard of no Mr. Childress neither. Alma's worker's name is Mr. Avery."

"Her worker? I don't understand. What worker?"

"Alma's taken care of by Family Services. She lives with me cause she ain't able to live alone."

"What about her mother?"

"Her mother's been in the county home for almost three years now. She's old. She couldn't take care of Alma no more."

"How is Alma?"

"She's fine. Got a little high blood pressure, and she gets upset sometimes, but she's fine."

"How long . . ."

"Just a minute." Mrs. Grant hollered. "Alma, you in the bathtub?"

Angie could hear someone faintly in the background.

"Yes, Ginny."

Mrs. Grant hollered again. "You be careful in there, you hear?"

"I will."

Angie put her hand over the receiver. "Mike, I could hear your mother talking in the background." Angie held the receiver out, and Mike tried to listen.

"I'm sorry, I'm going to have to let you go now."

Mike pushed the phone back to Angie.

"Mrs. Grant, please. How long has Alma been with you?"

"She's been with me ever since her mama was put in the hospital."

"Is Alma sick?"

"I have to let you go. If you want to know anything else, you'd better call Mr. Avery at Family Services. Don't you tell him I told you anything. I don't need no trouble from him."

"Mrs. Grant, could you send us a picture of Alma?"

"No, Ma'am. I can't do that. You don't call me no more, you hear?"

Before Angie could say anything else, Mrs. Grant hung up. She held the phone in her hand a minute before going into the kitchen to hang it up. She came back in the dining room.

"What did she say, Angie?" He was waiting for an



answer.

"Not much, really. You're maternal grandmother's still alive, but she's living in the county home. And Alma's staying with her because she can't take care of herself. I don't know why, but apparently her mother took care of her before Mrs. Grant started to." She sat down.

The front door opened. "Hi." Tammy didn't have her gloves on.

"Hi. You done babysitting?"

"Yep." She went over to the table and stood behind her dad. She put her hands on his neck.

Mike scrunched up his shoulders. "Don't, honey. Your hands are freezing."

Tammy started to walk toward Angie. Angie stood up. "Don't do it. Where are your gloves?"

"At school in my locker."

"That's a great place for them. They'll really keep your hands warm there."

"What's for supper?"

"Stroganoff."

"With hamburger or real beef?"

(1985)

It took too much effort to breathe. Her breasts felt like weights pushing against her lungs. She could feel her heart beating then stopping. She took in a slow breath and heard it bubble, gurgle. She tried to wet her lips, no saliva, she couldn't swallow. The mask pressed heavy into her face. She opened her eyes and saw pinpoints of light and nothing else. She thought of Matt and Grandpa. Then she thought of her Alma . . . and Joey.

\* \* \*

Ginny was crying. Alma saw her on the telephone talking and then she was crying. "Why Ginny cry?"

"Nothing, child. It's nothing for you to worry about."

Alma sat next to her on the sofa and held her hand. Ginny hugged her. Alma smelled the grease in her hair. Ginny's hair was black and curly and shiny. Her her face was soft and brown like Alma's teddy bear.

"Come on, child. We have to do some packing."

Alma followed Ginny. Ginny was going up the stairs. At the top of the stairs she went in Alma's room.

"Clean, Ginny?" Alma watched as Ginny opened the dresser drawers and took out her clothes.

"No, honey. We have to pack."

Alma started to pull the clothes out, too. "Why?" Alma stopped. "Go away?"

Ginny sat down on her bed. Alma sat down too.

"Listen, Alma. That call was from Mr. Avery. You remember him, don't you?"

Alma nodded. She scrunched up her face. She didn't like Mr. Avery. Ginny held her hand.

"Mr. Avery says he's got to take you somewhere else to live."

"Will Ginny go?"

"He says you need to meet some new people."

"Where?"

"I don't know, honey. But I'm sure they'll take good care of you."

"Go see Mama?" Ginny's hand was warm and wet.

"No, honey. It ain't your mama. Remember what I told you? Your mama's gone to visit the angels in heaven with Jesus. Remember?"

Alma remembered. Her mama was in heaven with angels, singing, and growing flowers for Jesus. "Will Ginny go?"

"No, honey. I can't go. I have to take care of this house and those flowers we planted, remember?"

"I take care of flowers, too." Alma didn't want to go with Mr. Avery. He looked at her mean.

"Honey, I don't want you to go neither, but Mr. Avery says you got to."

Alma started putting her things back in the drawer.

"No, I won't go."

"Come on, honey. He'll be here soon. We have to pack." Ginny started to pull the clothes out of the closet.

"No, Ginny!" Alma pulled her back. "No, I don't want to go!"

"Okay, honey. We won't pack. You just stay in here and lay down, okay?"

Alma nodded her head.

Ginny covered her up and left the room.

Alma leaned over the side of her bed and picked up Baby. She held Baby above her face and made her dance in the air. Baby was wearing a dress Ginny made from one of Alma's old flower dresses. Alma took off the covers and got out of the bed. She sat in the rocker Ginny had put in her room. She rocked Baby to sleep and watched the clouds change shapes in the sky. A bunny. A dog. A snowman.

The doorbell rang. Alma stood at her door and listened.

"Mr. Avery. Do you have to take her?"

"There's no telling what those people who called you. . . ."

Alma shut her door. It was Mr. Avery. He was going to take her away from Ginny. She grabbed Baby and held her. She looked at the closet. She grabbed her teddy and opened her drawer and took out underwear and went back in the closet in the corner and sat down on the floor. She put all of her things in her lap. She closed her eyes and waited in the darkness. She could hear her heart beating. Then she could



hear someone coming up the stairs. She heard Ginny talking.

"She don't want to go, Mr. Avery. Please let her stay."

"That's not our policy." He looked around the room.

"Where is she?"

"In her room."

Alma pushed her back into the corner as far as she could.

"Where is she, Mrs. Grant? She isn't here."

Alma couldn't see anything. Clothes were hanging in front of her face. She was afraid of the dark, but she was more afraid of Mr. Avery.

"If you're playing some kind of game, Mrs. Grant, I'll make sure you're taken off our list of providers."

"I swear, Mr. Avery. She was here when I came downstairs. She was upset about packing, so we stopped and she laid down."

"Well then, she's got to be here somewhere. You search the rest of the house, and I'll look in here."

Alma waited holding her breath. He came to the closet and opened the door. She held her breath. He reached in and took out a suitcase. When he left, she breathed again. He was banging dresser drawers shut. He came back and started grabbing her dresses from the other side of the closet. He took the other suitcase from the bottom. She could hear him mumbling. He came back and took more dresses. When he took the last dresses from in front of her face, he looked down at

her.

"I knew I'd find you. He leaned over and started to grab her arm. "Now you come out of there."

Alma tried to pull her arm back. "Ginny! Ginny!"

He kept grabbing at her. He dropped the dress. He held both her arms and pulled her out of the closet. Alma started to cry. She dropped Baby and Teddy and her underwear. Her arms hurt. He had her out of the closet now. He made her sit on the bed. Ginny came in the room, looking at him mad. She put her arms around Alma. Alma was cold and afraid. Ginny was warm but smelled like sweat. Alma's eyes hurt from the light. She had a headache and she felt like she couldn't breathe.

"What's the matter with you, Mr. Avery. Yanking on her like she was some hoodlum. Look at her arms."

Alma looked at her arms; they were red.

"She's 72 years old, Mr. Avery. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"It's not my fault she was hiding in the closet. I told you to have her ready. It's your fault." He was stuffing her clothes into the suitcase. "Now you get her downstairs and into the car. And I don't want any trouble, or you can forget ever having another client of mine or anyone else's living here." He grabbed the suitcases and started out the door.

"Come on, Alma. You have to go now."

Ginny held Alma's arm and helped her along the hallway and down the stairs. Alma was shaking. Ginny was mad. Alma started to cry. Baby and Teddy were still in the bottom of the closet.

(1988)

"For three years now, you've promised me and my wife you'd send a picture of my mother." Mike ran his fingers over his forehead, through his hair. "All I'm asking for is a picture. Is that too much to ask?" He wished he could reach through the phone and grab the little sonofabitch by the neck. "You know, Mr. Avery, when we started out, my grandmother was still alive. I could maybe have seen her just once. But she's dead now, and now my mother's been moved. I don't know where she is. And she's seventy-four now. How much longer do you think I have left to wait?" Mike could feel himself getting angry.

"Mr. Buchanan, I explained to you, these things take time. You have to be patient. We have to consi. . . "

Mike interrupted him. "Listen, Mr. Avery, I don't want to hear again how you have to consider my mother's condition. I know about my mother's condition. I know she doesn't know about me. I know she had scarlet fever. I know she's retarded. I know I am the son of a rape she doesn't even know happened." Mike could feel himself near tears. "I know it all, Mr. Avery. But what I don't know is why you people would think I'd want to hurt her. All I wanted in the first place was to see her. You're the one that told me I could do that, Mr. Avery. You said I could pretend I was a friend of yours and I could see her." Mike could feel the sweat forming in his hair. "But that never happened, did it, Mr. Avery? You backed off. I don't know why. I didn't want



to hurt the woman, I just wanted to see her." He could feel himself losing control. "You know, Mr. Avery, if you would just sit down and think about it, you could see that I've been as victimized by my mother's rape as she was. At least she can't remember it." He could taste the bitterness in his mouth. "But all my life I've been fucked over one way or another by people like you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. First, when I was eleven, people like you took my name away, took away my childhood by forcing my foster parents to tell me I wasn't theirs before I was ready to hear it. Do you know the things I thought about my mother because you people wouldn't give me any information about her? I felt abandoned. But you people still wouldn't tell me the truth. Now that I finally know the truth, you're still screwing me over, playing God, denying my right to see my mother, denying me even a picture."

"Yes, but you called the house where she was living."

Avery's voice never changed over the phone, and Mike knew he hadn't listened to anything Mike had said. "I've told you before, we had no choice. That was before I knew what I know now. We'd been searching for three years. We didn't talk to my mother, only to Mrs. Grant. If we hadn't talked to her, we would never have known how to get in touch with you."

"That's right, Mr. Buchanan. And it is my job to

protect your mother."

"From what? From me?"

"From whatever might disturb her mental condition."

"So you moved her. Right?" Mike felt drained.

"That's right."

He was about ready to give up. "Where is the picture you promised me, Mr. Avery? Can you answer that?"

"I'm sorry, we're unable to provide that right now."

"Why is that?"

"I've checked with my supervisor, Mrs. Badger, and we've decided that you need to request this information through your attorney to the state attorney's office."

"What are you talking about? After two years of you making promises to me, you're telling me that I have to get an attorney. For Chrissake, all I'm asking for is a picture. What the hell's wrong with you people?"

"That's all we can offer you right now, Mr. Buchanan. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry all right. I'm not a rich man. I drive a garbage truck for a living. I have a family to support."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Buchanan, that's something you'll have to work out for yourself."

"You know, Avery, I have to wonder about you. You say you're trying to protect my mother. You move her from home to home. You deny her the right to have any contact with the only family she has left in the world. Do you think that's

good for her mental condition?" Mike was standing now. I'm not going to let you get away with it. You'll be hearing from me again." He went in the kitchen and slammed the phone down, then he went in the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, his fists closed, his knuckles white. He wished Angie would hurry up and get home from school. He went back in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He grabbed a Coke. There were beer bottles in the doorway. He couldn't remember why they were there. Then it dawned on him that he'd bought them so the guys from work could have one if they came over. For a second he remembered how good a beer used to taste when he was all wired up. It'd been twelve years since he'd had a drink, and he still couldn't forget what it felt like to drink. He closed the refrigerator door, popped the top to the Coke and took a long swallow. It burned his throat. He went in the living room and read his plaque on the wall. "Presented To Joseph Buchanan By His Loving Family In Recognition Of His 10th Anniversary Of Alcohol Freedom June 10, 1986." He took it down from the wall and sat on the couch. He hugged it to his chest and waited for Angie.

(1989)

She hung up the phone. Finally. Someone who listened. Someone who said she understood and said she'd help. Now maybe they would get some results. She went back to the computer and typed.

The upstairs door slammed.

"Mike, is that you?"

"Yeah." He had already gone upstairs.

"I'm down here. Can you come here a minute?"

Angie shuffled through the papers and put them in order by date. She could hear Mike coming down the stairs.

He came in the den and kissed her. "Hi."

"Hi. How'd school go?"

"I got an A on my English essay."

"That's great. I told you you'd get the hang of it."

Angie was proud. It was hard for Mike to go back to school at fifty-one. "Maybe you'll change your major from Psychology to English."

He laughed. "Not a chance. You stick to writing, and I'll stick to counselling alcoholics." He sat down. "How'd it go here today? Did you get a lot done?"

"I'll have my thesis done by Thursday."

"Good."

"Guess what?"

"What." He played with the papers lying on the table.

"I talked to the assistant supervisor at the social services office in New York today. Her name's Mrs. Goodson."



she touched his forearm. "Mike, I really think she's going to help us."

"What makes you think so?" His voice was sarcastic.

"She told me we shouldn't have had to go through all of this. They have an office specifically set up for situations like yours. She said we should have been referred to that office in the beginning."

"So what does that mean?"

"She said that if we send a letter directly to her with copies of all the other letters we've sent and copies of the replies that she'll make sure you get a picture of your mother. And, if you want to, maybe you can meet her?"

"Really?"

"It would be like it was supposed to be before. You couldn't tell her who you are, but you could meet her."

He took her hand. "I just don't want to get my hopes up. I'm fifty-one. That makes my mother seventy-five. We don't know anything about her health or her living condition or anything." He looked at her.

"I know. There's one good sign, though."

"What's that?"

"Avery isn't her worker anymore."

"That is good."

"Do you want me to type the letter?"

"I'm ready when you are."

\* \* \*

He couldn't help but think as he mowed. It was Saturday, and they'd mailed the letter and copies of all the papers over two weeks ago and hadn't heard a thing. Mike was beginning to believe Mrs. Goodson was feeding them a line of bull just like Avery had. Then he thought about the letter he'd gotten from John yesterday. He couldn't believe John was in a home for the mentally disabled, the same kind of place Alma was in. And John was only forty-nine. He didn't want to believe that John needed to be in a place like that. Mike wished he could talk him into coming to Tennessee, but he knew John would never leave Rochester, never leave his father, no matter how badly they got along, and he'd never leave the church he'd belonged to since they were boys. He didn't even know if John was allowed to leave the home. Mike thought about going to New York. Maybe he could do something to help John, and maybe he could see Alma. He kept pushing the mower.

The grass had gotten tall. It had rained every day for almost a week and a half. The lawn mower would hardly go through it. Maybe he'd be better off if he'd run the weedeater over it first, then mow. Oh the hell with it. That would take twice as long. He'd just keep pushing. He dreaded having to mow the back yard, though. It was twice as bad. Maybe the boys would do it.

Angie came out the front door. She had a glass of Coke and was hollering. "It's too hot out here. Take a break for a few minutes, and I'll mow."

"You shouldn't have to do that."

"Neither should you. The boys should be out here."

"What are they doing?"

"Sleeping. I don't know how they'll ever be able to get up for a job when they move out on their own."

"You'll probably have to call them every morning to wake them up."

"Not me. I'll buy them alarm clocks when they move."

"They won't hear them ring."

They were still shouting over the mower. Angie handed him the Coke. "Here, you take this, and I'll mow a little while you rest."

He shrugged his shoulders and took the Coke. He kissed her. He was grateful for the break. He sat in the lounge chair on the porch. It wasn't the heat that bothered him so much as it was the humidity. He watched Angie. She was pushing the mower like it was a stalled car. She was already sweating and her face was red.

He got up, opened the front door and hollered up the stairs. "Andy! Joey! You guys up?"

"Huh?" It was Joey.

"What?" Andy sounded like he probably only had one eye open.

"Don't you boys think it's a shame that your mother's having to mow the front yard."

"Tell her not to do it; we'll do it when we get up."  
Mike could hear him turning over in bed.

"Yeah," Andy agreed.

"Come on. You're getting up now. It's after ten."  
Mike waited to hear them move. "If you're not out here in the next two minutes, you don't have to worry about seeing a movie or your friends at the mall tonight." He only had to wait a minute before he heard a steady stream of urine hitting the water in the toilet.

Mike closed the door and sat down again. He knew that would get them.

Angie's face was really red now. Mike knew she needed to go in. She couldn't tolerate the heat at all. He took one more sip of Coke and went back across the yard. He had to holler over the mower again. "Here, that's enough." He took the mower. "I'll do a couple more strips. The boys are on their way out. You'd better go on in and cool off."

She nodded and walked back to the house.

As he mowed the next couple of strips, he kept watching the house for the boys. *They'd better hurry it up and get out here.* The next time he made his way across the yard, he saw the mailman driving down the street, mailbox to mailbox. He figured that by the time he got the next two strips done, the mailman would be at their box. He tried to pace it that



way. It reminded him of timing green lights when he was younger. He could make it through downtown Rochester by slowing down and speeding up without every stopping for a red light.

As he got about halfway up the second strip, the mailman stopped at their box and waved. Mike waved back. He got to the end of the strip and cut the mower off. He pulled the mail out. There were two hospital bills, a letter for Tammy, and a large envelope from the Department of Social Services in New York. *It's the pictures. It has to be.* He could feel himself getting nervous. He left the mower and went in the house.

The boys were just coming down the stairs. They still looked half asleep. "You guys finish the front. But, one of you use the mower and one of you do the trim with the weedeater."

"Okay."

"Be sure to come in for plenty of water, though. It's hot out there."

They went out the door and left it open. Mike went back down the stairs and shut it.

"Angie!" He ran up the stairs. "Angie!"

"I'm in the kitchen."

She was at the counter peeling onions.

"It's here, Angie." He handed her the envelope.

She handed it back. "Well, aren't you going to open

it?"

He sat down at the table. His hands shook as he opened the end of the envelope. He didn't want to tear anything. He pulled out the papers. On the top was a letter. He handed it to Angie. Underneath it were two pictures. He knew it was his mother. He could tell by her eyes and chin. It was like looking at his own. The pictures were only head shots, but he could tell she was small and delicate. Her hair was almost pure white, with a few black strands. She wore it short, near her chin. Her face looked young for seventy-five. Her eyes were clear and her skin was smooth except for it being a little loose around the jaw. She looked sweet, girlish. He looked at Angie. She was reading the letter. Her face looked strained. "What's the matter?"

She looked up. "I. . . I think you'd better read the letter, Mike."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I think you'd better read the letter." She put the letter in front of him and went back to the counter. She kept looking at him. Her eyes were big, and they were full of water from peeling onions.

He took the letter and started to read. It was from Mrs. Goodson. She was apologizing. He kept reading. 'I'm sorry you weren't able to get in touch with me before it was too late. Your mother, Alma, passed away on May 28, 1989.'

He read it again. "Oh, God. I can't believe it." He

laid the letter down. He looked at Angie. "After all this time. After waiting so long. She's dead? Dead."

Angie was silent.

He was hollering, "Those lousy sonofabitches. They didn't call. They didn't write. They didn't let me know anything." He stood up and walked around the kitchen. He kept turning it over in his head. *She's dead. My mother's dead. Less than two months ago, and no one even bothered to let me know. Like I don't even count. Like I never counted with those fucking people.* "Who the hell do they think they are, Angie? She died alone. With nobody. No family. No nothing."

"I know honey. I know." Angie was crying. "I'm sorry."

He walked back over to the table and picked up his mother's picture. "She never even knew she had a son. Never even knew I wanted to see her." He put the picture back on the table. "Some son, huh, Angie. All those years saying all those terrible things about her, calling her a whore, blaming her for all my problems. I never even gave her a chance, Angie." He walked around the kitchen again. He went to the counter. "And now she's gone, Angie. Gone."

"You can't blame yourself for that, Mike. You didn't know. You were hurting, too."

And now he really wanted to hurt someone. Something. Anything. "I hate those people, Angie. I hate them all."

He picked up an onion and threw it across the room. It hit the glass on the table. The glass spilled. He put his head on Angie's shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him. "They're lousy sonofabitches, Angie. Lousy sonofabitches." He wept.

Coke ran like rivers across the pictures of his mother and dripped into puddles on the floor.

Angie came and put her around around him. He put his head on her shoulder and cried.