Haul Bodies from the Sea

Katherine Cart

Chapter One

Three miles east of Lokkertville High, the flying bugs had disappeared from around the Lokkertville Refinery blowdown stack B. They had been there in the morning when the trembling sun yawned up over that great midwest plate. But by half past seven, those that could flee had flown. Some abandoned queens. Some larvae. But a deep yapping mouth inside said Go, go, now go. There will be time to grieve later on in your living. All across little Lokkertville, people eyed swarming insects.

A large congregation of yellow jackets slipped into a Lokkertville High classroom. They came through a half-cracked window that had lost its screen in a bad storm of the hard winter and though it was an iron hot end of August now, nobody had yet replaced it.

Louella Abrahamse counted the yellow jackets but they crawled in shifting diamonds on the glass. She could not hold onto a precise number. Around her buzzed the undulating chatter of a high school morning, one of the first of the year. She counted and listened to the people and considered what she might say to Marce Telhaney. She had counted twenty-five or twenty-six yellow jackets but that number could be higher, she thought. She sat at the back of the classroom where she had a good view of people. No chance of rain but it would thunder. She had once been a talker in childhood but that talk had long gone quiet. Perhaps because she spent too much time only listening she now felt she did not understand most people.

Beyond the yellow jackets, the high summer grassland was shorn to the quick, tarred over, squared off. And beyond the streets of Lokkertville, the high midwest oil rigs bent on one leg and kissed the old prairie. Hinged zealots at the curve of a wound between earth and sky. Or no, that was the people. The rigs were metal and constant. And all of the student's fathers and some of their mothers worked the rigs or what came out of them. Oil children, same as fishing children elsewhere.

Before the yellow jackets arrived, Louella had been watching shiny Marce Telhaney wave around her soft white hand. A crystal promise ring flashed rainbows over everybody. Louella had decided that that morning, in the fresh zesty start of the school year, she was going to say something loud and nice to Marce. She had been thinking about precisely how to phrase it when the first yellow jacket mounted the window edge.

A blonde lump of a boy had given the ring to Marce the night before. He had bought in a place called Cincinnati for twenty-seven dollars before tax and a somewhat reverential whisper was going around that there was no point in those two promising anything new to each other because they had already exchanged most of the bodily fluids they could. The boy sat beside Marce Telhaney and the way he was smiling, Louella thought, it was like the orthodontist who had wired his teeth into submission had forgotten to take out the lip spreaders. Louella herself had not yet been kissed, not yet been touched, not yet asked for any kind of a promise.

One yellow jacket took flight but it was a short flight. It rose away from the window and as though on a string pulled gently taught, it hovered a foot and then returned, settling again into the small swarm. The yellow jackets cast long crawling shadows across the floor. But the ring on Marce's finger had caught most people's attention, just as Marce herself generally did.

She would say to Marce: Marce! What's it feel like knowing how the whole rest of your life is gonna go?

It was an honest question. As children, they had spent much of their time wondering about futures and what it would mean to be bound by law and body to a man and his money, and them to them.

Or, she would go slyer, bolder, teasing: Oh Marce. Do you really think *this* is as good as it gets? With a nicely planned nod to the boylump.

Once, Louella and Marce had been close playmates, but sometime over the years Marce's father had become a refinery foreman and her mother a pharmacist and Louella's father Lamb had remained, for all that he strained against it, a maintenance tech with an inability to save his money. Louella's mother Shelly had remained a woman who was considered a housewife. Shelly, too, strained against the mold into which she had been pressed. Marce and Louella had split like a dry cedar log beneath the maul. And after that, Louella had remained, for all that she strained and watched and listened and mimicked, a quiet girl who was beginning to understand how it was that a parents' reputation can leak down and stain the child. She was a little angry all the time.

Louella took a peek at the promise ring. Marce had beautiful hands, womanly fingers. Of course silver bounded one. Most of the most beautiful hands Louella had so far seen existed on billboards and in TV commercials, and those hands, a disembodied sort of mature sexuality to them, were also often metal-bound. Louella cleared her throat. She would have to call up the desk aisle to Marce to get herself heard. Other people would see if Marce declined to engage. She cleared her throat again. One yellow jacket lifted free from the window. It flew as though intoxicated, full of trembling indecision. Yanked this way and that, swerving past people's skulls.

Now felt like the moment to Louella that she would kickstart her life back up. She would, with cunning words and knowing, icy looks, ram herself back into the small social sphere of Lokkertville High. Relative poverty and vague pariah status of the Abrahamses notwithstanding.

"Marce!" Louella began. But too quietly. Not a person looked back at her.

As she began again, all the many yellow jackets lifted off the window pane. They rose like blossoms startled by wind. Each followed the first, ripped jagged orbits through the classroom. And all the students took their eyes off each other, off Marce Telhaney. Marce's head on its delicate, pale neck, swiveled left then right then back, the smallest twitches, as someone looks in a crowd for a friend they are surprised to have lost. Some folks shrieked and cowered and leapt. The yellow jackets spread and if someone had tried to count them now, it would have seemed there were many more than the twenty-five odd Louella had tallied. They flew with no certain direction except away from the window, towards the deep, cool interior space of the small modular school.

Outside, against the blue sky, distant rigs bent and sucked ancient crude and the Lokkertville women and men who had aged out of childhood labored. Wheat grew, hung cows kicked in slaughter, people loved and waited and died, irrigation pumps drained an ancient subterranean ocean of its dark water. Elsewhere, everywhere, hydraulic haulers hauled sea creatures away from the earth's iron core.

Into the small classroom's droning pandemonium, Louella cried "Marce! What's it feel like knowing–" and she saw Marce twitch at her own name, saw the shapely, teased-out head swing around, the glossy, beaming edge of Marce's lips.

But then the heavy hydrocarbon vapor cloud released from corroded blowdown stack B caught a spark, ignited, and made a hole like a meteor had decided this money planet was due for

catastrophe. The sight of it reached them first. Too wide and boiling and red to comprehend. As though sky and earth themselves had ripped at the seams. But hadn't they already? That town, like most on the continent, lay on top of another people's apocalypse.

In all the many details her frightened eyes took in, Louella understood that everything here was only atomic. But just for one slim moment.

Then all those children, sprouting breasts, dropping testes and worrying about what young failures and wins they had already accrued, covered their eyes and ears and mouths as if they could unsee and unhear and take back whatever bad thing they had said that had ripped the earth to let out hell. They howled.

If anyone had begun to hear that Louella Ambrahamse was going to say something to Marce Telhaney who had long ago declared Louella a lesbo, it was lost into the magnificent, terrible violence of this industrial epoch. It was the first year of the new millennium.

"Heat lightning!" cried Marce Telhaney's blonde beau.

Ever so briefly, Louella wondered why Marce, who really was a sharp whip of a girl, had promised herself to a boy so dumb. Then one half of a half second later, the heat blast hit the open window and shook it hard and Louella forgot about him for the rest of her life. Thick black smoke uncoiled from where the refinery had stood, shadowing the fields.

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The smoke was the tallest and thickest thing built by a human so far in that midwest region. Except perhaps for the long gone steam of a railroad laid across a cold stretch of prairie. Except perhaps a grass fire to corral the bison when there were bison. The smoke shadowed the durum, the barley fields, the houses rectangular and flat as fallen logs. What milk cows ranged free stampeded across their paddocks, lowed together and felt the hard bones of their neighbor's

wide pelvis. They screamed and through their long eyelashes eyed the smoke rising. The wheat growers feared the smoke would bitter the fields.

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In the basement rec room of St. Anthony's Episcapalean where the mourners gathered to eat the snacks of grief, Marce Telhaney gripped Louella's sharp elbow. "And how is my Louella girl?" she breathed, fluttering eyelashes. Marce wore a beautiful black dress, black tights, black nice loafers, though it was a sweating hot day. She had jet earrings in her ear lobes. In all that black, the crystal of her promise ring dazzled. Across the room, near the preschool toy chest out of which a foam puzzle spilled, a man giggled high and loud, and then quit. Marce's lips were near Louella's jaw. The ring's crystal dug Louella's hip.

Louella said that she was good. She was fine. The basement felt as if it had been lost into dark water.

Marce whispered, "Do you remember when he took us out on the prairie?"

Louella's knees were bare, the dress she wore was to have been her homecoming dress, and it was tight in certain places. The shrug that Shelly had forced on her was off now, for the basement's air conditioner piddled and spat but did not cool and outside was the bad heat that a coming thunderstorm pressed in. Marce Telhaney's black-tighted knees knocked her own. Marce's whole body was too close and floral. Louella stepped back. Marce's body followed, Marce reached out, held Louella.

"Don't you remember that, Louella? He made that fire." Marce leaned her temple against Louella's. Louella thought it was perhaps supposed to be a kind gesture but she stiffened. Always, she felt there was something she was supposed to be doing that she was not. She could not find any words to say. Marce was speaking of a memory that Louella could not find.

"That fire, Louella. We were cold, he made that fire."

"Marce," Louella said, feeling if not courageous then at least numb, "How's it knowing how the rest of your life is gonna go?"

"Oh, Louella. I'm only saying. He had some interesting notions about how to care for little girls. I don't mean anything at all by it. Don't be defensive."

Louella looked about for Shelly and found her in the corner with the man who had laughed. They were not laughing now.

"I'm good," Louella said.

Marce gripped her tight, a hand now on the small of Louella's back. "Oh well. Hallelujah, then." Marce whispered. "But I'm just saying. When you're moving through the steps of loss, you might remember stuff like that too. But you've always been a defensive girl." Marce leaned away from Louella, took a breath, shoved back in, "Offensive even. Maybe you can think about where that came from too. Equitable memory, Louella. It's key to mourning. Equitable memory."

Around them pumped the town's conversations. Everybody in black, necks kept solemn in pearls, hair restrained, the mouths swapping this and that story, though few about Lamb, who nobody now claimed to have known very well. Those far enough from Louella and Shelly, when they ran out of things to say, whispered, Poor women, poor women. But it lost all its little meaning after a while.

Marce had painted her eyelids blue and her mascara was black and thick. Her hair smelled of White Rain and her mouth, now opening, of Ritz cracker. "It's good to remember everything. Imagine you're floating on the surface of a big sea. And everything that has ever happened is floating at the same level. You just have to choose how to move between them. That's what Mom's shrink told her. So." People watched Marce like she was a beautiful movie.

She yanked Louella into her. She whispered sweet, empty strange things into Louella's ear. "I'll pray for your equitable memory, Louella. I'll pray at least for that. At least that you deserve."

Shelly Abrahamse, in the corner, caught Louella's eye. They were two blonde, blue-eyed, pale-skinned women. Shelly had a slack-jawed, bent look to her, and seemed not to be seeing her daughter but someone just beyond.

"Marce," Louella said, "Don't you think you'll be unhappy at some point?"

Marce leaned back, frowned at Louella. Louella shook her head. She had meant something else. Since the boom her thoughts had felt a little disconnected from her tongue.

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Louella and Shelly sat at the kitchen table. Around them sat pricey furniture bought new, delivered all at once last year on credit. Shelly was hissing into the house phone.

In Lokkertville, time was slow and measured in what could be and had been accumulated. Vehicles. Homes with finished basements. Memories of people. People. Shelly Abrahamse had been a wife. Lamb had always said that he had not worked hard all his life to marry a woman just to turn her to a working woman. What a lucky housewife. What would she be now? A fly buzzed too close to the ceiling lamp and got stuck inside. Of course there was no life insurance. Lamb Abrahamse was simply dead and gone.

The three Abrahamses had already felt, for several years, the bewildering isolation of something near poverty in that hungry town. They had been poor a long time. The deep worry of it had worn them thin. They would be poorer now. There were three credit cards with a bit of room to spare and the Abrahamse women had lived on those through September. Now there were three credit cards full up, debt-logged in Shelly's wallet. Their version of grief felt delayed, like

there wasn't quite room yet for it. Like they did not have the money to buy the time to really let loose and scream.

Louella watched her mother stretch her jaw, flex her fist, the phone pressed into her cheek, thin lips puckering in spasms of a spitting fury. On the other end of the line was Shelly's mother, Jacoba Orr, who lived in a place Louella had not yet been. The wet stoney distant seaweedy mythic coast of Maine.

Maybe their conversation went something like this:

"There's a house down here, hun. There's a house Tom Harris used to live in, but they put him away, hun. Or he died, can't tell you which. You could settle up and buy it, come right back down."

"Ma. Ma, I've got things—"

"Oh, Shelly. But you didn't really love him, of course!" Jacoba Orr had a Dutch tongue that came through hard when she was happy or sad. She had not liked Lamb. The Dutch came through now.

"Ma." Shelly breathed out and breathed in. "Can't just buy a house." The last word rose up as though in song.

"Oh! But his *life*-insurance—"

Shelly hung up the phone. She sat across from Louella, in a hard-backed chair, the kitchen table between. The late afternoon had gone orange and too hot, thunder coming.

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The smell of the burning refinery had come into the Abrahamses' kitchen and stayed. When Louella and Shelly ate their food, no matter if it had been wrapped in plastic and stored deep in the freezer, by the time it was in their mouths it tasted of crude oil, of Lamb's body, his

jeans and belt gone up in flame, his leg cindered, the cartilage of his nose. When they ate canned Spaghettios, he and the hole in which he died came in on the spoon.

Some folks left casseroles. Most did not.

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The shopping cart's wheels made a gummy noise and would not push straight. The Abrahamse women walked slow down the canned goods aisle. They had eaten the last of their food and found it was time to buy more. Louella pulled the cart with one hand, Shelly pushed, her two fists hard about the handle. They were both small women. Shelly yanked the cart to a stop, picked up three cans of sweet corn.

"Cheaper frozen," Louella said. The store played a love song.

Shelly nodded. "Paying for the can." She bent carefully and put the cans back. After a moment, Shelly said she knew you were paying for the corn too. "But also the can."

Marce Telhaney passed the end of their aisle. She reappeared, head first. She cat-walked the aisle towards them. The promise ring crystal zoomed back and forth, glittering all over in the store light. The Abrahamses rolled the cart on. Coffee, skim milk, soft bread loaf in plastic.

Louella bent, took up a five-stack of tuna cans. "Can't buy this any other way."

Shelly had found some shifts at this grocery store. The manager had said he knew several seventeen-year-olds with better work history than her. But he also said Jesus would not have refused a widow a paycheck.

Marce passed, nibbling a grape. She slowed, she did not say hello. She stopped at the pickles and began singing. She sang a series of jumping hallelujahs. "For the first time in history–uh-huh!" she sang. "It's araining men!" She turned a pickle jar around and read the nutrition facts. "Amen. Amen!" A woman at the corn chips shelves looked up and frowned and

then smiled and started nodding along with Marce, singing the long chorus. Then Marce laughed so sharp and desperately the woman jumped, grabbed a bag of Tostitos, hurried away.

The Abrahamses' cart wavered on the bad wheels, their tuna cans fell over. Marce turned towards the cashiers and was gone. Marce Telhaney with the big white breasts, the big brown hair, the red smile she kept red and wet with Smackers. But doesn't every school have a Marce Telhaney, who's mean for mean's sake. For somebody at home surely has taught what mean is for mean's sake, but taught them they're pretty too. Taught them how to use their cheek bones and hips bones in such-and-such a way.

"Fifty-cents a meal, basically," said Shelly, after a moment. "Tuna is."

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In late September, the *Lokkertville Driller* printed a frontpage headline: ALLEGED EXPLOSION CULPRIT REMEMBERED. A series of local interviews stitched together by a small town reporter's dreams of bigger stories.

Shelly looked up at Louella, the *Driller* spread on the kitchen table under her hands. "The narrative arc is impressive." She was a pale white woman who blushed easily. Her neck and chin had gone fireball red. "They really turn you around a few times. Amazing, what a town can know about a woman's husband."

Louella leaned forward, tugged on the paper edge. Shelly yanked it back, said she hoped Louella wouldn't ever read that paper but she understood that likely Louella would and that if Louella did could Louella remember that everyone in Lokkertville just then was still feeling like their little world had been punctured. "A scapegoat is useful in times of trouble, Louella."

Later, Louella knelt and smoothed the crumpled paper out on the living room carpet. Across the room, Shelly looked up from the couch. Beside her, Lamb's black La-Z-Boy sat like a big animal they were too frightened of to trash.

Halfway through, as the interviews turned from old memories of the Ambrahamses' arrival to Lokkertville some seventeen years before to the more cutting and personal speculations, Marce Telhaney was quoted: "Well you can just tell, can't you, when a child is lacking proper care. Sometimes you have to look off to the side of something to see it full on. Of course, as a child myself, I spent so much time with that family. But you have to get older to understand some things, don't you?"

Louella read this line outloud to Shelly. Shelly heaved up off the sofa. She shuffled towards the door in house slippers. Louella read on, louder, shouting the words as Shelly disappeared.

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On the first Monday of October, somebody left a dozen red roses on the Ambrahamses' front stoop. Louella found them frosted in the cold morning, on her way out the door to school.

The note said: *Loving you was the sweetest inhale of my existence. I am not a praying man. But I will pray that you quit the long lie. There is only this one consciousness.*

She brought them inside to Shelly. She said, "I don't want to go to school today."

After a while, Shelly stood and put on the kettle. Ants trekked across the floor. They became a small pile and then separated. When the kettle whistled, Shelly poured plain hot water and set the mugs on the table. Shelly took a long breath. She fondled a thawed rose petal, the limp pink card. She let the breath out and took another. "I have not told you much about Maine." The Abrahamse women had the same blue eyes, blonde hair, papery-white skin, sharp bones, as

though the one had simply split from the other and Lamb had never been. “I was not so happy there. I always thought that.”

“Is anybody?” Louella asked. She observed she knew very few people who were both functioning and happy.

“You’re sixteen, Louella.”

Louella plucked three rose petals.

Shelly made to swat her hand but quit. “Leave them.”

They watched the dripping petals.

“Back home on the coast,” Shelly said, “nobody leaves.” That she herself had left was besides the point. “There are no secrets there,” she said. “You’ve known everybody too long for that. Everybody is the whipping boy, sometime. You rise high and you fall hard and you rise.” She remembered a time when she was a girl walking to a boy’s house with rain coming. “He was the first boy I ever kissed. He was a good boy. The weather got bad and it rained. An out-of-town car stopped, asked if I wanted a ride. The car was new. The man just sat in his car. Watched my shirt go wet. No other cars out there.” Shelly lifted her mug. “Smells fine. So then an older boy, a Perry, he was a lobsterman, he came along and saved me in his truck. I still remember. How’d you even think about getting in a car from New Jersey? he said. But he drove me to that boy’s house and I kissed that boy that day.” She laughed, high and hard. Her face was wet and red. At some point they had both started crying. Louella could not remember Shelly ever talking so long. “When I first came here with Dad,” Shelly said, “I hadn’t thought how there would be no water. No tides. It’s unnatural. I am not so happy here either, is the point, Louella.”

Louella drank her hot water. The mug or the water tasted of petroleum.

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The empty gray charred warzone that was blowdown stack B's skeleton was reborn as just one more workplace. Neon-vested laborers, seen from a distance, crawled like little bright-backed insects, finding their niche in a barren place otherwise avoided.

But sprung from old seeds and roots buried under tar who knows how long, slim prairie patches of daisies and tallgrass pushed towards sun.

In town, there was the talk of money. Like any bend in the pattern of things, the boom shoved out some people and welcomed others in.

Louella had never felt, she thought, so many eyes. They touched like fingers pressing for firmness up and down the length of her. On the backs of her knees, the skin behind her ear. At any moment, she felt she could turn about, catch someone looking. It wasn't an entirely bad feeling. It made her feel a little alive.

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"They'd leave us outside in a blizzard if they could, be upset about the stink we made in the spring," Shelly said to her daughter.

"Ma."

"I'm not staying here. This town." She lifted an elbow as if to point outside but put it down again.

Louella looked back. "Can I come?" she said.

Shelly glared past Louella to the wall of the kitchen where there were no windows.

In the way Shelly swore to Christ and Louella, it was as if her daughter were bound also for crucifixion. Two flies buzzed towards the light fixtures.

"Who sent those roses, Ma?"

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The Abrahamses spent the empty fall in Lokkertville, wondering about the why of things. At the end of October, over the phone, with a three-point-five-percent down payment put mostly on a personal loan with a 20.2% interest rate not due for payment until October of 2001, they bought a house on the northeastern coast of Shelly's childhood.

The realtor lady described a sweet Thomas Harris who had, she said, "Died of his long loneliness and a slightly shorter heart failure." Though everybody knew, Jacoba Orr told Shelly, that Harris had croaked throned in his black leather living room chair and that that chair remained among magazine stacks and maybe-handy boxes, drill bits and a blue rocking horse, more chairs than a one-bathroom home might ever need, milk crates from Bev's Corner Store, enough seashells, bait bags, drift wood and buoys to make the house smell like marsh salt. But he had only been dead for a day before his brother found him, thank god, and had not, in death, contributed to the smell.

In November, the Abrahamses packed a little of their life into Lamb's red truck, forfeit most of the house's rental deposit, and fled Lokkertville to the Atlantic, two thousand miles east.

On the day before they left, Louella slipped a note into Marce Telhaney's desk. *Thank you for the flowers, Marce. I'll always remember you. LA. 11.05.2000*

Chapter Two

Traffic like a riptide moved them. Driving through Duluth's busy highway, they were a rattling truck amongst fast cars. They were not speaking. They were small town people worried about their wallet, who knew nothing of the world's largeness. Shelly's right hand bumped between wheel and shifter and back, she leaned way forward. Louella gripped her door and seat edge. A Kodak of the pretty house they had bought was taped to the dash.

On the far side of Duluth, they ate chips from a bag.

Shelly said, "God. Those're some ugly people."

"A lot of beef on the hoof, that town."

"Bet not one of them knows."

"Knows what?"

Shelly maneuvered around a slow cattle car. It was a frozen road and the living animals steamed. The alarmed eyes of big cows peered out through slats and then the Abrahamses were past them. "Give me those salt and vinegar, yeah?" Shelly said.

"Those're gone."

"We shoulda stopped."

Several cars slipped past and merged over. Red tail lights. The highway was a bright ribbon in a big dark place.

"You see the gas price?" Louella said.

"Cities," Shelly said. "Cities for the wealthy only. Gotta be some sort of sick to live there."

"You gotta be rich."

"I didn't grow up poor," Shelly said. "In fact we had money. Mom had inheritance money."

"Sure," Louella said.

"Right now, Louella," said Shelly, "we are not poor. We are just passing through a bad time. We are not poor people."

"Been a long time passing."

"We are a fine family. We are still a good family."

"You want these chips or not," Louella said.

"You said they were gone."

"You can't tell when it's a joke at all, can you? Never." It wasn't a mean thing to say but it wasn't a nice thing how it came out of Louella. They did not talk again for a while after that.

When there were no more cars on the dark road, Shelly told her daughter about Goodesboro. As a girl, she liked to drive out on Maton Bay Road, where they were headed. "You felt like you were going somewhere important, driving on it." But it would only take a person back past the river and then back into town. "You could go in a circle and by the time you got to the beginning, the sun would have changed and that was all. It was a good road to live on." She remembered nice houses out there. "I'll take you out to Red Hill and Hamden. We'll have the

country's most beautiful places next door. And the people," Shelly said again, "the people are very good." The truck heaters blew hard and flushed their faces.

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The Here Inn Motel glowed in the middle of a frozen, prairie void. They had driven across the high midwest. Shelly's hand was still on the key in the ignition like she might start it up again and they might just keep going. But then she said, "Well, Jesus then, let's go." They slipped out of the truck into the bitter black night. It was not the sort of cold to change a life in.

The office lobby looked bright and cheap through the windows. Their clothes were packed in banana boxes. Shelly's blue eye caught her daughter's and clung on a moment. The chopped prairie and its bending rigs and Lamb's small headstone were way behind them. They slammed the truck doors and the sound went up to the Milky Way. Not one other person in the world knew where they were, where they were from or where they were going. Two other empty, cold cars sat in the lot. Night pressed in like weather. The hotel lobby was a grounded moon. A room was twenty-one-ninety-nine a night, and they could drive right up.

Shelly asked if they had any with two beds.

"You're women, aren't you?" the woman behind the counter said. "What I mean is, you're her ma, aren't you?"

"You don't have two beds?" said Shelly.

The woman said that two beds was forty-five-ninety-nine. Then she added that the twenty-one-ninety-nine for the one was before tax. She waited and watched them with her jaw working. Louella looked at the counter.

The bathroom had the sort of lock you do not trust. Louella took the first hot shower. She let the water go until she heard Shelly's quiet on the other side of the door. A woman on the TV

talked rapturously about the weather. Louella toweled fast and put on flannel night clothes and these like everything seemed to stink of crude smoke.

Shelly was sitting on the bed, her knees together, looking at the television. She held the remote in a fist like a beer can. The beautiful woman with the Madonna mole said that winter was already the coldest season in a decade, but it was November, we're heading for Holiday warmth, folks. Turkeys and Santas and Baby Jesus soon!

Shelly looked up at Louella so fast that Louella flinched. "Fourteen years, I haven't been back, Louella." She held all her toiletries on her lap. Then she got up. She had been crying. Louella looked away. They traded places. Louella heard the lock pressed, the slow test-rattle of the bathroom door. The shower ran and ran. Shelly had paid twenty-two-sixty-five after tax for that shower. Let it run.

They spent all night crawling away from each other. The mattress slipped them into the middle. Twice Louella woke up facing her mother, kissing distance, but the eyes were shut and the lips slack. She reached towards the far edge of the bed and pulled away one hair at a time. In the morning just past dawn, the red truck started, and they drove.

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Money made of fish, mammal, ice, tree and rock long gone built Goodesboro. The Atlantic Ocean was a gray slick just beyond brick buildings. Mean, beautiful gulls wheeled everywhere. They arrived with a quarter tank of gas and afternoon dark coming in from the east over water. Shelly drove fast through a low downtown.

"Here's Goodesboro," she said. "That's the Corner Store." She pointed right at people like she might have once known them well. "That's Bev," she said, of a thin, white-haired woman watching them pass. "And I think news is that she owns it now. It's Bev's Corner Store

now, the Baker man gone into a Florida home. And that man, Jesus–" Shelly braked like it was an accident and then kept going. A man in an army jacket and hair just as long as Bev's stepped out of the store and tracked them with his eyes. He had a withered look and a tall widow's peak. Could have been mother and son, fondling their cigarettes on the store's granite step. "That man," Shelly said. "That man is John Day. I haven't seen John Day in a decade and a half." The woman watched them go, eyes following the truck above lit matches. Bev leaned in and said something to John Day and John Day looked at his feet. "Jesus," said Shelly, looking in the rearview. "Things changed. But not."

Lokkertville had not had a downtown except some prefab buildings built closer together than others. Goodesboro had a three-quarter mile straight stretch of brick, granite and glass. A place that looked like it had once and could again bustle. Something bonier about the people. There were alleyways. Steam from an open kitchen door poured into one as they passed, and Louella turned fully in her seat to watch the man that tumbled out, shouting at somebody left inside.

Shelly was saying of a cigar shop, "That place used to be a TV repair place. Guy was a pedophile. Everyone knew it." Then they were through the downtown half-mile and Shelly said, sounding like this cold salt air had blown something fresh back into her, that she was going the long way on Maton Bay Road if she remembered right and she thought she did remember. Then, suddenly, they were on a patched road by a river delta. They drove inland along the Maton River.

A high king tide lifted the water. A big tree limb like a drowned woman in rigor sailed by below them. The Abrahamses passed a very tall bridge spanning the river eastward. "That's the way to Red Hill," Shelly sighed. "Someday we'll drive through and look at the pretty houses."

Maton Bay Road bent away from the river. They followed it for some miles and came to a bog where Shelly slowed. “Realtor lady said we own a piece of salt bog,” she said. “Like waterfront.” Tall black winter pines hemmed the quiet tar. Shelly, as though asleep and only gently swerving, pulled the red truck into the wide, gravel yard one tire at a time.

The house on Maton Bay Road was white. The cluttered maybe-one-day-useful-treasure of a hoarder lay everywhere. Out of the mailbox at the yard edge poured Thomas Harris’ bill envelopes and bright coupons. The women sat in the low red truck and looked at the house. The junked porch sagged on its eastern end into the early rotting snow. The roof dandered black shingle. A bog stood red-berried and full of deer trails some hundred yards east.

After a while, Shelly unstuck from the dash the Kodak the realtor had sent, held it up. The two houses sat side by side. One in hazy summer light with a clean, straight porch and tidier grasses and yellow daffodils, the other the color of the dirty old snow out of which it sprung. The Abrahamses had driven, according to the odometer, two-thousand-two-hundred-and-one miles without the truck complaining, had spent one-hundred-eleven-some dollars on gas. They had arrived in the moment of late autumn when everything has suddenly been dead a long time. The truck engine coughed, lurched and began to suffer. Shelly shut it off and all went silent. “A house on Maton Bay Road,” she hummed, after a while. Grief was a door they had not yet gone through. They did not know if they could come back out.

A low plane screeched by and the Abrahamses hinged forward in the truck seats. It sank just into the trees. Louella looked back at the photo. Then at the porch askew and all its detritus, where broken mirror winked in the low sun. Wind flapped a wing of ice-trapped cardboard.

“What’d you say?” Louella said, side-eying her mother. “Nice house on a nice road?”

There was still time to drive on to a better place. Or had choice long shriveled with the first mortgage payment?

Shelly left the truck, made a new path in the old snow to the Harris porch. Patchy yellow grass came up through ice. She paused before the porch stairs, tested her weight. Then in three quick hard steps she stomped to the door she now paid a two-hundred-eighty-seven dollar mortgage on and Louella followed. The realtor had left nine keys on a twisty tie under a rock full of mica. The third gold fit.

They stepped into a thick stink and a dark kitchen full of junk. An empty space was surrounded by chairs as if the one thing the Harris brother had taken was the kitchen table. Someone had pushed the thermostat high and heat billowed out of floor vents. Shelly and Louella stood close as cattle. A white door was shut to their left, and a door to a short hallway and stairs hung open ahead of them. The kitchen sink was an old farm sink, black slate and wide enough to wash a child in. They could have dried a shirt in that hot air. They stood as if struck dumb and maybe they were.

Then Shelly twitched. “Find that thermostat, Louella,” she hissed. “That filthy man. No right. No right he has.” Her hands across her mouth, the speech like it was made for a stage. “Shit Jesus,” Shelly spat. They ran, they searched the kitchen and then the hallway, a small yellow bathroom.

Then they opened the closed white door. Marsh smell fell out like a body. Into the gloom a small path cut between Thomas Harris’ many belongings. They hiked down it and rummaged towards the walls for the thermostat and Louella wondered where they might sleep, if the bedrooms looked like this, and she considered who Shelly might be speaking of, which filthy man, for they already in that life had known a few.

Shelly wondered from the other side of a pink-painted armoire how a person could live buried in his own shit.

"He didn't, though, did he," said Louella, which got a thin laugh.

Louella found the thermostat an arm's reach from a wide black chair that sat at the very end of the worn path, about which were stacked fragments of a typed manuscript, letters, pizza boxes sorted by size. White plastic forks all kept tidy in a white donut bag. Doodles of various skill on a legal pad near the arm of the chair itself as if, in his last moments, Thomas Harris had been idle, contemplative, daydreaming. Napkins, deli paper folded and creased precisely, shoved booklike together between two squat squares of glass taken from the side of a building long gone.

"Eighty-one." The walls and stuff muffled Louella's voice. "It's set at eighty-one."

Shelly put her hand to her chest and growled. She would not pay for the waste of a lunatic. Louella tapped the dial down and a furnace making noise down in the cellar clicked off. Out in the bushes around the bog, chickadees sang. A truck with a spent muffler drove by.

In the upstairs front bedroom they found many chairs and a bad, cold draft. The chairs sat haphazardly as though they had once been arranged for a wedding but someone had waded through, pushed them aside to reach the window, peer out at the newcomers in the drive. The carpet was gray and had a footpath worn down the center. The east window was wide open. Louella crossed the room, climbed over chairs, and shut it.

In the back bedroom, Shelly laughed a high, mean laugh. There stood Thomas Harris' wide mattress, tousled sheets and a big body's depression on the left side. It smelled like decades of sleep. A decent frame though. And a high pile of metal rails in the corner that could make, it

seemed, another few frames. In the red truck they had some clothes packed in banana boxes and no dressers. Linens and no mattresses. Shelly had packed as if fleeing and then they had fled.

**

The rest of the evening passed to a purple twilight and three more planes zoomed low over the roof. In the late afternoon they sloughed the kitchen down with bleach, burning their eyes and skin.

"This is what money buys," Shelly said, kneeling before a trash heap in the kitchen corner. "You buy food and you eat food and then you get rid of it like any son of a bitch and then you die." She fondled trash. Brand name cereal boxes and soup cans. "Must have been some kind of rich," she said. "Have to be to not have to know any better. Trying to buy his way back into life, I'm sure of it." Later, on her hands and knees at the linoleum's edge, scrubbing a leaking stain, she looked up and said hopefully into the working silence, "But maybe he had a lot of debt, Louella. Maybe that brother took on a lot of debt when he took the fricken kitchen table." She looked like she could spit. She did not say how they too had debt and a mortgage like adhesives they could not scrape off.

Night came down on them. The house was cold now and the wood settled and if they had not been working hard they would have been shivering. It was a sad, wild house and a dark night. They threw what they could onto the porch but then Shelly considered what the next-door neighbors three miles down the road would think when they saw Lamb's red truck and this ugly new change to the way the trash had settled, so she cried, to God and her daughter, Keep the worry out of sight! The moon was bright as one milk tooth.

Shelly dragged debris into the living room with the snow still on it, threw junk, toppled the magazine towers. She cut her knuckle on a piece of nice mirror.

"You got blood on the floor," Louella called. She felt something close to boredom, a compression in her chest. "Like fricken Carrie. Blood on the clean floor." She was tired suddenly. She held a wad of wet letters in her arms. Shelly turned from the kitchen door. Louella caught in that moment a look in her mother's blue eye that was the bit of her mother she did not know, this mother who feared that she was wounding her child with what she could not give. Shelly let Louella hold her hand under the sink water. The water was bitterly cold. Three hands, thin and winter blue. Shelly's eyes tugged around the room. The spent blood went into the bleached slate sink. Her mother's hands, Louella thought, were very elegant, a wife's hands. They both knew this was the most intimate they had been in a long time.

When it was done they pulled away from each other and were embarrassed. They wadded a towel around Shelly's knuckle and brought in their banana boxes of clothes from the truck. Shelly's blood froze in the porch snow overnight and stayed all winter.

**

Shelly unpacked her little backpack in the yellow kitchen light. She drew out her cheque book, wallet, and her coin purse and placed them on the bleached counter in a row. The coin purse was heavy and round. The clasp was silver, the fabric brocade and it was very fancy for Shelly to own, it had been a strangely good gift from her mother, Shelly always said. Louella, when she was younger, had watched those yellow-knuckled fingers pinch at the clasp.

Louella hefted the coin purse in her palm. She let it fall to the kitchen counter. It was not her coin purse, or her coins, not yet her kitchen counter. The purse made a deep thump on the linoleum, like the heartbeat of a good strong man.

"Do not throw it," Shelly said.

"Throw what?"

"Throw that, what you just did."

"This?" Louella picked it up again. They looked at it cupped there in her small palm. The place smelled of bleach, Harris' scalp and the cranberry bog. Perhaps the purse held several dollars.

"Yes. Do not throw it."

"I haven't. I put it on the counter." She tossed it again onto the counter.

Shelly spoke to the porch door. "There is four-hundred-and-eighty-nine dollars, Louella. To make it on."

"Maybe I'm just getting used to the counter height."

**

Thomas Harris had food, hundreds of dollars of food left in the cabinets. When they found it, they stood in front of the open cabinets and were momentarily wealthy women. In darkness, they hauled things back and forth and trembled and scrubbed. In every drawer, cabinet, closet and shelf, dead Harris inhabited his goods. Now blue midnight came. They charged the stairs two at a time, cleared the bedrooms. They had left one death and entered into another. They flung chairs across the house, hundreds of feet. They dragged their own bodies. A great horned owl had been hooting outside for a long while, at the edge of their woods. In the front bedroom, they hoisted a plush green loveseat sofa together. They would put it in the kitchen below the coat pegs. They made for the stairs.

"Come on now," said Shelly.

"You're going too fast," said Louella, the stair edge at her heels.

Shelly shoved the sofa against her daughter.

"Rest it on the rail a second," said Louella.

Shelly muttered and heaved. A truck on the road came from the east and slowed. The Abrahamses caught each other's eyes for the truck then was stopped and the owl was not hooting anymore. The truck's muffler shook the midnight trees. Louella looked towards the road and Shelly pushed hard against the sofa. Louella clung to the banister and did not fall and let the green sofa go. It slid fast then lifted up and bounced once down the stairs. It punched two holes in the wall and did not break.

At the stair edge, Shelly stood and studied it. "Down it goes." She looked back up at the black porch windows, to see what a person might see if they were to cross the yard at a sprint and look in. Then the truck started again and drove on.

In the small hours, Louella watched Shelly stand inside the living room for a long time, turning slowly about, taking inventory. The big mattress sat across the piles. They would have to get rid of the black chair in which Harris died but it was too big to fit down the aisle between the junk so they buried it instead. They bleached everything they could. Then they closed the living room door, would have locked it if it locked.

Chapter Three

"It is good to be feared as a woman," Shelly had long ago said. As the school bus pulled even with the Goodesboro High School lobby doors, Louella considered this fact.

New faces walked all around, students spilled from a bus behind Louella's, from sedans and trucks, two four-wheelers and a dirtbike. One boy shouted but it was muffled and quickly silenced. Many small things were crying in the fog.

Louella rose, and followed the other riders down the bus aisle. Angela, the bus driver, a pink-skinned and powerful woman, eyed her.

"Goodbye," Angela said. "And good luck."

Louella kept her blonde head high. She stepped out of the bus stairs and a mean-faced boy who had gotten on at a trailer home just three miles down the road from the Harris place pressed his whole body too close. "Can't just stop the traffic like that," he muttered in her ear.

She jumped forward and so did he and then the bus doors snapped shut and the bus roared on. The whole crowd shifting towards the school paused and turned to this new girl. Then they kept going. In the fog, girls everywhere held plastic babies.

One baby, some ten feet away, cried out as though its motor was tired. The girl who held her walked with her head high as Louella's, the wailing baby wrapped in a blanket and tucked under her jacketed arm like a log. Another baby answered and a skinny girl who looked sad

enough to break easy worried over it in the dark fog. The students funneled towards the school doors. Even outside, it smelled of tile and paper and PineSol. A black-haired girl squinted back at Louella. For Louella's benefit, it seemed, she hauled her baby out from under her arm and performed motherly maneuvers. The baby really cried.

And then they were all through the school doors and there was another plastic baby now crying in another girl's arms. And then another, four more, eight. The hall wailed, it was a bright beige tunnel full of young folks. Most of them would grow up. Everybody kept an eye on the new girl.

Louella pursed her lips, sucked in her cheeks and belly, lowered her eyelids, raised her brow, clutched the damp, blue parka around her. It was not the right material, she was wet through with fog. The office walls were glass. She swept through the office door. "I," she said, with all the pride her burned bastard of a father had ever given her, "am Louella Abrahamse." The office lady did not smile.

**

A tiny girl leaned like a bold boy with an arm against the locker next to Louella's, a baby wadded in her other arm. "Hey," she said. "Hey, what's up." Like those of an uncertain wild dog, her eyes went all over Louella's face. She slapped the locker door. "What do you think of this place?" The girl's fingernails were blue and pointed, she gripped the baby around the stomach, held it out like Simba. "You know what I named her?" The baby had plastic curled eyelashes and green eyes and skin that was not paper-white but was pretty close. Little fat immobile fingers and an open red mouth. "Monica." Which, the girl said, she knew was pretty risque. Did Louella know what she meant? She tucked the baby back under her arm, leaned back against the locker wall and looked Louella up and down. "We're so glad you're here," she said.

Louella fussed the locker's lock, grinning and nodding. She considered somewhat frantically what to say to this blue-nailed girl who talked. So far, public muteness had served her decently. Luckily, the blue-nailed girl kept chattering. Perhaps Louella should ask about the babies. She was beginning to sweat in her blue sweater. Sweat recently had come to mean something more than wet. Shelly said God didn't need to reach down to find her.

Out of the hall's busy crowds, a tall girl approached a locker behind the blue-nailed girl. She did not walk so much as bound. She held her baby like a sack of hefty produce. She was long-limbed, with reddish hair, sharp nose. A face that looked like she thought long thoughts. Louella and the blue-nailed girl were shorter than this girl by a head. They were also both uglier or much more beautiful. Perhaps the girl was a type of beautiful, but it seemed, in the hunch of her neck, the girl did not think she herself was beautiful, and so Louella felt, all this in the span of an inhale, that the girl was in fact very ugly. This tall girl stood with her face very close to her lock's dial, working it open.

The blue-nailed girl leaned in, saying, "She whines every half hour. Cries on the hour. I mean you still get a good grade as long as they're not dead. They can die, I hear, but mine's still alive."

The tall girl peeked over the first girl's shoulder and caught Louella's eye. A bright flash, very blue and very tired. The skin of her face thick over the bone like a bloated ocean. That blue eye rolled once and then quick, back to her locker she turned. She stooped, lowered her baby to the ground. The eye roll felt intimate, as if from a friend Louella had forgotten.

"It's all over the school. Tragic, obviously," the first girl said, of Lamb. Behind her, the tall girl wrinkled her nose, flexed her face in a silent scream, and then calmed as if she had done

nothing. Around them young people were flirting or sweating in winter jackets or suffering or all three.

As Louella drew herself up to say something, anything, the tall girl reached high and pulled a pencil out of her locker. She dropped it. But she was fast and caught it. Louella watched the pencil fall and the girl's quick hand catching it and it seemed somehow that she was not supposed to see this tall girl at all but she had.

The blue-nailed girl spun around. She spoke as one does to the bad dog one has grown tired of living with. "You are a nasty girl." She gripped her own neck. The tall girl straightened, closed her locker carefully. Then she sank to her knee and put her hands on the baby there lying swaddled on the floor. She knelt for a moment with her hands on the baby's stomach as if in prayer for a better life. Then she rose with the baby, turned, took three loping strides and then was quickly very far down the small school hall. The first girl's chest heaved.

Louella felt she had just watched something shameful. Some failure on someone's part.

Monica's motors were winding up to squall. "You just see how she just caressed my bum, just then? Did you see that, Louella Abrahamse?"

At the end of the hall, the tall girl's strawberry head bobbed above all the rest. A woman with paper turkeys dropped her stapler. It broke open on the floor and the whole hall turned to look. The girl lifted her foot and stepped over.

Louella asked if that girl was a fag. She fumbled the word.

The first girl cooed. That, Louella should know, was Dorothy Goode, who would pay to lick a twat.

**

The babies were boxed up by lunch. More fog rolled. Louella could not see the town roofs through the big cafeteria windows. A tired woman in a hairnet on the far side of the hot bar banged mashed potato onto her tray. The cafeteria was an audience that watched itself. In the cash-out line, Louella fingered the quarters and the dollar in her pocket. Dorothy Goode the bum-caresser waited in the next line over. They shuffled forward, unspeaking.

Dorothy turned to her. She took a deep breath. "Does this feel like a homecoming? I was imagining it might for you. Feel like coming home." There was a softness in the question that belonged to an older woman.

"No," Louella said. A little surprising bulb of anger flared. "No. Certainly it does not."

"Aha," Dorothy said. And then they did not talk.

Louella took a step away from Dorothy and squinted at the money the folks ahead of her paid up. Some held out some money and some held out none but all passed through. She had a raging sort of hope that here, in this new town, she might hide the fact of her unmoneyedness. That perhaps the Abrahamses' economic history had been left two-thousand miles west. Money's big delta might have been, Louella knew, what split her and Marce Telhaney. These chattering, glossy girls could abandon her in a similar fashion, if they knew all she could not afford. She held her tray with one hand, rummaged in her pocket and fisted the quarters, the dollar. Her milk wobbled, the potato mound threatened to topple the whole deal.

The cash-woman said, "You're Louella Abrahamse." She had her finger on a sticky note.

"Yes."

The woman looked up. "It wasn't a question. Free lunch. I have you down for that."

"Hm," Louella said.

At the next cash-out, Dorothy Goode's head turned down towards Louella. She smiled a smile full of sharp teeth. Those two girls passed through the cash-outs together. Then Dorothy loped across the cafeteria, sat hunched at an empty table like a thin wild bird on a branch that might soon break.

It was a tiny little thing, free lunch. But the little things, Louella knew, built up like twigs in a log jam and stuck her on one side and everybody else on the other.

The first morning in the Harris house, Shelly had started calling the help-wanteds. She put on her sweet voice. "I used to be from around here," she said to everyone who answered. "I'm back." But she went husky when she asked about the job on offer. And though she smoothed herself out eventually, by the time she reached up from the green sofa to hang the phone back in the cradle above her head, untwisting the cord of all the twisting she had done, she knew they would not call back.

She knew that somewhere else there was a woman with a consistent silky voice and a resume or a twice-removed, down-on-their-luck second-cousin or a man with a penis to do the job. But hope was like calcium deposits: just give it time to build back up. She made a job out of calling.

Dorothy Goode's solemn hunch and these other girls' toothy cheer reminded Louella of Shelly. It twisted her stomach. She stood wavering, tray clenched in fists, before a little sea of staring lunchers.

Then out of that chattering cafeteria's center, another girl rose. Everyone watched her rise. She was made up like a grown woman, a big Marylin beauty mark, chestnut hair, red lips. She was a cusp species. Not girl, not yet woman. That girl turned her eye on Louella, flung out an arm, beckoned her with the grand force of a Kennedy. And so Louella went.

The girl met Louella and took her by the elbow. She had a grace to her walk, and took short, sashaying steps. Not even Marce Telhaney moved with such confidence. She yawned, had perfect white teeth. The girl called hello to everyone, except those to which she pointedly did not. Her name was Lydia Perry and Louella could call her Lyd.

Towards the end of lunch, Lyd stood and bought a diet coke from the vending machine. Some boys and girls snuck glances at her. She was a rich lobsterman's daughter. She said so herself, often enough. Lyd cracked the silver can, sipped it with a hip popped. Walked back smiling like a billboard for Kay Jewelers. Louella watched the students around her and counted up the poor and counted up the unhappy and found herself next to a wealthy woman.

**

"And that's Jimmy Rogers." Lyd pointed. "Hi Jimmy!"

Jimmy Rogers slipped between two cafeteria chairs. He was skinny all over with red hair chopped close. "You're new," he said. His mouth bubbled at the corners. "You're new, I'm Jimmy. Okay, good to meet you, my mom says to say how-you-doing to your mom, we heard you moved into the Harris's old place. Guess my mom knew your mom, she says, way back. Harris died, you heard that? Guess he's dead now and his brother is living in Florida off the house money."

Lyd placed a hand on Jimmy's forearm and told him sweetly to settle his chatter. Louella was weary from travel. Did he want to wear her all the way down?

Jimmy's neck went red. He left and sat at a table with a gaggle of boys.

Louella said, after a moment, that it was true Harris was dead. "He died in the living room chair. We own it. The chair."

Floating past Jimmy came a boy with a sharp dark face and a nice red sweater and what looked like pressed jeans. He stood fidgeting and stuck out his hand to shake Louella's. The high school had some two hundred people in all. He was the least pale out of all of them. "I'm Jerry Lavoie," Jerry Lavoie said. Jerry used to sit with Jimmy Roger's crew until he and Lyd started kissing. Jerry was very formal. He asked Louella her name.

"Oh, give it up, Jerry," Lyd said. She slipped a hand around Jerry's waist, her fingers showing up on his far side soft, nails red as his sweater yarn. His face jumped all around. Lyd held him and turned to Louella like she and Jerry were a married old couple. "He," Lyd said, "like every single other person, knows exactly who you are. Just nobody expected you to be so pretty. You're putting everybody in a heightened state of emotion. Look at her nose. Look at her little chin. I mean she's like a little Russian doll. Anyone could take you home. Put you on their shelf. You have to understand, Louella. Nothing happens around here. You're news."

We are poor, Shelly had said to nobody as Louella left for the bus. We are poor. She had spoken to the closed door in which Harris' things were kept, her face stricken by something unseen but nevertheless blinding. Good lord, I am poor.

"And this is Delilah!" Lyd cried, of a thin girl in blackish clothes. "Delilah is on a purging diet," Lyd told Louella. In August Delilah had been more of a Madonna and now she was going for Lavigne.

Then through the cafeteria doors blew a boy in worn jeans and with wide shoulders and red windburn on a blonde face. Louella watched him rap one knuckle on Dorothy Goode's lonely table, then walk on. Dorothy did not look up.

He crossed the cafeteria. It was said he lived on eggs and cigarettes. "Look at him saunter today," said Lyd. "He knows the new girl's watching, is what." He had an older way he held his

mouth, no awe left in it. Louella's blood did something. She had too little of it in her skull, suddenly. Delilah ate a fry. Lyd leaned into Louella's hair. "Sewall Goode," she said. "Don't pay him any mind. He'll put on a show for you. Delilah, let's take a bet, see how long it takes him to tell little Louella he's going to be the lobster king of Holly Island."

Delilah squinted across the room at the wall clock. "Six minutes. Fifteen seconds."

In a moment Sewall Goode stood above their table with a lunch tray in rough young fingers. Looked straight at Louella. "You Shelly's girl?" he said. He was sixteen.

Later that day, Mrs. Howes drew Africa on the chalkboard. She stood back. "That's about right," she said. She looked at it a moment longer. "Now who can tell me where on the globe Africa is? Just give me a guess. Is it to the *left* or the *right* of America?"

"I'd say it's to the right!" Jimmy Rogers cried.

Lyd passed Louella a note.

Jimmy thinks you're FINE. A reputable source.

Chapter Four

The first mortgage bill came in a pile of coupons and credit offers for Thomas Harris. Louella had been in school a week by then. She and Lyd were soul mates, it turned out, according to Lyd.

Sharp cold flakes circled the far pines, drifted, and fell around Shelly. Louella watched her through the window. Shelly walked like she might have a pain in her back. At the mailbox, Shelly hugged herself with about as much tenderness as she ever hugged anything. On the other side of the living room door, Harris' junk settled in like a body does for a long rest.

When Shelly closed the mailbox and started back, shuffling envelopes and bright coupon pages, Louella fled. She slid across the cold kitchen floor. She took the stairs at a run, closed herself in her bedroom. In a moment, the front door opened and snapped shut, the green sofa sighed, papers rustled and an envelope got ripped open.

Louella sank to her knees on the carpet, one gesture shy of prayer. She crawled beneath her unzipped sleeping bag and heavy blankets. The legged shadows of the many extra chairs fell across her. Snow fell against the windows. Downstairs, Shelly mewled like a stuck, small cat. The morning light was strange here, far from the prairie winter.

Good riddance, Shelly had said not infrequently on the drive, between the gutting booms of Lamb's loss and occasional tears. Good-goddamn-Jesus-son-serving-riddance.

She opened an inch of the sleeping bag for oxygen but the air was mean and cold. She watched the window and put numbers to the coast's light. She did not know much about math but she liked it. She held the numbers up against the window pane. Whenever Louella mourned Lamb, it was tinged with a sort of bewilderment. She was a little bewildered all the time. One worried mallard flapped by. Fog might be a number with many zeroes. She could not keep everything warm all at once, alone in a cold like that. Twenty minutes or several days passed.

She woke to the sense of Shelly breathing outside her closed door. Dried spit cracked on her cheek. The wind slacked for midday and the snow fell straight down. Lately, Shelly moved like a worried ghost, afraid that she might last forever.

If Shelly came in, Louella did not know what they could say to each other.

Shelly might say: One-hundred-ninety-nine-and-eight cents, Louella. To make it on. Or she would say that she didn't know who else to call. Shaw's and the Walmart were a gamble. For if the truck gave out driving so far, the new set of wheels would just be buying debt to work for not enough and she wouldn't have more debt. She would not.

And then, perhaps: A rich man can replace his truck. He doesn't have to worry about it like a tooth. The rich don't have to worry about teeth either. They think they're something to keep pretty for show like a fence. But with Lamb's red truck they had to chew carefully. They like their fences, the rich. Do you know the price of a wall?

Or Shelly might say again that she didn't know, she didn't know! She did not know! What to do? she sometimes asked Louella, as someone asks the priest for absolution.

But Shelly turned away from Louella's door.

Near noon, Louella slipped downstairs. She found the mortgage bill peeled open on one side of the green sofa. The pile of trickster coupons, an *Uncle Joel's* laid on top. The mortgage was $287.51 and due in three weeks.

Shelly came down for the midday meal. They did not talk. Shelly's face was drawn as though yakking might solve something. They ate Harris' canned Lindy Doore THICK BEEF n TATER STEW. Louella poured the stew in a sauce pot. When she turned the stove dial to let loose the fuel, Shelly cried out and Louella's hand flew up, quick as a chickadee. They faced each other and Shelly chewed on her words. "Let's save the fuel. For a little while." She looked at the gray window beside Louella. "Save it for the heat."

So they ate the Thick Beef 'n' Potato cold in Harris' bowls, sitting side by side on the small green sofa. It was November. The winter laid out long and erect before them. They kept the house warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing.

Louella cleared her throat and said, "There's people starving in Africa. So." She thought about Lyd. How her lips moved, let out her words with a Buh-bang!

Shelly lowered her bowl to her lap. "Don't you ever lecture me. Brat child. Bullshit. Go to hell," Shelly said to the kitchen sink. "Don't you ever do that." Shelly was still, by a hair, the larger woman, and could make herself sometimes as large as a house. It was too cold to go upstairs and too expensive to drive away. They ate side by side and the cold orange fat stuck to their teeth.

**

The house trembled and the plane passed over.

"He was the handsomest boy I'd ever met, " Shelly said.

"Where do you think these planes are going."

"Louella. Let me talk."

"But that was a big one."

It was morning, another Saturday. They had had good days and bad days. They had $191.98 and no food save Harris'. But somehow the fuel tank was near full, like the last thing Thomas Harris had done before he croaked was call MidCoast Energy and order a $250 fill up. Let them burn his money a while longer. The sun had risen behind white clouds. The earth was shadowless and still.

Shelly sighed. "Rich hunters coming in from the city for a whiff of rural living. Bang bang. Honey I've got a pretty new head for the dining room wall."

The Abrahamses sat in chairs, facing the space where the kitchen table should go. The linoleum peeled in places. Shelly held the latest *Uncle Joel's* like a psalm book. Looking for gigwork. Looking for quick work. Lawn work. Boat work. Truck work. She would call them all. But the Abrahamses were joking women that day, a good mood risen up from nowhere.

Louella leafed through last month's *Uncle Joel's,* read the Personals in a breathy voice. "Eastport shaw's tues 11/2 at the soup cans. Talked about your dakota pin. I'll be by soup cans next few tues until dec please come!" Louella tossed her fine blonde hair. This was her funny voice lately, since she had met Lyd.

Shelly sat in her straight back chair and screamed, laughing. No, that was crying. But the bleach was still bad in the air, wasn't it? They felt wild and if not good then at least as if they were bracing back side by side, shoulders to the door. Chickadees outside fell through curled rhododendron leaves.

"Been married over twenty years?" cried Louella. "Radio show needs life-long couples for interview. Call 621-MOOSE. Are you mature, love early evenings? Quiet nights and good

conversations with a little wine? I'm a widow looking for you! Betsy 621 8009." Louella turned the page. She could hold her face straight through anything. Shelly laughed a helpless, muttering laugh. "Seeking help," Louella read. "Young companion, preferably female for good company. I'm a nice old guy, looking for energetic friend. Will compensate thoroughly. 621 0817. Frank." Shelly quit laughing. Louella dug at her ear. She read on: "Bingo for retired folk at Penny Memorial, basement gameroom after the service. Win real cash make real friends!"

Shelly had gone still. Louella flexed her jaw, scraped her tongue on her teeth. Shelly snapped her Help-wanteds against her knee. "Energetic friend," Shelly said. She cleared her throat. "Man wants a nice thing to look at," she said. "Should just go to the adult store, buy a magazine. Who needs to run that sort of ad. Who gave the go ahead to run that sort of ad? Wants something pretty, has the money for it? Compensate thoroughly," she said. "What a guy, that Frank." She knew old men like those. Lonely not knowing they'd bought out loneliness.

"Preach, ma."

Shelly would have spat if she was a different sort of person. "Energetic! Used to be, when I was a girl, *Uncle Joel's* was just a nice thing to read. All the free stuff." She told Louella to read the free stuff. Louella saluted.

"Though," Shelly said, while Louella riffled through the pages, "maybe he's just ignorant about how his ad sounds." On the road outside a car came around the hill with its belts screaming.

Louella read the Free-for-the-taking in the same Kay Jewelers voice. "18.5 fthm 3 foot rope. Some fray at 7 fthm. Been in water. You haul! 7753. Fenders, caps, green door, bits, tires. 6284531 Long hair kittens to good homes, come pick up meow! Call Bev's. Pile of good dirt."

The screaming car rounded the hill. A seagull wailed. “Need gone off driveway. 6216708 Downed firs 4 cutting. U haul away. Behind Hamil’s Marine.”

Energetic was a woman’s chore, a flirty apron. Neither one was laughing now. They were tired again. The bleach stink welled up. Both sat wondering in separate, silent ways: Could I be compensated for womanhood? Am I an energetic woman?

Into their drive then the screaming car careened. Across the snow and gravel, a rush of tires, braking, skidding. A door slammed. Feet, marching, running.

“Do we hide!” cried Louella. She stood, the *Uncle Joel's* rolled tight in a fist.

“We don’t hide!” cried Shelly, though she was already. She was bent flat, she was falling off her chair, she was diving below the window’s view. So Louella sat back alone in a kitchen full of chairs, her mother on all fours on the bleached linoleum. The feet hesitated outside before the rotting porch steps, then up they came. The door pounding and the knob, Jesus, the knob then turning. From her knees on the kitchen linoleum, Shelly lifted her head. “It’s my goddamn mother.”

The door opened. A fleshy parka came through. Jacoba Orr was a teal shimmering force. She looked like she had just missed a flight for some place warmer and all-inclusive. Her jowls trembled and she had beads everywhere a string of them could close. Shelly stood up off the floor. She did not offer Jacoba the green plush sofa in the corner but Jacoba found it, the cushions wheezed. She had a clutch of bags in her arms. They spilled slowly off her lap, onto the sofa and the floor. Shelly stared. Jacoba sat with her hands clasped as though she held a small, mean creature between them. Her throat bulged. Three sets of lungs pumped. Shelly sat back down into her hard chair. Three women faced an empty space.

Jacoba gasped and then cried: “Bev Holbrook, Shelly, Bev Holbrook called to ask me!” Jacoba gasped twice more in rapid succession. “If I knew my own daughter was in town! Shelly, do you know yet the embarrassment motherhood will offer you?” She was wailing. “Do you know this yet?” Her eyes poked around, widened on the Wheaties, the empty can pile growing in the corner.

Louella put her hands in her pockets. She took them out. She reached underneath the chair to pick at the wood and found gunk that was not wood there. She drew her hand away. The empty floor between the three women might have held great maps and charts. They might have been planning a war.

“We did see Bev the other day,” Shelly said. “Sure. Bought some TP off her. She hasn’t changed much.” Louella registered in her mother a weird, calm contempt. The gunk under her nail was blueish. She had met her grandmother at birth and then never again. She thought perhaps she was not supposed to like her.

“She called to tell me!” Jacoba said.

“Well, Ma, you knew we bought the place.”

“Well, I would of come by sooner if I knew you were here!” Jacoba leaned forward in the sofa and the whole contraption sagged. She shot out two teal pantlegs, stomped her snowboots. “You’ve been here a goddamn whole while!”

Shelly said that Jacoba got there not too far from soon enough.

“Oh!” Jacoba cried. “Well!” She waved a hand. Her gold hair was thinning. Her jewelry was made out of wood and painted colors. “I brought donuts!” She shook the white bag. They passed the donut bag between them. Shelly stood and took it from Jacoba and sat. Louella walked to Shelly. Shelly took the bag and walked it back to Jacoba. Each woman took one white

donut between two fingers, broke it apart, shook the crumbs to their left side. Placed that bite on their tongues.

"Well!" Jacoba cried. "Well. Well. *You,*" she adjusted her bangles, glared at Louella, "are very pretty." She might have said, There is a tall mountain in the way, we must march around it, women!

**

The days bellied over and passed on. Terrible autumnal rain came and that northeast world turned entirely to swamp. Louella stood in the Harris kitchen. She had their gray phone in her hand, the cord pulled taught and wrapped around her fist. She stood beside the open cellar door, an ear cocked down into the dark, listening for Shelly coming up the low, spidered stairs. It was a strange warm day for November. Living things were violent, eager, wishing to rut. Children out driving their parents' trucks.

In sleep, Harris and the boy Sewall Goode, had crouched, tiny, at Louella's feet. She told them, one after the other, to approach, to suck her cunt. Until she came, she felt queenly and blinded. Then the rain, slick as oil, burst on the house and she woke. The cellar flooded fast.

Shelly had spent the morning watching it. "Built to flood," she said, picking her hairline until it bled, shedding the yellow hair and cold season dander. Her face had changed since Lamb's death. The cellar's granite walls sweat waterfalls. If there were mice they had run to higher ground. Shelly had been near screaming all morning.

Louella slipped into Harris' junked living room and shut the door on the phone cord. The top of Harris' black chair peaked up from between old window panes and a good sculpture of a bluefin. They had found the sculpture in the bathroom sitting like a friend by the toilet. She listened again but all that was there was rough wind scrubbing out winter before it had begun.

She dialed. She waited and when the man seeking company did not answer she left her voice in his message machine.

"I saw your ad. I'm energetic. I'm calling about the job. Maybe you found someone. You can call me back if you want at 0871. I'm home evenings after four and weekends. We got a similar number. I'm Louella Abrahamse." She hung up.

Harris watched her. He slunk between his things. Fondled their edges, he laughed at her. She ran and he chased, he was wide as the room. Breathless, she shut the door and hung up the phone. Shelly came upstairs then, her feet on the cellar steps uncertain. "It's going down or it's steady." Her voice was tight. "I put some tape on the wall, so we'll see." She shifted her eyes outside to watch the clouds rip, as though guilty of something. Shadows hurried over the house.

**

Lyd passed Louella a note. *don't breath too deep <3.*

Louella was ahead of the rest by a multiplication line or so. She felt there was a grace to how the numbers made sense like a dancing she had never done, though she would never think to tell anyone so.

Jeremy Tripp with the hair scraped in the right direction but oiled past simple filth sat in the desk next to her. It was a brand of living, a culture in the way the dirt settled on him. He was a skinny boy who had the appearance of too much skin, he squinted at the chalkboard. Mrs. Howe was writing in a lazy sort of fury. Numbers and numbers and numbers. Jeremy leaned close to Louella's shoulder. "What'd she write after the first line?" he whispered. "What's the second line say?"

Without looking, her head bent to her own paper, Louella said, "Thirteen times fourteen."

He hissed. What was that, what did that come to, what was the answer to this and everything. Did she know?

"Work it out," she said. Feeling good about going fast, like she was winning something. She figured every poor kid was good at calculation but maybe Jeremy was too poor and had nothing at all to practice his subtraction on.

From behind them Lyd whispered, "Glory be to those who accept the cleansing water, Tripp."

"Tell me," he said to Louella.

"Don't," said Lyd.

Louella said, "Guess it's one-eighty. And two. Or whatever."

"My god," Lyd Perry said. "Give help to those who help themselves, Louella, hun."

Jeremy slid away and wrote the number down. He squinted at the next line.

Mrs. Howe said to the black board, "You all think always you all are so good at whispering, you all really always think that. And I find it astonishing. I do."

Then it was only the sound of the chalk in her hand, striking the board.

At the end of lunch, Louella passed Sewall Goode. He was sitting, briefly, with Dorothy. Dorothy Goode, the cleavage-peaker, the twat-sucker, the strange, too-smart, too-tall, wordless girl. She seemed to laugh at odd moments at nothing at all. You couldn't choose your family, folks said. Sewall was sweet, they said, for sitting with his sister sometimes at lunch like he did.

"Any boats where you're from? Or this all blowing your mind, right?" he yelled after her, through the cafeteria din. Bald bright day outside, the gone clouds like buried memories, unbelievable.

"Obviously," Louella called back, over her shoulder. "Had the Great Lakes didn't we?" Not saying she had seen them the first time a month ago on the drive to Goodesboro, and that it was just the corner of Erie flitting by outside the truck, and that seeing that wide space of water felt like seeing a way to leave a place. But perhaps it only felt that way because she had been leaving.

**

People were milling, watching. Brickish acne on every face, some welts picked open and bleeding. Childhood needs getting eaten up by adult desires, right there on the school's tar.

And Sewall Goode, who was sterning on the *Ginny* for Roy Lavender during a rich lobstering year, was waiting for the new girl with his odd little sister. Nothing much happened in Goodesboro. Everybody looked. His muffler was salt-shot. In the passenger seat, Dorothy sat trying to disappear behind the window frame. Some people would, in later years, say what a beauty she had been. Whether they believed what they said or not made no difference. But now, most wondered how two blonde siblings could be so different. Her bones were too strong and showed through her skin.

He waited with one elbow on the wheel, bent all the way sideways in his seat. Trying to look rough. He looked tired and worried. Blue eyes wide, his brow rubbed red. Dorothy studied the dashboard. Sometimes looking up fast, straight ahead like a determined swimmer wondering how far land was. People peeped in the truck at the Goode siblings and then walked on.

When Sewall caught sight of the new girl, he yelled. A springtime yell! A yell like melting streams and grass grown up about truck tires in a yard, the yell of running from a place as a child, before you discover that home is an island and you do not have the funds to get off. It

was a big fish on a too-thin line sort of yell. People whistled back, grinning. It was a weird warm November afternoon, after all. The Goode siblings peered out at everyone.

Louella sashayed right up to yelling Sewall. She bared her teeth at him, held her chin high. She did not believe anymore that the mute and friendless girl in Lokkertville had been her. Two pairs of blue eyes latched on to her.

Sewall said, "Doll, you get out. Let Louella in."

Dorothy watched the sky just above Louella's head for a long moment. Then she popped the door and slid down out of the truck.

There was something in how Sewall looked at folks like one long Fuck You Louella wanted to break with her hands. Maybe Sewall saw the same sort of thing writ on her. Felt the same need to force her down to a different shape. Maybe this is attraction.

Chapter Five

The warm spell left and cold came down from the stratosphere. It snowed three feet.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Sewall drove Louella home in a greening sunset. Because Dorothy Goode was like a catheter bag, which was something Sewall had once told Lyd who then told everyone, Louella had yet to ride solo with Sewall. The cold was deep. Gutter icicles never thawed, just grew longer. Even the south facing Acadian hills held their snow.

They cruised the Maton River's edge. The tide sucked inland stuff out. Each time Sewall shifted the truck, his elbow dug Louella's thigh bone. Her right knee knocked Dorothy's. She did not know where to put her feet, cramped on the axel hump. Every drive, those three sat like this, bunched up.

Louella had not talked much, Dorothy had not talked yet, and Sewall had been telling Louella about fishing. He talked of the money he made every fishing day. His sternman's twenty-percent. How thick the lobster were crawling that year. He talked of Roy Lavender, who paid him. "Men getting made, Lou," he said.

On Louella's right, Dorothy sighed. She was pointy-kneed and too resigned to be a child.

"Getting *made*," Sewall said.

Into the passenger window, Dorothy whispered, “This is hell.” Just too quiet for the others to hear. The road sank down into a gulley.

Sewall said, “Springs, this part of the road floods. You’ll see.”

Dorothy spoke. “Not every spring.” She rummaged in the glove box, found Sewall’s Camels, shook out two cigarettes and passed one across Louella.

Sewall said she wasn’t quite wrong but she wasn’t quite right. “Offer Lou a smoke, Doll. For christ sake.”

Dorothy hummed one long flat note. The heaters blasted but there was ice around each window’s edge. Dorothy had a way of making a person feel damned dumb with her silent watching stare. And though she could not look a person in the eye for too long, she could talk anyone down, it seemed. A bullishness. But when Sewall spoke to her it was as though a hand on his throat that had been squeezing was lifted. “Didn’t last year,” Dorothy said, putting the cigarettes away. “Was a dry year.”

“Did,” said Sewall.

“Didn’t rain until after break up. Was a dry year.”

“That wasn’t last year.”

The Goode siblings muttered back and forth across Louella’s knees. Their smoke ribboned out cracked windows.

“Was.”

Louella rode between the Goodes around the curve of a round planet and clung on. She was far from high plains grass. She could not remember its smaller smells. Lamb had been cindered. She had a mother and no father and no paychecks. Lamb’s being dead nudged its head at her throat so she kicked it out of the truck. Snow-covered pines flashed by in the side mirrors.

Crows broke out from one and left it emptier up top. The plowman had come through, but some snow out here had first been pressed to smooth ice by tires.

Sewall said that it would flood again come spring, he could tell already, just wait and see. "Big melt and a long rain." He popped his truck into neutral and they rolled fast over some little hills. On the slow uphill of the last, where the road began to bend away from the river edge, he put it in first, and the clutch jumped. His elbow rested on Louella's knee. "Good for the water, flooding, feeds things," he said, like a father who could not hear when folks stopped listening.

Dorothy turned to Louella. Her forehead skin was close enough to see the small hairs of it. She said, "When the Maton floods, this road closes and people go around the long way, and it changes things in town. That river quiet all year and then one day, everything different. But then people forget. Pregnancy is like that, I hear, you can't hold all of it in you, how bad it was, or else women would only have one kid, ever. It would just be Sewall and not me. But we can't remember everything. Some people can, I guess, but they're abnormal. But most people it's not like that, so people put their stuff back in the cellars that all flooded because what else are you supposed to do with it, really." She looked back out the passenger window and in a moment, it was like she had not said a thing at all.

"Floods are pretty bad," Louella agreed.

Then the truck went inland, towards Thomas Harris' house.

"You know he died in there, right?" Sewall said.

They were kids driving in a big machine.

"I know," said Louella. "We own the chair."

"No shit."

They sat stiff as three dime store toys untouching on a shelf.

"Yeah shit."

"I wanna see it."

"Too bad about that," Louella said. Sewall grunted. They might have been flirting.

"Why'd you have the chair?"

"We've everything of his." It felt like winning, taking the talk from Dorothy.

"He was a hoarder, you know that?"

"Obviously."

They were young and courageous.

"What's your mom do?"

Crows chased a lonely eagle out of a white pine. The bog was a mile wide, the road built right through it in places.

"My dad left us a bunch of money. So."

"Yeah," Sewall said, slowly.

"It's coming up."

"Oh yeah," he said, "I know it," and braked hard.

Inside, Shelly was emptying the refrigerator. The unplugged plug of it was laid out on the floor like something Shelly had beheaded. The stuff that did not mind freezing was out on the porch. The other stuff was just inside the door. She looked up at her daughter and said, "Save some on electric."

**

At ten-thirty on the next Sunday, Shelly vanished into the bathroom. She emerged looking powdered and wide-eyed. "I have an interview," she said in the same way she might have told Louella breathlessly: I believe in a god! Any! Then she took the red truck and left.

A terrible cold spell had landed. Louella dug her fingers in the green sofa, looking for the sort of wadded bills often lost in cushions like these. The no-money ate holes in her she would have trouble filling all her life. She was waiting for the phone above her head to ring. She had a feeling the man seeking company might soon call. She had a feeling, lately, that she was good company. It must be people in Lokkertville had no taste. Shelly was gone and the quiet house seemed braced for a planetary impact.

There was nothing to eat but condiments, the precious Lindy Doore cans, some corn tortillas and uncooked rice. She ate a spoonful of Thousand Island dressing. Waist deep snow drifted in a steady wind. Tall silent pines thrashed. Louella stood at the kitchen sink and watched through the window the square of the world they owned a debt on.

She wore her blue jacket inside and two pairs of socks and flannel pajamas under jeans that once were loose but something was happening, like a shifting of continents, and it seemed she was splitting at the hips. But she liked this womanly shape. She felt she owned something new, inhabiting it.

Beyond some drowned birches, a too-thin doe emerged from the woods edge, navigating the bog edge. She, too, looked hungry and wild.

Something structural in the cellar creaked. The furnace, in that weather, would never stop whirring. The Abrahamses prayed for unfrozen pipes. Harris skulked in his living room like a pressure in the ears. “Cold,” people said to each other all over that region. “Cold one.”

The doe put her lips to the bog edge banks and pulled out sanded, frozen rootballs of old bentgrass, worked her way around a hassock. Frozen sand dusted her chin yellow. She moved closer to the Harris house. Louella popped a chin zit, squeezed it. The deer stumbled, the deer fell.

It was quick, missable, silent. She fell as if shot in another life and only now giving in. Her solemn head hit the far bank. And then she was gone. Ice crystal blew around.

Louella turned away from the window. She opened the can cabinet, took down one big can of Lindy Doore HOT! HOT! BEEF n JALAPEÑO. Looked it over. The spice did not sit well in her. But the meat sounded like it might save her life. She cranked Harris's nice can opener around the can. How his palm and thumb now dead had squeezed that tool. She broke the thin orange fat above the meat, hard as wax, spooned up the beef clumps cold. It was not pleasant. She ate. She wondered about the stink of a carcass. She knew she was supposed to have put on her layers and dashed to the bog edge with a line and compassion, but it was cold and she already was wearing her thickest jacket.

**

Purple evening came down with a sudden crashing silence. Time had folded. She chewed beef. In the living room, Harris mumbled. She was abruptly very tired, as if a man's body weight had rested itself on her and had only now become too heavy. She was between a deer in a bog and a dead man. The can was half-gone, the spiced fat around the meat bit her back. In her mind's eye, she saw the gummed teeth of a deer's rotting head. She gasped and guzzled a quart of water. The house shrank in on itself like a woman alone at the end of life. When Shelly's headlights turned into the drive, Louella leapt the stairs and squatted in her empty bedroom. She clutched her spoon and stew can.

Downstairs, Shelly entered the kitchen. Everything was too slow about her movement, like a scaly predator scenting something. Louella thought of Hollywood's velociraptors. Then quick! Shelly sprang up the stairs. Louella flashed to the slatted thin closet, still full of

maybe-useful cardboard, of lawn signs from Nixon's time, fly fishing tackle spilling out of its box, the hooks hoping to pierce a foot's webbing. She tucked the can and its spoon inside.

Shelly barged in with a thin wad of bills held out. "Made a bit a money." She shook the bills. "If you want to go to the store." The bills flexed gently. "I made a hundred. I worked a few hours and made a hundred." She was panting. Her make up looked tired but pretty, as if it belonged to someone more fun. Her hand tightened around the bills.

Louella knelt on the carpet, looked up at her mother. "What'd you have to do?"

The bills rubbed their edges, rustling. "Caregiving," Shelly said. "Old person. Baby sit, pretty much." The bills flexed their backs. "Hundred every Sunday."

At Shaw's, they bought cucumbers and apples, forty-cent tuna in cans, peanut butter, two-percent milk, oatmeal, toothpaste, a small box of tampons, a five pound rice bag. A packet of wintergreen gum. When the cashier said, "Twenty-five-oh-eight," the Abrahamses felt the blood fall out of their brains. But Shelly handed over two new twenties. They watched the cashier break them, turn them into smaller things.

On the drive home, Shelly told Louella a story. Sewall Goode Senior had been a dick of a boy. He and others had made a game of spitting down Shelly's back. "But you're beautiful," Shelly said. "They won't."

Louella sat back in the truck seat. "They don't," she said. They drove over a dead and frozen squirrel. "They spit on you. They spit on you," Louella said, a moment later. "They spit on you." After another passing silence, Louella said, "I watched a deer die in the bog today."

At home, Shelly closed herself in the bathroom. She showered for seven hot minutes or so. Came out scrubbed raw.

**

The white fuel tank chug-a-lugged towards empty.

The Thursday preceding Thanksgiving, Louella and Shelly slept, respectively, on the green sofa and the carpeted hallway, beneath the blankets hauled from frozen bedrooms. When they woke, they said, "Cold night," as if meeting on a wharf like strangers. The cold had gotten worse, or only longer. Shelly had gone quieter and called all the businesses again. There is a cold that can make you so angry, if you cannot leave it, like a wild loneliness on the skin.

Pat Nigla's mail truck bumbled around the snowed and shimmering hill. Pale dawn, white moon. Louella stood waiting for the bus at the Harris mailbox. One bright cardinal flapped away. Pat Nigla was tall and slim-hipped like a man, or maybe that was the looseness of her jeans. Her wedding finger was banded though folks said she was with a lesbian and lived in one of the small downtown apartments with Dawn, the antiques dealer.

The mail truck careened in. Louella walked purposefully away. She stopped, let a skinny hip pop out and a leg go long. Like Mariah Carey in the velvet slit dress and all that warm thigh on page five of Lyd's November *Seventeen* issue. She trembled in her blue, old jacket, cotton tights under worn jeans, her snow boots. Pat Nigla leapt forth. Louella turned and studied the bedazzled hill. Her leg was so long and nice-looking and she would not shiver. The mailbox clunked open, some papers shifted.

"Alright," called Pat. The call broke Louella's magazine angles. She looked over her shoulder. Pat stood straight as a pine on a dead wind day. "There's your mail," Pat said. She had a carved-out, pale, friendly-enough face. Maybe she was twenty-nine or thirty. Old. People said she'd been places. She wasn't from Goodesboro. An out-of-stater with rich parents maybe. A trust fund kid with no ambition. Grew up with the hots for women. Sometimes those rich folks

just went wrong though. Affluenza. The money and the relaxation just gone to their heads, never learned to think hard, to work hard. Or she was from Serport and had just lived over in Provincetown, come back during the worst of AIDs. Maybe she had it. “Looks like your grandma sent a letter, kiddo.” The sun hit Pat’s eyes sideways, emptied them like mussel shells.

Louella smiled her most queenly smile. She felt ugly as the house behind her. Then Pat was back in her truck. The wind in the dawn bent the trees and it smelled like more snow coming. Pat pulled away and looked down through her window and gave Louella a thumbs up. The tires rolled gently over gravel. Her face had no fat at all, like a runner’s.

The envelope from Jacoba Orr was blue and sealed with a snowflake sticker. Louella de-mittened, stuck a finger in at the edge and ripped. The cold clamped her hand, shocked her teeth. On the card cover, a happy child hugged a happy turkey. Inside, Jacoba had written, *Buy yourselves something tasty this Thanksgiving! Gobble gobble!* An old fifty-dollar bill folded tidily. Raggedy and used hard but still worth what it declared itself to be worth. She fingered the bill, she put the card to her nose, smelled the history of it.

Then the bus engine came echoing from east of the bog and she put the bill back in the card, back in the envelope, back in the mailbox and shut it.

**

In an hour, in the high school hallway, Sewall Goode strode right by her. He did not look down once. He had driven her home in a small blizzard and hadn’t that been an experience that brought them together, those snowy roads he was pretty good at driving. He walked just behind Dorothy. Dorothy looked to Louella and smiled, like a doctor to a dying patient.

Louella rolled her eyes and Dorothy Goode swept by. She was just as tall as her brother, if not taller. Then Sewall was abreast of Louella and Louella yipped: “Hi, Sewall Goode!” Flirty

like Lyd had shown her. He sailed past. Up close, his right ear looked as though he had had a door closed on his head. And his left jaw corner was not the shape it had been the day before, had a bruise the color of a cod's back. He passed her by, following his sister down the length of the hall. Students were boisterous that morning. Being homebound for the Thanksgiving break meant different things for different folks. Louella did not let herself turn and watch Sewall go.

At the lockers, Lyd Perry chirped, "Hi, hunny bunny," and kissed her on the cheek. The ribs of Lyd's corduroy pants rubbed the locker edge. Louella, if she could have put it into words, felt that Lyd's breasts were not like they were waiting for hands but like they were hands themselves, reaching.

There was a white envelope folded in Louella's locker vents. She paused before she reached for it.

Lyd hovered beside her, watching. "Oh, yes?" she said.

The envelope was the kind bills came in. It could hold: the fact of Louella's free lunches. The dollars in Shelly's bank account. A tally of bills unpaid. A list of the fleshy crevices Louella's eyes had poked before she could reign them in. Ratio of the Abrahamses' goods to Harris'. Her clothes folded in banana boxes, smelling of bananas. Shelly's joblessness. The fact of them sleeping on the couch and floor. Lokkertville's loneliness.

Inside the envelope, the paper was folded to a fan. Jacoba Orr's letter had been squat and cute and blue. Up close, Lyd smelled of cranberry juice. Louella tugged the fan's edge. Out came a binder paper, three-ring-punched.

YOU ARE THE STAR I SEE 1ST AT NIGHT.

Lyd screamed, "She got a little love letter!" The hall paused like a faulty cassette.

But of course, Jimmy Rogers wrote love letters. He had written Lyd one in second grade. Did Louella know that? He had written, *I love you, I love love you, I love love love you* and so on. Lyd leaned in. She smiled so easily.

The pen was precise. Not labored. A confident writer, a hopeful lover.

Dorothy Goode stepped up to her locker behind Lyd's hair.

"It's like your initiation," Lyd whispered. "Jimmy loves everyone once, of course. Don't feel you owe him anything."

Behind Lyd, Dorothy had no smell. She had no color. She had no sound. It was her blue eye only that was shockingly sentient, alive. She opened her locker door and it hid her. Louella folded the letter. The school was warm. She was sweating in her tights and jeans, moist behind the knees. She folded the letter neatly and kept it for years.

After lunch, Lyd held Louella's hand, carefully, and swung it down the hall. Soft skin, bones frightening to feel in the muscle. Louella might break anything she did know how to hold. Other girls knew touch, it seemed. Lyd's rich hand.

**

Ketchup, tall enough to cast a shadow, jiggled on Dorothy Goode's tray. When she opened her mouth to bite the burger, her whole face stretched over the bone. Her eyes zoomed and settled on Louella's. Louella winced, looked away.

Sewall Goode burst through the cafeteria doors. On his face that bruise blistered dark but he was a laughing man now. He strode and waved at everyone like a politician with a purple heart who keeps his grief inside his suit. His sister set down her burger but he was gunning too hard, he could not stop for her. He rapped knuckles on her lunch table and the whole deal shook.

As Shelly had long ago said: There were no secrets here. These people had once all been toddlers together, diaper pin to diaper pin. Scandal happened in other towns only. That Sewall Senior beat his son was nothing new. It was like bad weather when it happened and would pass.

Sewall smelled of an older man's deodorant, his shirt tucked and belted. He wore the bruise on his face, Louella thought, like a pitiable woman's gaudy lipstick. It turned her heart off. He carried his tray in one fist and winked at the frowning cash-woman on her stool. Every eye was still on him when he sat next to Louella Abrahamse and said, "Aren't you a pretty thing for old sore eyes like mine, girl." He did not look back once at his sister.

"I'm for nobody's old eyes, boy," Louella said. Across the table, Lyd twitched.

Sewall chewed his burger. "Jerry!" he shouted.

"Sewall," said Jerry. Lyd linked her hands around Jerry's elbow.

"Won't you ever be doing something with your life that works the shit right down out of you. Won't you ever work a job."

Jerry cleared his throat. He said that he likely would. He said that he did not particularly look forward to it.

"Should try fishing, Jerry," Sewall shouted. "Should try how it is out there on the water. You can die like that." He dropped his burger and his hand shot up and got itself around the back of Louella's neck.

For a moment in that cafeteria, his hand and her neck were the epicenter of everything that had been and would ever be. People sucked strawberry milk through straws and stared. She sat and he squeezed harder than a massage.

"Unhand the woman, Sewall Goode," Lyd sang.

Louella sat with her hands flat on the table. She was, perhaps, more conscious of eyes than of his hand. What a monumental display of affection, she thought then. And what a jealous girl Lyd is. When his hand left, her neck went cold then hot.

"I don't feel the need to maybe die daily," said Jerry.

"But you'll eat the food we're out there hauling," said Sewall. "Your daddy will pay a lot for it, too."

Jerry shrugged, looked away towards other tables.

"Louella got a little love letter, didn't she?" Lyd said. "Not from anyone *I* know."

Sewall went quiet. Then they gossiped of other things. Sewall ate like a man should eat and took up space. He ate and then stood and kissed Louella rough and fast on the cheek. Lyd yelled, "Yeehaw!" and Louella cursed him but wasn't it something to hold clout and not even have to wield it for to be wanted wielded itself.

Across the cafeteria, Sewall emptied his tray with a bang like a twelve-gauge. He slipped into the chair beside Dorothy. Dorothy began talking seriously as though he had been there all along. Sewall rested his chin on his hand, listening, eating his sister's fries.

Lyd put out her cheek to Jerry for a kiss, but he was looking smaller than normal in his nice sweater, and missed the cue. So Lyd sat with her neck cocked for a moment then straightened up and hissed for Delilah to pinch Louella, for Louella was staring at her boo, in la-la lover's land.

Delilah thought. She squinted at Sewall across the cafeteria, then back at Louella. After a moment, she raised her own arm, shoved back the sleeve and pinched herself between nails, hard and long. Jerry and Louella looked away. There would be blood soon. But Lyd watched. She said, "Delilah, hun," softly as she would to a child. "Now don't do that to yourself, sweetie."

Chapter Six

Lamb's truck hurtled over frost heaves, aiming for big Shaw's Grocery Store, south down the coast. Shelly was an inventive driver. Quick on the clutch. They had found a decent miracle that morning, another cache of Harris' name-brand cereal in the hall closet buried under posters of beautiful men dancing in various locales. In the passenger seat, Louella put a Wheatie in her mouth and chewed it. She sucked sugar out of her teeth and the stale wheat cut her gum.

"Why not Bev's," she asked, knowing why. Hoping perhaps to make Shelly's worry something other than her own.

Shelly said that Bev price-gouged. She maneuvered around black ice.

"Well," said Louella. "She's a small place."

"Well. We're a small wallet."

"We go there for pizza. My friends," Louella said. "She lets us sit in there."

Shelly nodded. "Your friends." She said that that was nice. Her fists on the wheel. She looked lately as if she had been gnawing her whole self down to the quick.

"Money is time," said Louella, around a Wheatie. "Bev's is closer."

Shelly called to Christ, who lived outside the truck.

In the Shaw's lot, Shelly parked far away from everyone else. The two women in blue jackets crossed the tar and left the little battered truck like a bad dog at the edge of the lot. They said to each other, "Chicken cans. Potatoes. Bread. Chicken cans."

"Carrots?"

Shelly said that they would see. That maybe cranberry sauce would be nice. There was no fridge to keep bird meat in. The racoons and foxes would be at it on the porch. "But cranberry sauce–"

The store was playing happy Christmas tunes from the ceiling. The sound wafted around. Shoppers with carts full enough to topple rammed down the aisles.

"Turkey?"

"Chicken cans."

Shoppers with deep, deep carts. Bright soda cans, frozen goods, thick bundles of celery wands. A woman with a silky blonde bob and a cart full of butter lettuce, Hood whole milk, running for the registers. People in fishing clothes and nice clothes. The Abrahamses went mute except to say Excuse me to folks. Excuse us. Excuse my reach. Stuck their arms between the shoppers. Plucked from the low down shelves. Tuna, white potatoes, rice, no bread, a bag of Wisconsin cranberries, though didn't they have a cranberry bog in the next town? A bag of carrots for a dollar-five before tax.

Then steadied themselves and readied for the registers. They had not talked before and now they went silent. Holiday tunes echoed down from ceiling speakers. A woman sang, *I ought to say, no! no! no!* and a man asked the woman if he could move in closer.

The total for their goods was sixteen-even. The cashier in the red polo was a boy Louella's age. He cleared his throat, bovine and pleasant. Said that there wasn't a lot about his

job that was fun but when there was fun like that, an even perfect number, you just had to take it for what it was. He said it'd come in waves, those even perfect numbers. "Just wait." They were the first but after there would be many more and then it'd slow down. "I've been here long enough to know." His eye bounced once, twice to Louella.

Shelly opened her wallet. There were two twenties nestled in it and a wad of ones. Louella's eyes dug in there. But Shelly pinched out a blue card Louella had not seen before and handed it to that pompous, acned lump. The boy straightened his spine up. He was taller than them, she saw. He closed his lips over his teeth like poverty was a catching habit. Louella went small, down to the ground, she was a tiny thing, she was a rodent chewing the leftovers in the dung heap.

The boy said, "Alrighty." He took the card and pushed it through the little reader.

The ceiling sang, *I really can't stay! But baby–*

Louella and Shelly and the boy-cashier watched the card reader as though it might speak. The card in his hand like a tissue. The card reader did not speak. The boy swiped it again.

"Don't swipe it again," Shelly said, very quiet.

A bob-headed woman in line behind them had begun to pile her carrots, King's flour, CoolWhip, Chips Ahoy, apples, a merry pineapple, many tortilla chips, Uncrustables, juice boxes, two Hood milk gallons and a Folgers can onto the conveyor. The cashier squinted up at her. He called, "I wouldn't start unloading, ma'am. These new food stamp cards sometimes take forever. Sometimes they just don't work. Could be here a while." The woman paused with an Italian loaf in her fist. Her eyes zipped in a triangle from the card to Shelly's mouth to Louella's jacket collar, back to the card. The card reader did nothing. The boy swiped the card again.

"Stop," Shelly said.

He said that he would have to call someone. He looked over their heads.

"I'll just pay," Shelly said.

The young boy looked at her and squinted. The woman put the Italian loaf back in her cart. Her cart was still full as a fed belly. Two voices in the ceiling now, singing, *But baby it's cold! Out! Side!* The boy held up a hand like the store was a classroom and yelled, "Excuse me, Barney! Stamp machine down again!" The woman put the bright stuff back in her cart. She smiled with sharp teeth at Louella, and checked her nice little watch.

"I'll just pay," said Shelly. A twenty between her fingers, out across the counter.

Louella turned around. "I have a headache, I guess," she said. She watched a car park in the parking lot and a big family get out. She took a step away from her mother.

"Well," the boy was saying. "We've got to get it working anyhow. There's always more with the cards."

Louella moved away towards the doors. Passed a man in a red polo tight across the gut shifting himself across the store, already frowning at the EBT card in the boy's hand, at Shelly's blue-jacketed back. Louella heard him say, "Did you swipe it?" and the boy answer, "Yeah, just like this." Her mother saying, "Don't do that, I'll just pay now!" And the man with the voice like a Sesame Street muppet saying, "But isn't this your card? Give it. Here. Try it like–"

"Don't."

"You want to pay now though don't you?"

And in the ceiling one lover convinced another lover to drink her drink down. Louella went out into the cold. The morning was gray and flat. Seagulls had come inland and were diving for the dumpsters with the crows. There was a storm out on the Atlantic.

**

It took sixteen days for the man Frank to call her back.

While Shelly readied her body for her Sunday geriatric gig, Louella sat folded on the hallway carpet where the heat was best, just outside the bathroom door.

She listened to Shelly's guttural sighs. When she opened the bathroom door, yellow light fell across Louella at her feet. "Do your homework hun," Shelly said. And then she was gone without a goodbye, as she always was, on the winter Sundays of that year.

Louella shrieked, "Adios, you fag-o!" The house shook, swallowed her sound. She leaned against the stair wall. It was too cold and far to walk into town. She moved to the kitchen. The morning light was pale and warmed nothing. She looked at the Harris house around her, and found herself living in it. When living has been tight, you swim with your mouth just above the water. It does not matter what water or where, if you are drowning and cold. A crow cried alone out past the kitchen walls. No cars passed, no squirrels chittered, the fridge was a dark box long unplugged. There was only the throat of the crow.

Then, from behind his living room door, Harris and his junk said, "Hmm?"

It was warm and damp as springtime in the living room. Gold-framed posters of beautiful, shirtless men strutting over sand dunes, through city streets, paddling a canoe, lined the far wall. She crawled to Harris' big black pleather chair and stood in it. She kicked away typed pages and lampshades and his bright collection of rubber duckies. The room like a bone trembled. Or that was only the winter wind.

"This is my house now," she said. "You're nothing but a dead fag-o."

Then she settled into the chair. She did her homework. She determined she would never again be frightened. She scratched through math like it was a stomping dance she was doing,

kicking around what *x* might be, jigging the *y* up, always knowing somewhere deep where she was headed. The light had turned outside and suddenly it was late afternoon, it was twilight, she did not know where she had been.

"If you listen," Harris said, "you'll hear the echo of everything that has been, in the way the squirrels chew the roof."

She fingered the loose fabric of his chair. Pulled out a white hair from the seam. She dug her hand in the chair's crevices. She swore she would not listen. She imagined him wealthy, with gold rings.

When the phone rang on the wall outside the living room, she felt as if she had been caught masturbating, or something equally vile.

She dashed from the room. Harris chased her like a swelling wave, pushing the child towards shore.

As she reached one hand for the phone, she thought: Hello? Hello, the Abrahamses. The Abrahamses. The Abrahamses, this is Louella. You've reached the Abrahamses, this is Louella Abrahamse. Hello, this is Louella Abrahamse. Wondering how it is people answer phones, how do you do it, Hello? The Abrahamses, this is Louella Abrahamse. Nono, you cunt, say it like, Good evening, you've reached the Abrahamses, hello. She picked up the phone. She said, "Hi?"

A man said hello, as though he was smiling how somebody smiles when they are seeing a person they have been missing for too long.

Dad? she thought. She watched her feet in two-pair socks on the floor. "Hello?" she said. She had left her math homework in Harris' chair. Her thumbnail dug at pencil wood.

His smile stretched his skin, she could hear it. Wider, he would split, swallow the phone and cord. "Who's this?" he said.

She chipped a bit of the wood out. “Louella.”

“Louella. You left me a voicemail a while back.”

“I am energetic,” she said, and broke her pencil on the wall.

The man laughed, soft and far away. She could hear the old branches of his lungs working. They said some things to each other, back and forth. “How old are you?” he asked. What do you do on Fridays? And do you like being in high school? She thought of Marce Telhaney’s hand. The pink flesh beneath the lacquered nail, Marce Telhaney’s teeth, the lips she slicked as though preserving herself in wax, there was never an inch of Marce that had not been armored with something bought and applied. Marce Telhaney had once been a child. She, like Lyd Perry, would know how to talk to this man. The man’s voice rumbled in her head.

He asked if they could meet. She said fine. Yes, of course. She would love. She did not ask what compensation might mean. Five dollars? A trust fund? They set a time. The Friday after the next. In the afternoon, from the Goodesboro school lot. He would pick her up in his car. Could they go for a drive?

Yes, of course, a drive.

He had an accent like he was born in a lecture hall at Harvard or Yale or one of those places. Then the old, gentle voice smiled and said goodbye.

She said, “Bye-bye!”

He laughed again as he took the phone from his mouth. Then the phone was dead in her lap and the crow was still crying outside. Harris had pressed himself into the wall just behind her, as though he might slip through it. Louella hung up the phone. A quarter of an hour perhaps passed. No sun for days, but god-rays now broke at sundown. Shelly was late returning today. Perhaps the old woman’s man would pay her double.

Everyday but Sunday, Shelly spent asleep or scrubbing the house to blistering. She had called all there was to call. She scrubbed until she fell back on her heels and saw that the carcass of the house was still a carcass.

Louella's math homework lay in a white mess with Harris' writing and letters from a one-time friend, bundled in a blue rubber band. "Screw off," she said. He was listening somewhere between his belongings. Sometimes the house felt like the inside of a wide mouth, trembling to yell but not yet. She ran. She yanked on boots and her blue jacket, wrapped Shelly's scarf around her neck, found mittens. Took off the jacket and pulled on a sweatshirt of Lamb's from the Digger's Dig Lounge, worked the scarf out through the neck hole and then got the jacket on again.

She walked fast through frozen and yellow grass to the edge of the bog and stood there a while. The woods beyond the bog were young, shadowed, full of snow and animals. Everything was silent and listening. The sun went down and she shivered.

Later, inside, she retrieved her math homework and ate half a box of stale Fruit Loops. When Shelly's tires crashed into the drive, Louella was back on the green sofa. She lay dazed, blue-tongued, watching the ceiling.

Shelly stomped up the porch steps and through the kitchen door, her five twenties in a yellow-knuckled fist. She was so thin. She had not been weeping but perhaps if she had been, she would have moved less like a sudden flood into the house. "Nice sunset," she cried to her daughter. "It was a good sunset."

**

Because Shelly was waiting on the Serport Cannery to call, they could not stop paying the phone bill. "The cannery," Shelly said, whenever they started talking of money prospects, "is

dependable." People bought cans. She said, "Nowhere else in the world cans like this northern gulf here."

Harris' blue hand-crank radio muttered NPR. The world was disintegrating, had been for a while. Did the Abrahamses know? *Noncompliance fines set at fifty-thousand renminbi, approximately six-thousand-seventy-five US dollars,* the blue radio said. It was the Wednesday before Turkey Day.

The Abrahamses sat in their blue jackets in the kitchen, Shelly on the green sofa and Louella tucked up on two wooden chairs. Their breath fogged, damped their hair. They chewed more dry Fruit Loops, loop by loop from bowls. In Harris' toaster, they were toasting his good corn tortillas. *In other news, scientists debate causes of global warming while world leaders meet in Hague*

"That sounds nice. When you say it like that. Like a slogan. Could be a cannery spokeslady," Louella said. Shelly smiled at her knees and pressed her stomach in with her palm. Shelly looked like a cold grasshopper. Slow limbs, and the mound of her skull. "Will you keep the old lady job?" Louella asked.

Shelly took the tortillas from the toaster. "No."

"Maybe I'll take it."

Shelly cut the tortillas to halves. She made a brief motion like spreading butter but there had been no butter since Lokkertville. "You can't drive," Shelly said. She was tired.

Louella put down her coffee. It was thin enough to be rust water out of a tired faucet. A teaspoon of Harris' Folgers for a whole pot. Make it all last until something changed and something soon had to change. "I," Louella said, "cannot drive because you haven't taught me."

"The clutch is going," Shelly said. "It can't take the abuse of a learner." She said that she was sorry. Outside seagulls fell into the bog and rose. Pink mornings this whole school break and all the bog grass was frosted. *Unprecedented ice cap melting will change the capacity of the global fisheries*– Shelly turned fast and shut the radio off. A mean storm was coming out to sea, and the gulls were pushing into the pines and dumpsters. "That lady's dying so," Shelly said. "Pretty soon I'll be done with that."

"Maybe you could get your nursing thing or whatever." Louella fingered the hot tortilla, wished for butter. Butter warm enough to spoon, to sprinkle Fruit Loops in, butter and cheese and cream. "Or take that job at Bev's store," she said. An egg or two, the yolk hot and dripping and the edge crisp. Bacon with a soft, white donut.

"Eat the tortilla," said Shelly.

"Why not Bev's. Why the cannery. That boy Mark Tripp works at the cannery."

"Who're you talking to that calls Mark Tripp 'boy?'"

Louella said that he was not that much older than her. He was twenty-one. He was twenty-one and worked at the cannery and if the other Tripp boys were anything to say about what the cannery paid then it didn't pay much. "They don't shower," Louella said.

Neither woman said, And do we shower much? What's pit-swabbing called, then?

Shelly said that you couldn't always know about peoples' lives. Maybe they were saving for college. Those boys had no parents. "It is no fault of their own," Shelly said.

Louella chewed a fistful of loops. "Jeremy Tripp is the dumbest kid–"

"Jesus, Louella. Worry is what makes a person dumb. Just worry." Shelly looked right at her daughter. Not like she was seeing her for the first time, but like she had seen her for a long time, and still could not believe some things. "Worry, Louella," Shelly said. "Worry is like

wearing sunglasses when it is dark and you are running a race and you wonder how everyone else is going straight and you're the only one who's falling side to side trying to find the route with your hands out in front of you on the walls and the walls are sharp, they cut your hands." Shelly stood above her daughter sitting in the hard chair. She asked, "When did you get so mean?" It was not a joke question. There was a life's worth of curiosity in there.

Louella stood and passed by her mother and opened the dark, dead fridge and looked through Harris' condiments for mayonnaise. Maybe they had missed something they did not know they owned, just had to know to look for it. "When'd you get so fucking lazy?" Louella said to the fridge door. There was still Thousand Island dressing, she took a sip.

The next day was Thanksgiving. Shelly and Louella wished each other happy Thanksgivings on the staircase carpet. Louella went to the bog to stand at its edge and watch a starving doe lip lichen for a long and frozen morning hour. The deer had a bad limp. Louella had looked for carcasses in the bog but found none. Slight snow fell as though something had ripped up there. When Louella went back in, Shelly was on the green sofa reading the same classifieds she had already read. They did not speak but used fuel and made hot water. They thought they might have a few weeks left in the white tank.

The newspaper was marked up in highlighter: yellow for called and waiting. Pink for called and no, but maybe it was a soft no so call again. Blue for men's work. There were no jobs for uneducated women in this small place until the tourists came back and needed their fish handed over in fry baskets and red-checked paper. Maybe they could quit the electric bill for a while. But the phone needed the electric. If only there was a fire place. Perhaps it was buried in the living room.

Chapter Seven

On a whipping cold December afternoon, Lyd and Sewall roared into the Harris drive unannounced. Lyd took it upon herself to lean on Sewall's horn until Shelly and then Louella appeared, because, Lyd said later, Sewall had sat there like a good dog waiting for his kibble. Louella fled down the porch steps to his truck. They did not seem to mind that she was an unkempt hag on weekend days.

Sewall drove them. Lyd chattered. "Ginny is a doll," she said. "She can read a person's soul just like that." Lyd slapped the dash. They were heading to Roy Lavender's house, to eat the ployes wise Ginny Lavender was making. And Roy Lavender was an old man who just wanted a young man to teach to lobster. "And Louella," Lyd said grandly, "let me tell you. Roy has always loved Sewall just like a son."

They slipped down the Holly Island Road, over the big island bridge, over a slice of blue Atlantic. Lyd sighed then. "Sewall, tell Louella how you and I used to play house and how you got me drowned nearly, making me fetch you dinner crabs from beneath this very bridge. Tell her about that, Sewall. Louella, isn't there nowhere so beautiful on earth?" The water curved over the globe's crest. Some white boats just then returning to offload catch.

Roy and Ginny Lavender lived in the cape across the Holly Island Road from the Goode house. Roy captained the *Ginny*, on which young Sewall Goode made all his money. The Lavenders had always been childless, but Lyd was right, they loved Sewall with all the hesitancy of parents who have lost a son and just barely gotten him back. Ginny seated Lyd between Louella and Sewall, all on one side of her big kitchen table.

On a yellow platter steamed a tall stack of hot ployes. Butter slicked each flap. The whole thing awash in Aunt Jemima's. Silvery Ginny set Sewall to work grating macintosh apples. "Watch your knuckles now," she said, a hand on Sewall's blonde skull. She slung three eggs over-easy on each of their plates and Roy's. Fuel for the start of the rest of their lives! A miracle the Lavenders were not wider than they were. "Watch your knuckles now, Sewall," Ginny said again, not two minutes later. Louella saw Sewall grin like a boy and her heart, whoops, fell in her stomach.

When the apple was grated they ate. Roy pulled ployes with a blue spatula and slapped the young people three thickies each besides their eggs. "More butter in the dish if you need it."

"Yogurt, too, if you want it," said Sewall to the young women, around a mouthful. In the way he said it and the way the Lavenders nodded while they chewed, Louella thought there was something like theater going on between those three. And none of them knowing how it showed, how much they enjoyed it.

Sewall asked if this was not the best year Roy had had since God knew when.

"Sure." Roy swallowed. He had a yellowness to his white beard that suggested spit stain or a blonde youth. "But the American lobster is running north." He waved his fork. "Don't it feel like we're in the midst of a stampede?" What would the dust of it be like?

"None of that," Ginny said. "Eat the meal."

"Ginny used to make us ployes every fishing day," Lyd said, "when the old boys were out in the winter and our mother's wanted nothing to do with us."

"Your mothers want everything to do with you," Ginny said. "They only need to forget they've gone old."

Lyd purred.

"She'd make cod cheeks too," said Sewall.

"Yes, ployes and cod cheeks."

"Have you ever had cod cheeks?" said Ginny to Louella. Was it kindly, how she asked? She looked too hard and too long at people, Louella thought. "Have you ever had ployes, Louella for that matter?"

She had not. Lyd cried, "Oh my!"

"There are no more cod," said Roy. They all turned back to their food after that. Louella's yolk ran under her ployes and turned them yellow.

"Forgive him," Ginny said. "He's just turned seventy and is a sour old man." But then she said that it was true. "There are no cod. I have recently realized," Ginny said to the young people, "that what I had mistaken for prolonged youth was simply the experience of being alive." She would be seventy-two in March. Hadn't she and Roy seen some things, from the cradle of their fifty-year marriage, here at the edge of water? She said it was like a continent splitting beneath your feet. "You hadn't realized it was split until you were swimming. Getting old."

"Nobody gets in the water by any accident," Sewall said. He was young, and thought he knew everything that he would ever know, which was quite a bit.

Louella laughed, until she heard very quickly that the jokes were done.

Ginny had a way of looking at low places when she spoke, as if praying. She liked to proclaim profundities. She would not look up until she was done. “Cells split to make a person, a fetus,” she said, “and people split later on to make new lives.” She had silver long hair. She mentioned the Protestants. Laughed her reedy, wet laugh. Her great-great-greats had been desperate people too. Perhaps from them she inherited the sense of drifting between land masses. “Sea sponges split. There’s always been different words for the same thing,” she said.

Louella listened. She eyed Lyd and Lyd, with narrow eyes, was nodding at everything Ginny said. Louella was not sure if she liked this woman Ginny. She did not know if this woman Ginny liked her. Roy served them all more ployes.

Ginny said, “When there is a little hate, between many other things, it’s hate. When there is only hate, it is something else, it is unhappiness.” Ginny laughed as though deeply pleased. Her laughter was broken and flooded and old. Ginny said she imagined her foremothers in the sort of construction-paper pilgrim hats you make in primary school. “Or maybe they don’t make those anymore. I often wish I could have tried talk therapy with them.”

Roy did laugh then. Ginny looked up, smiling at herself and her husband, who she had loved all these fast decades. Her old, sinking eyes went from Sewall to Lyd to Louella. She had pink eyelids.

Later, Ginny stood slowly. She began to clear the table of the syruped plates, a butter wrapper, knives and salt dish. She paused with a plate in hand. She said that perhaps she meant the Puritans. “I don’t know my god stuff that well.” Sewall leapt past her, for the sink and hot sponge. Lyd cried that she would dry. Louella stood and then sat back down and then stood again and dithered near Lyd and Sewall, as the one passed the dishes to the other.

**

Pads and tampons were expensive. The Abrahamses had begun, since Lamb's burning, to bleed monthly together. They cut Harris' flannel sheets to rags and washed their blood out into the sink. The rags were drying on the heating vents across the kitchen and the kitchen smelled strange.

Louella swallowed a chunk of beef. "How about I drive you," she said, "I can wait around. We can have a driving lesson. A good long one." She was pressing her mother about the Old Lady in Red Hill Gig. They sat on the green sofa side-by-side under all the blankets they owned, eating Lindy Doore HOT! HOT! BEEF n JALAPEÑO.

Shelly frowned over her bowl. When she opened her mouth, red cracks in her lip corners widened. "We'll drive sometime. Summer's better for learning."

"You said they're rich."

"They're richish." Shelly thought that what they liked about Shelly was that she lived far away. Thirty-five minutes between Goodesboro and Red Hill. "I don't think they'd like the idea of me knowing somebody."

"I'm your kid."

For a moment they only ate their stew.

Then Shelly said, "Wouldn't you like some cucumbers right now."

This was a game they played.

"I would like some grapes," said Louella.

In her Julia Child's voice, Shelly cried, "The Lindy and Rice diet, folks!" And held up her bowl like an offering to a collective power. She said they should write a cookbook, like the South Beach diet. They would publish it, get rich and live large, hire maids to wipe their own

assholes. The heat was set at forty-four. Lately they had both been a little backed up, which can kill an appetite as good as a cigarette.

Louella peeled back the blanket, shuffled across the kitchen in socked feet. Spooned another half spatula of rice into the bowl. She banged the spatula on the rice pot side. "You want more?"

Shelly blinked slow. Her clothes were loose on her. Under the blanket she looked older and sadder than she had been at Lamb's funeral. At the funeral she had been like a dog on caffeine.

Outside the sink window, around a hard-edged moon, all the stars pasted thick. Shelly leaned off the couch and the blanket gaped. "Shit," she said. "Shitty shit." She snagged the *Uncle Joel's* off the floor. "Maybe there's a kitchen table somewhere. Couple cute things."

Louella crawled back in the blanket and tucked her feet under but she left room wide enough between her and her mother that a baby might have sat there. Downstairs in the basement the furnace turned back on. It sat down there chewing the money that bought time until the warm season. Shelly looked up. She moaned but did not say, Ten cents an hour! They knew the math, they saw how the coins piled and made debt.

They flipped through the Free-for-the-Taking. Chickens and puppies and children's toys and a pin collection from somebody who had liked Reagan. Hub caps, hub caps in better shape than the other hub caps, a whole shoddy sloop, downed oak tree just needing to be buzzed + hauled, empty wire spools big enough to have been a table but when Louella said, "Look at those, though," Shelly said, "We are not that poor," which took the sweetness out of the looking. They turned the page and said nothing. Then they were in the Help Wanted and the page was

covered in Shelly's highlighter and the tidy pen marks scratching out everything. Shelly closed the *Uncle Joel's*. A cloud shot past the gibbous moon and the whole place smelled of blood.

"What are we gonna do for Christmas, you think?" Louella said. She licked the rim of her bowl. "Grandma's?"

They thought about Jacoba's fifty-dollar cards. She had been sending the bills like penance. The cards got sweeter and the silence got longer and except for inflation, the fifty-dollar bills stayed the same. Maybe go see her Christmas Eve. "I don't know," Shelly said. "It's a lot of gas, down and back."

Then they looked back through the Free-for-the-Taking with an eye for what they might shape up and give her, knowing they would never.

**

Thick blue eye shadow flaked off Louella's lids. She had a scalp of not-quite-rinsed soap, Shelly's woman cologne spritzed all over and the sense that that afternoon her life was about to change, for it was the Friday that she would meet Frank the Compensator.

She turned to look back at the Harris house like a tourist would, like she was just walking that road in dawn's first poke for the hell of it. When she climbed the bus stairs, Angela's brows twitched up.

Three miles of childless, houseless road bent between the Harris place and the yard of the Tripps. The Tripp trailer stood in the field adjoining the property of a large, rich farmhouse like an outbuilding for the gardener. The three Tripp brothers lived parentless. They were always dark-haired with a lack of washing and bruised under the eyes like something was punching from within. It was said, by Lyd, that Mark Tripp would buy alcohol for pretty girls and would not even ask for anything besides money, just meet them with the bag. Mark was handsome in the

way of large feral cats. Jeremy Tripp was too young or poor or sad to be anything but ugly. Ed was a tadpole.

Ed and Jeremy hunched up onto the bus, tripped down the aisle. Little Ed sat in the very front seat where the heat blew on Angela. He turned all the way around to see where Jeremy might sit, caught Louella's eye and hid. Both of the Tripps wore red sweatshirts over many other layers some sizes too big like accidental skins. SERPORT CANNERY, the sweatshirts read, with a white stencil of a dragger. Not everyone was the same type of poor. Not everyone was poor. Not everyone who was poor stayed poor.

The brick downtown flashed by, some people in that bitter morning hour out buying milk or toilet paper or cigarettes. When Louella thought of the man she was bound to meet that afternoon, her gut flipped over like a dead bird. Sun beat off the water between buildings. Against the door jam of Bev's Corner Store leaned shaggy John Day. She should ask Lyd about John Day's deal. If Lyd's mom knew if Louella's mom had ever sucked his dick. The bus pulled up Maple Street, towards the school building. Everything windborne flew fast.

Outside the bus doors, behind Jeremy Tripp, Louella called, "You not have water in your shower or what guy?" The call echoed around in the cold. Jeremy turned, passed his eyes all over her like a tongue between fingers. Waved a hand up in the air as if to say, I'm tired, girl. Aren't you? Then he was gone, into the school doors.

Lyd arrived, put her red lips on Louella's earlobe, sighed, "Thank god. I've been waiting all morning for you. Jerry Lavoie made love to me on Saturday night."

"Righteous," Louella said, shaking Lyd off.

Across the lot, the Goode siblings got of Sewall's truck. Dorothy made walls of her shoulders. Her chin went down towards her nipples like her neck could make the roof. But then

as if she was saying Pick it up now, pick it up, pick it back now, she picked her chin back up and looked over everyone's heads, out at the sun's early glare. Winter daylight shot her eyes. Like a martyr she glowed.

Who knew what whisper, what secret mingle, those two passed their mornings with. Rumor was they had both been hooked on cigarettes since the ages of eleven and ten. Some gossips even spread that the Goodes loved each other too much. They hunched together in wind and pine trunks. They moved in the ways of siblings. She wore his jacket. He bumped her along by the elbow now, gently, watching Louella the whole walk over.

Lyd's mint breath continued in Louella's ear. Far away, Sewall winked.

"Delilah is useless," Lyd whispered. "You understand the needs, I think. I mean I love Jerry, of course. And I don't know about you, Lou, but I need that sort of attention in the sack." She had Louella by her upper arm, those nails each prodding through jacket for muscle and bone. The hand tightened, just a tad, as Sewall drew near.

Once, Lamb had driven Louella and Marce into the frozen prairie. He had shot a red turkey. Marce had cried. Lamb pressed their hands into the turkey's warm innards. He built a little pale fire and she and Marce had sat on one side and he had sat on the other and did not speak again. Lamb had maybe always been a little frightened of Louella, too. The swoop of the thought rose like surf and crashed in her. "Lord," she said.

"But then," Lyd mused, "Love is not actually an affliction of blindness, is it?"

Sewall laid his arms across the girls' shoulders. Pulled Lyd and Louella to him, like how he moved traps. The whole body in it, fling the trap across a deck, another behind and more to come.

"Do they have boats in the grasslands?" Sewall wondered again. Far away, in town, a porch door slammed. "Come out sometime," he said. "Roy said he doesn't like a talker and I said you're not and he said he noticed."

"Has Sewall gone soft," Lyd asked. "Has he fallen for the new little town dollie?"

He pushed away from them. From the school doors he called, "Jerry said you got nice lips, just the right amount of them, Lydie, I mean it, he said that. Said there's not a lot of extra," he stuck his hands in crotch and waggled, "woo-woo flapping around. Sweet boy like Jerry wouldn't lie." His neck pink up through his hair, the ears red, the shoulders wide and then he was gone.

Lyd sang, "Our boys are fine boys, aren't they." But her words were sad on their edges like a wind at a changing season.

Then a fog came up the hill all at once. Those left outside turned to watch it. They were all much shorter than the fog. It touched their cheeks and would drown them if it could. The birds quit singing and the young folk fled into the school. People bore down, and began the long wait for spring.

**

The school day passed. The buses left. Louella waited, her gut clenching, stripping her thumb tip clean of skin. The track team trotted by, chattering, buoyant, tortured.

Delilah pushed through the school doors at two-thirty-eight. "Ah," she said, to Louella. A look of swaying seasickness to her. Her white skull rose up from her jacket like a vulture's.

"I'm meeting a family friend who knows about colleges," Louella said.

Delilah smiled. "Yes, you are," she said. She toed a maple leaf to red pigment. "So you and Sewall, huh. Big time lovers?"

"Sure," Louella said, "Why not. I had a lover back in Lokkertville and I'm just getting over him right and Sewall's cute so." Very cold wind came up under her jacket hem. She had wondered about doffing the shabby jacket, but if this man drove her out and left her somewhere on the rocks to die, a jacket of any condition would be intelligent to have. She had been this nervous for the Lokkertville homecoming dance, for every other girl but her had had a beau to take them. Might get maimed, alone like that on a gymnasium dancefloor. A similar sensation now.

Delilah frowned pleasantly, humming like an old academic. Quarter to three passed by. Up the school hill came a beater Saab with a sorry muffler, a man at the wheel peering out at the two girls through coke-bottle lenses and a brown bush of a beard. If it was that guy who was coming for Louella, she would turn around, hurry inside, lock herself in a stall.

But then behind it came a low, gray Mercedes, stealthy as a wolf who stalks a deer. And if it was for this Mercedes she was waiting then Christ it was good to be waiting.

The Saab humped to a stop. Delilah gave an arching wave. She folded herself in and kissed her father on the cheek. The Saab had pink and purple hand-painted flowers daubed all across the trunk.

The Mercedes waited a ways off. The man Frank sat upright in his seat. Louella thought, There's his wife, she's four wheels and a stick shift and he sits right in her, driving. He studied the Saab until it was gone around the hill's pines. When it drifted on, the Mercedes advanced and the old man climbed out. "Louella!" he cried, as if there had been no pause in the momentum of his arrival.

She waved a hand and made a sound that was perhaps a Hello.

He shuffled around the hood in loafers. Glanced once at the school doors and then popped the passenger door. The leather seat waited for her as if nobody else had ever sat in it. His loafers were the tasseled kind summer people wear in the cold season. He seemed to be made of many disparate parts. Blueing skin gone red at the cheekbones, white hairs scraped across the scalp, a small tight paunch and wealth all over him.

Then she was in the low-down seat and he was shifting gears next to her and the good car was moving. She looked back to from where she had come. A pink man she did not know leaned against the brick near an open emergency exit, a shoe off, sockless. His foot swollen like something dead, skin warped and purple. Little yellow shards of toenails at its edge. He stuck his foot in a snowbank and put his head back and let out a hot breath. Frank took them down the school hill. He thanked her for meeting as a grown child might thank a parent for something done long in the past. She looked ahead and saw that that stretch of the brisk Atlantic beyond the Goodesboro buildings was framed by Frank's windshield like she all of a sudden owned it.

**

"Are you a sugar-free girl?" he said, in the Goodesboro downtown. He had a way of speaking that extended the spaces between the words so that she might have fit in a sentence or two between each. He had bright teeth, pale lips. She wondered how old men shave wrinkled chins. Grab a flap and pull taught?

"I'm not a free anything girl," she said.

"Ah," he said. He laughed. "Ah. Ah. Could I buy you a soda? Would the girl like anything to nibble? Or is she a diet-girl?"

"Diets are for lonely people," Louella said.

"That," he said, "is fascinating. Do you really think so?" They idled in the half-mile strip of the Goodesboro downtown, outside the bar called Rimmie's, at which it was said most people found their future spouse.

Yes, she really thought so. His car was warm.

"Let's buy you a soda and a snack," he said. "And then we will go on a drive." He was, perhaps, Ginny and Roy's age. But the Lavenders were robust. This man was thin-jointed, his neck a gizzard in a soft sweater collar. He shut off the good car and the heat went away. They climbed out. She felt she had never been here, on this sidewalk before. She felt she was rocking on one side of a floating plank and this man was on the other and at any point he might see her fall. He held the door of Bev's Corner Store for her. He was taller by a half-foot. The arm of his sweater she brushed left an odd feeling on her wrist.

John Day at the cash register did not open his mouth when he spoke. The words came out of his cheeks or nose. His black beard trembled. "Louella," he mumbled and tipped his head and scanned the man Frank following her in with the wind. Shelly had said John Day had been in Vietnam and was still trying to come back.

"Louella," Frank said. "Louella then. A sugar soda for Louella."

She picked a coke and declined a snack, for it seemed inelegant to chew anything while the man who escorted did not. Save for his hands which took Frank's dollar, John Day did not move. But when Frank led Louella with her bottle in hand out onto the sidewalk, he followed them with his cigarettes and watched them sink back into the low car.

When they drove past him, Frank said, "You know that man."

And Louella replied, "Not very well at all." This was true. But somehow, in the saying of it, it became not true. Frank drove faster than she thought old men did.

He drove her down the Holly Island Road. Down over the island bridges. Down to where the Atlantic floods the fingering bases of old mountain. Where fishermen returned and made money from meat, the meat of fish and their own meat and the meat of hungry buyers. It was winter and so there was wind. The sun was heading towards busier places, white caps caught silver light. They drove between the houses of the Lavenders and the Goodes but it was as if those houses were emptied of people, bound for selling. At the parking lot of land's end, they stopped. She got out and walked to the scarp edge when he said that he would like to. The land was basalt. Great teeth broke every millennium into the sea. She did not ask why he wanted an energetic companion and he did not offer. She did not ask if she would get compensated and he did not offer. When the sunset flared and went dark, she found that she thought of the Harris house as home and was surprised. They talked for a long time. She could not, afterwards, say about what. She had answered all his questions. He had laughed at odd moments. When the dark came out of the water, he said, "Well then." He told her he would drive her home and he did.

"I'm good at math," she said, after they had turned onto Maton Bay Road. It had been quiet for some time. His headlights found iced trunks deep in the woods.

A mile later, he said, "That's a good thing to be good at." It sounded like he meant it.

"Right," she said. And then the bog in the dark flashed past. New moon. "Soon," she said and he slowed. "Everyone's pretty dumb about it. I don't know what their problem is. Here's good," she said, at the gravel edge.

"Sometimes it does feel that way," he said and stopped the low car. She waited. At the back of the drive, the kitchen light was yellow. In the dark, the Harris house looked nice. Just like a house. "Well then," he said and gestured towards the Harris house as if she might need direction. She leapt out. She thanked him for a nice afternoon. The galaxies thick enough to cut

to squares and sew to a quilt. She felt she had been gone a very long time. Shelly, she knew, was inside. She did not know what she would tell her. “Ah,” he called, as she made to close the car door. “You don’t want?” She bent to look. He had some bills in his hand. He swung one finger in a circle. “Come around,” he told her.

She walked about the car’s hot hood, into the empty road. She stood by his window. He waved the bills and reached out a hand and his fingers hooked her jean pocket. His old arm was very fast. He tugged her by the pocket towards him, and with two fingers shoved the bills in deep. His nails pressed into a tendon. “I might call again,” he said. Then he took his fingers out and she stepped back. She felt as if she had slipped on ice. He waved her away and she went. His tires flung gravel and he drove, very fast, east.

Shelly was in the kitchen. She stood with her head bowed at Harris’ stove, turned away from Louella, holding its white rim by her fingertips.

Upstairs, Louella stood in the center of her bedroom, and looked at its corners. She pulled out her new money from her pocket. She paused to hear who was listening. She lifted them to her nose. Downstairs it was silent.

Frank had paid her: one five, one twenty and one fifty. The fifty did not seem like money. It was too big. If she broke it would not go back together. She thought, I can have a man stick his fingers in my pocket all day for seventy-five bucks. If that’s what he means by energetic. Yes, I can. She prayed to something larger than herself that he would call.

Chapter Eight

Out on the water, off every shore, every living thing that could, hunted fish.

Louella stood before the can cupboard. Shelly sat on the green sofa. Shelly was five sticks and a head with yellow hair. Too flimsy to be stood up in a field to scare the crows. If she opened her mouth a person could shine a light through one cheek and see it glow red through the other.

"The cannery says soon," Shelly said.

"The cannery says when?" Louella turned. "I mean, I'll go to work." The Lindy Doore was gone and the cabinets now were very large. They checked the recesses often to see if new cans would sprout there. The remaining: 5 can peas, 1 small pull-tab POPEYE can, 11 can black beans & 3 can kidney beans, the glue of the labels peeling. The latter of which they had hoped they would not have to eat for neither did well with beans but they were eating them now.

"They're waiting for the season to open," Shelly said. "They're waiting for the fishing."

"You know you can lobster all year if you've the right boat?"

In silence sometimes things seem to sink. Trees put down roots and the human cannot hear. The lobster walks in silence for miles until the resting season. It is noisy to cut down a tree, to catch a lobster. On the stove white rice gurgled in the pot. Blue flame like a leak in the wallet.

Shelly said kindly that there was no boat for them ladies though she would have liked a sailboat and a rich dead uncle too. She was talking today as though she was the joking type.

"What if we go pick clams or something. Could sell clams," Louella said. She opened the rice pot lid. The steam went up and warmed her face until her face went very cold.

Shelly picked her feet up off the floor, tucked them under herself. The green couch had a few spills from their dinners. Food stamps bought rice and potatoes and non-perishable meat cans and last week they had bought carrots and celery and a head of lettuce but there were some weeks when the food stamp money did not go so far. Though some weeks it did go, some weeks it seemed to have split like oil in jars and bore itself over. Good supermarket deals. Louella took down one can of black beans, slid it across the counter. It nicked Harris' TREATS jar and stopped.

"Quahogs," Shelly said.

Louella turned the rice off. She looked at her mother. "I forget you lived here. Sometimes."

"I did."

The wind which in winter passed from the water drove along the Maton Bay Road and spilled out over the bog, charging the house broadside. Louella cranked the black beans open. Scooped rice into bowls and the steam wet her palm and chin. She poured in the beans and some black pepper. "I don't miss Dad," she said. As she said it, the awful lie of it choked her. "I'm done thinking about it," she said.

When Louella turned around, her mother was holding her own neck as one holds the head of an infant. Their eyes met a moment. It does not matter who looked away first. They sat side by side and ate the beans and the rice and sipped cold water from mugs and watched the kitchen floor.

"I don't think you know what missing is," said Shelly. Their stomachs began chewing the beans a second time and that was loud. Then Shelly said, "I miss having a kitchen table."

The Abrahamses looked through the latest *Uncle Joel's*. Shelly leaned over to her daughter, poked at the open periodical. Louella leaned away. "Here," Shelly said. Shelly's finger on a line that read: *furniture, junk to be curbed 1/5. Free just haul. 3 Old Nanticoke Rd Concord Vill.*

How they talked like two people reading scripts they did not know very well. What oomph Shelly had got in her words since Lamb died had died again. Perhaps grief's chatter was only a blip. Louella could not well remember the before, anymore.

"Could sell it," Shelly said. "Could get it and fix it up and sell it." She sat up straighter. Put some heft in herself. "He's got paint and stuff. He's got stuff." Shelly waved her hand towards Harris, sitting like a wee god in his living room. Harris cracked his neck.

"But he's got junk already," Louella said. "And the gas."

"His junk is cheap. We want the junk of better people."

"The gas," Louella said. "Won't it be a bad haul?" Concord was far. An hour inland and south on unknown roads.

"Someday Louella," Shelly said, "we've got to start living again."

Shelly kept her Sunday money in the jar Harris had labeled TREATS. Though they had found no fur in the house and the jar had smelled of nothing and there had been no crumbs inside. As if Harris did not know, like most lonely folk, that he might have to go out and get the thing he would like to treat. Twenty-seven dollars in this jar. A ten and three ones in Shelly's wallet. In the change purse there was now eight-dollars and sixty-four-cents. It was Wednesday, late in the month. The food stamps did not come until the third of the next. Shelly would not get

the hundred cash from the old lady's man until Sunday and maybe Jacoba would send another fifty but in the end they were two women who lived on a backroad and waited for things because there was only so many times a woman could ask the world to let herself help herself.

"What's gas cost?" Louella said. "There and back again."

Shelly thought. "Four maybe." Then she thought a moment longer. "Five."

Harris leaned his gentle bulk against the door panels. They had bleach-scrubbed the kitchen side of that door, amazed at the pink marble handle beneath the grime.

Shelly said perhaps they'd have a yard sale in the spring, when the cold broke and people went out driving on Saturdays. And whatever luster Shelly had had went away and she was thin as a chair again, that somebody had broken and left for the taking. Maybe she was kindling and would burn, if Louella was inclined.

"Nobody buys stuff in winter," Shelly said.

**

For Christmas, Louella made Shelly a necklace out of Harris' unstrung bait bags and sea shells. It looked overtly ceremonial, felt like a gift from a younger child and stank and itched Shelly's neck but she wore it. The sea shells had perfect holes, where someone's hard tongue had once punched through to flesh. Louella had thought of also giving Shelly her five dollar bill, but could not bring herself to part with it. And good thing. It was not the sort of present to bring a mother cheer. Shelly gave Louella an arctic driving lesson, an anklet she had owned as a girl, and an assortment of very nice teas. "Save the laxative one for a special occasion," she said. So the winter holidays had come and happened and passed.

On the first day of the new year, young Sewall Goode had Louella shimmed up in the middle of his truck's bench seat, Dorothy crammed in on the far side. Sewall was telling Louella about a nor'easter he and Dorothy had once slept out in. "An igloo," he said, "we made."

"We sat on the porch until ten," said quiet Dorothy. "Then we went to sleep."

"Shah," hissed Sewall. "She's too young to remember."

Way back in the frozen, windswept daylight of the open truck bed, Jerry and Lyd and Delilah crouched. Delilah was not the cuddling type but they all held each other for the truck was revving twenty-five through town on a day the porch thermometers had only pushed above eighteen at high noon. No icicles softened. Now it was nearing three o'clock and the twilight was bleeding in, pink as a fresh smack on pale skin. Jerry was perhaps the happiest and least frozen of the three in the bed, his either arm around a woman. Lyd had a firm grasp on Delilah's two hands perhaps for solidarity but more likely to keep that skinny girl from touching any abdominal bit of her Jerry Lavoie.

Louella saw John Day in the Corner Store. "There's John Day," she said. Something was caught in a heating vent, flapping fast like it was dying. John Day stood in the store window and watched them glide past. She thought she saw him smile. The exhaust made such a pretty blue plume. They were heading for Lyd's house.

Between Sewall's hand and Louella's thigh rested ten inches of throbbing air. Dorothy had her hands hidden beneath her backpack like if she could bury her head in a similar way she would have. Sewall slowed at a stop sign at the far end of the downtown half mile. His finger tendons yellow and his knuckles red-chapped and all of the hand clenched around the stick shift knob. Louella watched this out of her eye corner without moving her head. This is the version of sexual tension nobody enjoys. An old yellow Subaru clattered through the intersection.

Then the truck was moving again, and his elbow was resting on her thigh while he jammed the rig up into first though the elbow had kept its distance for the whole ride since they picked her up at the Harris house and Lyd had dragged Delilah out of the truck cab and into the truck back with her and Jerry, so Louella could get in and sit with Sewall, Lyd somehow saying all this without ever acknowledging Dorothy Goode. Sewall's unjacketed elbow dug Louella's scrawny thigh, digging enough to hurt. The poor boy's nervous, she thought. Doesn't know his own strength.

She wouldn't take his hand though. He needed it for driving. Though maybe if she didn't, she'd be sending a frigid signal. But who'd want to hold somebody's hand while their sister was hip to hip on the far side. But he didn't care, seemed like. And maybe the elbow was mature. Like they didn't need to hold hands to show anything. But maybe he was waiting. She didn't know what a man's hand felt like. Some fine blonde hairs on his middle finger. Where his elbow was digging would bruise to the shape of an eye wide open and watching.

Lyd slapped the back window like a seagull with rabies. Dorothy blinked. Sewall and Louella sucked their appendages back in towards their spines. Lyd tried to pry open the slider but it would not unstick. Muffled through glass and wind, she cried, "We are dying. We are dying in this life and we will be hypothermic in the next. Can you go freaking faster than fifteen on the nose, Sewall?" She was twisted around, kneeling on the bed's metal bottom. "I don't want to die for your date." Jerry then said something, and Lyd shrieked, and he got her around the waist and pulled her back down on his lap. "Bonerific!" Lyd squawked.

"She's not pregnant before we graduate, I will be goddamn shocked," Sewall said. The heaters dried their eyeballs.

Louella nodded like she wanted to make sure he saw it. “Horny dogs,” she said. “Horn dogs.”

Dorothy blew out a long breath. She rested her temple against the window.

Then the truck heaved into Lyd’s tarred drive. Lyd’s old man Paul Perry was in the living room window. Jerry leapt from the truck back, twisting in midair catlike to see Paul blooming out the red front door, bellowing, “You Sewall Goode! Do you know how many people I’ve known! How many people dead cause some moron wanted to show off his goddamn truck and put em all in the back and hit ice? You know how many, Goode?” And Jerry was landed now, near-crouching, his arms half stuck up maybe about to help Lyd down out of the truck but maybe just saying, It wasn’t me driving, sir, no, it was not, it was him, it was him with the truck and swagger. The yard full of midwinter snow and chickadees jollying the rhododendrons.

Lyd rose from the truck bed like the virgin Mary or Miss Blueberry Pageant. She began to weep. “I wanted to ride in the back, Dad,” she wailed. “Sewall said he’d make two trips! But I made him do it. I did!” She was near screaming.

Even the birds looked at Lyd. She wore old yard clothes but her hair was shampooed. But then, loyalty was a strange thing. It snuck up on folks and came slipping out their teeth. Could not choose easy who to be loyal to. No different than loving. Sewall was turned around watching her as if was seeing something pretty. The chickadees left.

Paul ogled his daughter, rearranged some things in his head. Then he turned and left the front door open for them. The furnace heat rolled out like caramels, and carried all six inside.

**

Killing cold, the kind that suggested the world thought it was time for a purge.

Louella crossed gravel yard, dressed in Harris' long woolies under jeans and her blue sweater. Shelly had found the woolies in the small hallway closet wrapped around a bust of the Virgin Mary. An orange hunting flannel and a DIGGER'S DIG LOUNGE sweatshirt of Lamb's and her parka over all of that. Louella waddled. She could not put her arms down. The wind bent her over, took her breath. She reached the road edge and turned around to face the Harris house. Gulls hunkered inside their feathers. The house and its windows looked like a white, wide-eyed, resolute and straining face.

If a window broke in that wind, how would they find money to fix it? They would not. Her teeth froze to her tongue. Asinine faith people put in boards and horse hair, the pink fiberglass insulation, tin nails, tar paper. Some agreement made sometime that whoever is outside won't come in. Often enough unbroken that people still believed it. She watched her delicate shelter, waiting for it to fall. One roof shingle lifted, bounced and then the wind threw it.

The yellow bus came chugging down the dark road. Louella climbed up into it. The wind rocked the bus. Angela squinted at Louella's forehead rising up into the yellow light.

"Cold one," they said to each other. Angela was a fine, strange woman. She talked to the riders like they too were worried adults. Everybody on that bus looking dumbfounded and squat. A cold jugular can kill a person, better to burrow in one's own flesh. After a moment, she quick-stripped the DIGGER'S DIG LOUNGE sweatshirt, the flannel and the hat and shoved them in her backpack. A bulging backpack was not a good look either but life was a series of swaps and she would not look like the cold trash that got picked up and bussed in from the outer towns. Not if she could help it. The bus shifted and jumped and made it through the wind to the Tripp trailer.

Young Ed Tripp stood there in things too big but warm with the extra air. Jeremy beside him in a Carhartt over a tee-shirt and skinny chest bones, the zipper likely freezing the cotton to his sternum. Ed climbed up looking like a sleepy quilt on legs.

Angela said to them, “Cold one.”

Ed sang, “Cold one! Yes, it is!” He was a good little kid with a fairy voice and fine cheek bones. Jeremy slunk up onto the bus and sat across from Louella. He shook but he was proud. He did not hide his neck. He was disgusting and poor. Everyone waited for the sun to rise like the spilled heat of an earlier time. Angela quit greeting folks. Nobody else was so layered. Maybe Angela knew something about bad cold spells, how the poor feel it more, you never get so warm at night, you wake with stiff marrow. But if she knew that maybe she knew shame and should know too that proud children liked to pretend cold was a momentary blip, not a seasonal disorder.

At the lockers in the busy hallway, Dorothy Goode wore a zany pink sweater. She wore mascara, something pink on her cheeks, red lips. She had done something to her hair, pulled it back. She had ears. She did not know how to stand, it seemed. She looked like a beautiful eagle someone had shoved into a costume. Louella took a look and then another and Dorothy caught her looking. A shuddering moment passed.

Laboriously, then, dolled-up Dorothy said, “Good morning.”

All the things Louella might have said presented themselves. “Good morning,” she said.

The two girls pretended to arrange their lockers’ insides.

Dorothy touched her hair. “Cold one,” she said. She smoothed her hand down her bright sweater sleeve.

“Yes,” said Louella.

"Are you settling in okay," Dorothy Goode asked. She had missed once with the mascara wand and painted her right eyelid. She eased her locker door somewhat shut and looked right at Louella and Louella looked back and saw how Dorothy and Sewall held their faces the same but how on a man it was okay to not be radiant at every moment.

Louella felt a strange thing then. A welling need to crumble and to wail and to begin to finally fall apart. It was like laughter. She plucked her thumbnail skin.

What unstoppable torrent would let rip if she knew how to say, I feel at every moment the sense that I have been covered by the shadow of something big and rolling towards me, too big to see where it begins and ends but I know soon it will hurt me, it will be bury me, I will be dead or changed when the whole of it passes over and I live always in this. Her heart thonked her sternum.

But she was not very brave. "Yes, obviously," she gasped. She hid her face importantly behind the locker door. She waited for Dorothy to move softly away.

Dorothy's hand snaked under the locker door. It rested gently on Loella's forearm, pressing. Then the hand whisked away and Dorothy too.

Lamb's goneness filled the space between her ears. It speared out her ears. Louella thought she might scream and so she covered her mouth and mewled. She stood there sweating and cold and strange and full of the thumping fear of feeling too much and wondering if she was going to suffocate until the hallway cleared. Certainly she trembled. No one stopped.

The sun kept rising. These children gathered in the cafeteria and watched each other chew. Louella ate her free-lunch breaded chicken sandwich and drank chocolate milk. Her head felt dislocated and fuzzy. She looked for Dorothy but Dorothy was not in the cafeteria. It occurred to her she might have said to Dorothy, Do you ever wish your shitty dad dead? It is not

so simple as that. After lunch, all the students scattered again and watched white marks appear on black boards. They listened. The sun began to sink. They piled onto the yellow buses and were carried home.

Angela called down the stairs of the bus, as Louella was stepping down onto the yard's gravel, "Stay warm now, dear, you hear?"

Louella turned, the wind caught her in the face and filled her mouth. She raised her large, black glove and spat the wind out.

**

She was an ignorant girl from a nowhere place. No doubt Frank the Compensator was looking for a Lyd. Outside, the fuel in the big white tank had gone frighteningly shallow. Louella woke on the green sofa. It was Friday again and Frank had not called.

Shelly sat close to Louella on the sofa. Louella leaned in, felt she might crush her scrap of a mother. But Shelly sighed deep and held her daughter close.

Louella, after a moment, shook free and rose. "Concord?" Her voice was rusty. "The table," she said, and gestured at empty space. Thick frost grew on the window pane's intimate sides. She and Shelly were both skinny sticks in someone else' fabric. Harris like a man kept them just warm enough not to leave.

"There's gas in the truck," Shelly said finally.

A sudden gust hit the southern side of the house, took the heat, ran with it straight to Toronto. Louella did not ready herself in three fabric inches to stand in waiting for the bus. Shelly did not tell her to. Like two new lovers, neither one knowing how to ask the other, Won't you stay? and Can't I stay? They thought about free furniture.

"So cold like this," Louella said, settling back in the couch. "Bet nobody else will go out."

Shelly got mugs out of the drying rack. A plate knocked a bowl. Shelly's wrist bones out of the jacket looked lecherously naked, how thin they were. "People are tough," she said.

"Well."

"They are."

"Why're you so skinny now?" Louella asked as if to ask was to curse.

Shelly paused and said, "I don't think I am so thin."

"You'd be warmer if you were fatter."

"I've plenty of fat." The water pot began to fuss. There was coffee in the air. Shelly wiped nothing off the counter.

"That's, Mother, just like certifiably untrue."

Shelly turned. She had coffee grounds beside her mouth. Skin like a bleached shell. "You and Lyd Perry, huh. Good buddies?"

They stared at each other. "You look bulimic," said Louella. "And not in some chic way, you know?"

Shelly wiped her palms on her jeans. She wiped her knuckles. She scrubbed her hands together. She said, "Is this mean thing the way you keep yourself feeling good? What is it?" The wind bent the bog pines and pressed the ice. Way east, the dust of the fallen snow glowed in sunrise. "Is it like, you feel bad about yourself, hun? Gotta be mean to everybody else? Cause let me tell you, that's no new trick. People see mean and they see right through that and wonder what's wrong at home. It's people who are nice that have got it figured out, how to trick. I mean

people see mean and they just feel pity and is that what you want, people just pity you, just say there's that sad girl, what's wrong at her house, huh?" Shelly had a soft morning voice.

She poured two mugs and held both at her blue-jacketed chest. Louella sat still on the couch under blankets. Shelly stood for a while longer and then shuffled in heavy socks with Louella's mug across the kitchen. She retreated, leaned against the counter, said that Louella should be thankful Shelly didn't have a problem, that she wasn't an alcoholic mother, wasn't a screamer, like Jacoba Orr was. "Don't you think it's weird, how Grandma Orr doesn't come except for that once to tell me how I've done wrong? Some people think they can pay and make up for what they've done to you–"

"Maybe if you had a problem," Louella said, "maybe if you had a problem, you'd have incentive to work a day. Walmart's hiring. I hear Bev hired John Day cause nobody else applied." Her voice went louder than the furnace. "Maybe if you were some drunk you'd care about getting the money a little bit more, wouldn't just be waiting on somewhere you can hide."

Shelly turned her mug in her hands. "Christ, Louella. Sometimes. You go work at Walmart then. You buy the gas and drive out there for a few bucks. You fix the truck when it breaks, driving that far everyday. Driving that far. Maybe if I was a drunk." Shelly swore softly. She looked out the porch window, at the truck, its cold metal. "Sometimes, Louella. We didn't shelter you. We didn't raise you to be a naive girl. But sometimes."

They faced each other across the old linoleum.

"You are missing a fucking screw," Louella sighed.

Their coffee water went cold. Worry like so many ticks, they let them crawl and hoped someday the ticks would just freeze too.

Shelly lifted one slow shoulder. She let it fall and took a drink. “You don’t need to do your hair to go. Not gonna see anybody for impressing.” Her head jerked towards the truck outside. “It’ll be warm once it’s running.”

**

Sun unpeeled in their rearview and the truck heaters were hot enough to make a cold person giggle. Blue snow gullied in the woods. With the sun rose the crows. The Abrahamses listened to WBFE. Shelly hummed along to a Greg Brown song and then began to sing way out loud.

The gas gauge was near half full and that was good enough for now. Louella watched the white moon hang out until it was resting behind the truck bed. She tried singing but not much came out until the chorus. She sang, “Got another boom town!” and Shelly turned her head and cried, “Oh yeah, Lou!” which shut Louella up. They took their scarves off. Unbuttoned their jackets and let their ribs warm. Louella rode with her fingers in the heating vents. As they got towards Bangor the roads got a little bigger and the Abrahamse women got a little quieter. The buildings changed.

The houses were like a well-rested people holding their shoulders back, their chins up. They squatted on their lawns, laughed at the little red truck. A man and a woman out jogging vigorously in bright clothes and big white sneakers watched the truck pass. They’d all no doubt been born lucky here. Along the roads the plow piles were brown. Good cars warmed in drives.

Louella held the inland roadmap on her lap. Shelly had turned the radio down. Two fists clamped the wheel. She said, “We’re on Brisbane, we need right on Colton then right on First then, and Colton’s a one-way, look for the arrows, then First then Old Hallowell Road which’ll turn to Nanticoke then the place’ll be on our right. A mile.”

Louella said she thought that they had passed Colton. “We weren’t supposed to do the roundabout.”

“No.”

“What’d you mean, no?”

“I mean we were supposed to go through a roundabout.”

A small time plowman went by with his yellow straight-plow lifted. They watched him pass, a thick man in a tee shirt and a black beard. He smiled down at Shelly, lifted two fingers. Another roundabout came under them and the Abrahamses careened through. Louella held on to the window handle for dear life.

“Oh, calm down,” Shelly said.

“Colton!” screamed Louella.

And they passed it by. Made a turn in a gas station with wreaths on the door. A man in a red jacket watched, and he, too, smiled at Shelly. The sun gloried on every sheet of glass.

“Those two get their beards done at the same shop,” said Louella.

The houses got further apart again. Some smaller. Some much bigger. Still mostly nice. The sun on a wide snowfield shone the color of Lyd’s coral lipstick. Black pines at the far edge. And then back into something resembling a town.

Shelly looked in her rearview, leaned close to the wheel. “We must have passed it,” she said and kept driving.

A hairy man carried a child’s pink bicycle by the tire over one shoulder, heading nowhere down the roadside. He frowned at them as though they had known each other a long time. The houses were old and beautiful. Electric candles guttered pompously in windows. In the drive of a blue spindly Victorian, there was a small pile of furniture.

"Alright now," said Shelly, as if preparing for a liftoff. She slowed, checked her mirrors.

"Don't go too deep," Louella said.

Shelly aimed for the snowbank and hit it. "You might have to climb out this side," she said after a moment.

Some comfortable looking people walked elegant dogs. The dogs were all the same breed. Big black loping creatures. The people said hello to each other as though they said hello to each other like this every morning.

A thickly bearded man approached the red truck carrying an ice auger over one shoulder. He swung a yellowy gutted cusk on a gaff. He walked with thin legs and big boots and his step seemed to cover greater stretches of the globe than most. He passed the truck, the auger point caught sun and passed even with Shelly's face. Then he swung around and leaned close to the truck window and cried, "Not from here, are you!" His nose flared, his winter lips stretched as if to crack. He had not slowed, he walked on. Behind the truck he tapped their plates with the auger tip. "Not nearly from here at all," they heard him say. In the rearview they watched him trip away down the snowed sidewalk.

"The hell," Shelly whispered. He had been sitting in snow, it seemed, and the ice of it was crusted up the backs of his denim. "The very hell."

"Everybody looks like dad these days," Louella said.

Shelly sat beside her with her jaw unslung, watching.

"That was a hog of a cusk," Louella said, a moment later. She climbed out over the stickshift, tumbled and righted herself in the street.

**

The junk was fine junk. Shelly glanced again down the road but the bearded man with the cusk was gone and had not yet been replaced by another. It was not junk. It was dainty bedside tables with good curved legs, a ruffled, flesh-pink armchair, dark shelves with deep enough reaches to house small mammals, a painting of a winter harbor, every single boat well-kept, kitchen and blue dining chairs, a cream settee and a footstool with strange faces painted on, many lamps, a plastic bin full of cloth or curtains or something else they could use for anything they wanted.

The Abrahamses hesitated by the truck. “It said free,” Shelly said. She twisted the truck keys. She put them in her pocket. “It did say free.” She let a breath go out white and fogging.

The front door of the house then swung open. Glimpses of a heated red hall, a banister’s curve. And then a man in low Bean boots and no jacket came fast-walking down the steps holding shieldlike a pink sign on wire feet. He stuck it in the snow and it swayed and said *FREE for the TAKING!* Someone had made a smiling face inside the ‘for’ but their hand might have been unsteady for the mouth curved down on one side as if the smiler had just then given up pretending. The man retraced the slim shoveled path to the house.

The Abrahamses braced. They walked towards his good furniture. There was a kitchen table in the middle of it all. Louella felt Shelly catch herself from running. They approached the table cautiously and stood on either side. The man, his hand on the door latch, called out, “It’s a good little table.” He told them to watch for a weak leaf. He told them to give a call if they needed help. Then he opened and shut the door behind him.

“Okay,” called Shelly, to the red door. Of course they would not call.

"Fold down that leaf," Shelly said. "Fold it down and pick it up. Let's go." Her eyes flicked up to the house. There was a sense of stealing. There was a sense of getting away with it.

They carried the table through the snow, let the truck gate down and somehow flipped the table onto its top, though it had been a heavy tree. The legs cleared the truck bed cap by a tooth. There was room for more. They took the bedside tables. Some smaller shelves. Of the bigger shelves, Shelly said, "We should have brought rope, dammit." There was a rag rug rolled up, they took that too though it was heavy as a drowned body, would not stay together in their hands. They took the curtains, the book boxes, there were plates in one, they put it in the front and Shelly was laughing, "You'll have to ride with some lap stuff." The sky wide and blue, they were not so cold, moving fast like this, their hands and forearms aching, like the rising sun had lit the possibility of a good time back up.

When they turned again, a little girl in a fine red wool jacket was crawling up into the pink chair on her knees. The jacket reached her little snow boots, her hat was red and pointed and her mittens matched it all. A woman watched her, wearing all of the same fine mittens and coat and hat except they were black and severe. They were beautiful, this small daughter and elegant mother. A different type of blonde from the Abrahamses.

Out of the house again came the man. The Abrahamses watched him approach the woman from the truck bed. "Just trying to move on with it," they heard him say. Sound went far in the cold air. They stood besides the truck back in their many mismatched colors. Bright scarves and hunting hats. The blue jackets worn brown at the cuffs, food-stained.

The black-jacket woman nodded at the man. She said that they had been thinking of him. "We still can't believe it."

The man looked back at the house. "Interesting time," he said.

"Isn't it. Of course we've been thinking. We've been thinking." She touched his shoulder. He raised his hand and held her mitten there a moment. They were not dressed for the weather, but did not seem to be cold. The child cried softly, "I do like the chair. This one I'm in, Mommy." And the man in his good cableknit and the Mommy pale as a birch leaf in her long black coat turned from each other. The Mommy told her daughter that the fine junk was for people who were not them. "Other people," she said, "not us." She turned back to the man. They did not speak. The woman glanced once towards the Abrahamses. The child sat in her chair and stared at her booted feet hung off the chair edge. She is young enough to become any kind of person, Louella thought. The thought struck Louella dumb. She herself was not so young anymore. It frightened her.

Louella and Shelly turned, bent into the truck and rearranged their taken things. When the rich were gone again, the Abrahamses snatched the pink chair. Hungry dogs take carcasses from hungry dogs like this. The chair fit perfectly. They drove.

"Sometimes," Shelly said, at a stop light. "Sometimes when I'm driving and I'm feeling how I'm just sitting in the dent Dad made in the seat and my hand's touching where his hand wore down the leather. And it makes me feel unclean. It makes me feel unclean and stuck. Like I can't get my skin clean, Louella."

"I've been thinking lately those grief counselors don't know shit about being sad for somebody you don't want to halfway be sad about."

"Oh Louella." Shelly turned to her daughter. "Louella, but I'm never not sad. God, I'm never not sad. I'm a widow, for christ sake. No woman my age expects to be a widow."

"You're sad but it's dirty, you're saying."

Her mother just stared. “Aren’t you sad? Aren’t you, Louella. God, Louella. Aren’t you sad, too?”

“I didn’t say that. I didn’t say I wasn’t. It’s green.”

By the time they reached the Harris house, the sun was flat and warming the ice. There was still gas in the truck. The table was scarred by the truck bed. One of the leaves was weak. But they were only two women, and did not need both.

Chapter Nine

Louella rummaged in Harris' room. He stood at her shoulder and said, "If I suffered and no one saw it, what was the point of it then?"

She unearthed a carton of small figurines. Pink-skirted dancers, Lego men, crocodiles, et cetera. They sat in cobwebs. "I bet you lured kids in, you lonely old fuck," Louella said.

To which Harris said, "It is easier to hate, isn't it."

Shelly was gone. "I'm off to wipe that old body down," she said every Sunday. As if the body's oldness was catching and she had caught it and she could not believe that she would go back to do it again. Sometimes the woman told her to read Whitman out loud. "You don't really know how to read, do you," Shelly said the woman once said. The woman talked often of her long good life now ending.

The phone rang and Louella hissed at Harris and leapt for it.

"This Friday," Frank said. "A drive, you and I?"

**

The week went by. On Friday, she waited again outside the school doors with Delilah. The buses filled and shoved off. Delilah asked, "That guys knows a lot about college, then?"

"Sure does," Louella said. "He was that Mercedes when your dad got here."

They stood outside with their jackets unzipped for it was twenty-five degrees or so and windless. Delilah's father arrived. Delilah quit biting her thumb. She wiped her hand on her jacket and said, "Learn lots, then." She moved like her backpack might soon break her. She was succeeding this week in disappearing herself. Her father looked out at his starving daughter. Fear in the love all over his waiting face. What have I done to make her?

Frank arrived some ten minutes later. They drove to Bev's and he bought her another sugar soda and John Day said, "You can put out fires with Mountain Dew."

"Keep the change for your donation box," Frank said.

They returned to the car and Frank wondered if Louella might not like to see a different part of the coast. She said, "Oh yes!"

He drove them far away. They took the Maton Bay Road the long way around and passed over the very tall Maton River Bridge. It cast an arching shadow some hundred feet below, far away across the water. The water was greenish in winter. In storms the ocean pushed the flow back on itself like a crowd overwhelming a crowd.

"I've always wondered about the engineers who designed this bridge," Frank said. "It is unnecessarily tall."

"Tall ships," she said. For this was something stuck in her memory from Mrs. Howes's history. That tall ships once offloaded marine catch to the Goodesboro wharfs. That loggers once

cut logs and quarriers granite and icemen ice and all carried the goods out to trade at the ocean's edge.

"This river is a foot deep in places at low tide," he said.

"Maybe they dredged a channel through," she said. And he turned his whole head to look at her and said nothing. She thought she had better not be contradictory again for that was a dull thing for a girl to do. She would not be dull but shiny. Two herring gulls caught an updraft splitting on the bridge rails and winged over the windshield.

They drove for several minutes. Then Frank asked her about her friends. She told him she had many great, deep friends here. "But Marce Telhaney back in Lokkertville is my best friend still. We talk all the time on the phone. She told me last week things don't feel right since I left. She's going to visit soon, here." He asked her about her Lovers and she spent a furious half second deciding if it was good for a girl to have lovers or if she should be of the virginal energetic sort. That she was a virgin was besides the point. "Oh, well. You know," she said, and laughed Lyd's laugh. He said that he did.

They passed a field of jack pine that seemed to never end. Then it ended and they were driving a white mounded cleft above water. Around the curve of the globe in the direction she now looked, it was night. If he left her for dead on this drive, she thought, she had her bearings. Follow the coast until the Maton River.

They drove fast through a town with redder brick than Goodesboro's, newer pavement. She smelled browning garlic. He told her about his moving here. He told her that the house he bought had once been down at the harbor where they were headed, but he, since he was a boy her age, had liked to have a view. "So I hauled," he said, "the house up the hill." Flashingly, she saw

her and Shelly and this man Frank with ropes taught over shoulders, yanking the Harris house up the blueberry hill.

They pulled into a snowy lot at a working harbor's edge. “This is where the house was,” Frank said. It was now an empty yard stuck high with lobster traps and a statue of a fisherman and his wife and his child. “I rent them this lot for their junk,” Frank said. They sat in the car. Beyond the lot was the wharf and water. White bluffs rose sharp on the far side. The harbor swelled with a gone boat’s wake. At the quiet lobster car, two men bent in yellow slicks and offloaded lobster. The men moved bodies and hands as though in dance.

“It’s a rowdy harbor,” Frank said. The globe turned and night came around the bend.

He drove her home. In the dark at the gravel edge, she leapt out of the car and came around to his window and he laughed and said, “Turn around then, quick learner.” When he lifted her blue jacket to stick his fingers in that new pocket, the night air swept up her backbone.

**

She woke in the night and rose and ate what there was to eat which was rice, canned spinach and Thousand Island dressing. As best as she could, she dressed for bad weather. In her jacket pocket she placed a fifty dollar bill. Coyotes yipped way off towards the Tripp place. She put her ear out the kitchen door and all was bitter and still. No moon but the stars shone on the yard ice. She heard wavebreak. Cold fell down her eardrum.

And then Sewall Goode in his truck came around blueberry hill, cut his headlights and pulled into the drive with a crash of frozen gravel. She fled the house.

His truck was warm. He was quiet as her that morning. They drove down the Holly Island Road and then the Atlantic split open on either side, and there was nothing but the dark before dawn and their headlights and the headlights of other fishermen going to fish.

At the wharf, below blueish rimy lamplight, unspeaking men shoveled frozen pogy fish from troughs. Pickling salt grated wood under the shovels. When she and Sewall walked up, every one of them looked up at her between one shovel scoop and the next. Then they all looked away and tossed their silver fish to bait trays. Down at the lower dock, three boats waited to fish.

Roy Lavender had the same bend to his nose as Sewall. He was a tall, soft-speaking man, looked Louella in the eye like somebody might look at a nice, sturdy daisy. Everyday he wore thick red suspenders. He limped and greeted Louella kindly like it was no big thing for her to be there at all.

It was not the coldest morning of the winter but it was cold. She crouched in her old jacket, studied Sewall shoveling bait under the wharf light. The shoveling men took off their jackets. Their necks steamed, their brows wet. Some men came and stood close to her. “It’s cold out there.” Did she know? They gave her cigarettes in the stairhall of the wharf office and she learned how to smoke them. Some men made like she was a pile of buoy line somebody had left in an inconvenient place. She shrank back, surged forward.

High tide had lifted the gangway to the lower dock until it was nearly flat. At the lower dock, the *Ginny* was messier on the stern deck than the other boats. Louella’s heart yammered. She called to young Sewall across the wharf, “What can I do, Sewall?”

Some men smiled, some looked away. The wharf light pulsed. He looked up grinning, his shovel kept going on its own. “You’re for standing there and trying to look pretty as you can for these men of the desert, little girl!” he cried. It was a strange thing to say. He had learned it from a John Wayne movie.

She tried to be pretty. Roy sat slow beside her. He told her not to worry about the cold, that the fo'c'sle was warm. He asked if she got seasick.

She didn't know.

After a moment, Roy said, "He being good to you?"

He most definitely was.

Then Sewall and Roy heaved the bait baskets onto the stern and those three took the *Ginny* out to sea. The sea moved beneath the boat and she moved above it.

She baited the irons with Sewall. "Twelve traps to these offshore strings," Sewall said. "Twelve irons a trap, five pogies an iron, get them through the hard bone there, or else the meat will rot and the bait will fall away and feed something for free. Yes, like that, but faster, you've got to be fast. Not through the eye, through the cheek bone. Not through the stomach fat, that will rot and break first. Yes, through the bone, another. And another, another. Another, another. We need twelve now, we'll need twelve again, and then again, and all day we'll need another twelve until the day is done."

The sun rose in her chest. It came out her throat and stood in the sky.

The ocean was a wide place and it seemed she knew how to ride the winter swells. Dawn was red, sea smoke orange. It was deep cold out there. The three did not speak much. They hauled traps and the traps were thick with lobster. Some people believed these boom years would always be.

Sewall showed her how to band the big claws. "Take the lobster by the back, yes, take that hen there. If she's clipped onto another, set her down for a while and she'll forget. Take the lobster by the back in your left, wary of the claws, they won't feel good, take the bander in your right, get a band on it and stretch it wide, turn it like so, and the claw inside and done and now the other claw and done and slip her into the tank to wait with the rest and keep going, you have to keep going, there isn't time to think like that. Yes, nice, Roy, I think she's going to be sore in

the morning, don't you think? Put your hands in the hot pot if you can't feel them. You lose a pretty little finger to the cold, you'll be useless. But keep banding until then. Keep working. And when it's done there's the baiting irons, you've got to remember them, they need baiting. Yes, through the cheek bone, not the eye. But there's more to band, so band, get the lobster out of the cold air, they don't like it, band and then bait."

She worked. When the sun was high they saw that the thermometer read sixteen degrees fahrenheit and she wondered how she was not yet dead. The lining of her gut was cold. She was not seasick. Roy told her how when Sewall started coming out he'd get so sick he'd vomit until his eyes were black under like he'd been beaten, but he'd keep working, Roy hadn't ever seen anyone work like Sewall. He said it how a father who loved his son would say it. Sewall kept banding as if he could not hear.

Something like weather was rising in her. A type of certainty. She baited and baited and the water rocked her and what had been yapping in the front of her head all her life settled down like a young dog gone old and finally to sleep. "Christ all mighty," she said to herself, beside the blapping exhaust pipe. The rising sun spread itself and paled. Waves lifted yellow water. The weather slipped out her eyes, she could not say why, but in that cold wind, anybody might have cried. She was happy or perhaps, for a moment, calm.

**

Deep below the Atlantic's surface, a dogfish chomped a hole in a moon jelly. Then a string of lobster traps zoomed past, startling both creatures.

The traps birthed upwards out of water. The bipeds in the boat could see pretty fast if they had caught money. At half past nine Louella asked if she might bait some. "Couldn't that be useful too?"

Land was a little black smudge of tree and rock.

Sewall said, “But you’ve got to be fast about it. It’s a lot of traps.”

“I’m fricken fast, Sewall.” She did not look at him. She looked at the rope coming up, coiling out of the hauler block, waiting for the marks that would tell halfway, feeling, not looking at the lobster in her hands. Yes, like him, she could shut off the thinking part of her and move. She had been pinched and it did hurt. A big one, Sewall and Roy both said, would wreck an ungloved pinky. Sewall delighted to tell her. Roy full of a settled worry. Having lived long enough to see how people get hurt.

“Roy,” Sewall called. “Hey Roy. The girl wants to work.”

Roy looked at Louella. “Is he making you bait?”

“Can’t make me do shit.”

Roy turned into the cabin. The trap rope’s halfway mark came spitting out of the hauler block and she called, “Halfway,” and Sewall laughed. But Roy looked and said it was right. A billion unseen plankton clogged each wave.

Up came the trap. She watched Sewall pop the door. Thick with lobster, anemone, a lumpfish. “Bait,” Sewall said. He danced with the trap. The motion was pick up measure toss bug keeper Pick keep her keeper pick up bait bait it now. She hesitated. “Bait it now, goddamn. Bait!” Sewall’s face hounded like a dog you wished you had not kicked. “Bait right now!”

She stepped forward. The baiting iron kabob stacked with five pogy through the cheek bone. “Well fucking show me how to do it then fucking Christ all mighty Sewall Goode!”

Smell of deep clay sea floor and salt on wet stone. It was the first best day of her life. She was not so fast with the baiting but it would come.

Later, quieter. Big greening foamy swells out there. “Sue?” she called to Roy, threading an iron and pulling it free and shutting the trap. “You call him Sue?” She put back her head and whooped. She stood on top of the water.

Smiling Roy said the girl might be baiting faster than Sue soon. “Look how her hands go.”

“She’s not having to stack the traps too though, is she?”

“I’ll friggin stack traps.”

“Those weigh more than you, little girl!”

Roy said, “Put that buoy in the hot pot, Sue.”

He did.

When they were done, when the wind turned and the waves had tried rolling up the stern once, they had hauled one hundred and forty-four traps and caught five-hundred-and-one pounds.

Sewall looked at her like he did not want to know that she could work like she could.

Roy said kindly, “Come back anytime.” He liked how she did not talk much.

Price per pound was $3.55 which was good, and after bait and fuel Sewall made his twenty-percent which was $379. Sewall would buy her dinner for her efforts, he said, flushing. “You can shower at my house.” Sewall gaffed the mooring line, they anchored the *Ginny.* The sun slipped away.

Louella and Sewall walked back up the Cove Road. The road rocked beneath her. They were crossing the Holly Island Road when Roy drove up in his truck fast behind them. He leaned across the passenger seat, cranked down the window.

Stuck a hundred-dollar bill out into the breeze at her.

“You come back anytime,” he said again.

She thanked him. She did not not take the bill. A little necklace hung from Roy's rearview. His wedding ring on it and a twig bound in seine twine, swinging. Louella said that it was okay. "It's all in fun." She stepped back from the money.

Wind tugged the hundred's green edges, Roy's hand a thick white paw.

Sewall said, "Well go on. Don't insult the guy." He snatched the bill and her hand and shoved the money into her palm with two fingers. All of it rough and quick as vaccination.

Roy still leaned across the truck seat, watching. He did not ever smile much.

She thanked him and was ashamed. Roy nodded and drove away to his yard some fifty feet on, tires full of clacking gravel.

She shoved the bill far down in her pocket. It was an exorbitant sort of charity, she thought. But, Jesus Pete, she had a hundred and fifty dollars in her pocket.

Dorothy Goode nodded hello from the living room couch. She was reading a book called *The Myth of the State*. The Goode house smelled closed. A taut misery hung everywhere like sheets. Or the place just had bad lighting.

Sewall's mother, Holly Goode, gave Louella clean clothes and called her beautiful. They stood in the kitchen and talked about the fishing day. Louella toed a soft spot in the linoleum, saw the collected bits of living on their window sills. It was a nicely kept house, she thought, full of seaside knickknacks of children now grown.

"Look at these elegant arms," Holly called to her daughter. She smoothed Louella's cold head. Holly's hand traced the neck's tendons at their joining to the skull, as she might an infant. Holly herself thin-limbed with a small drinking gut. She had a gravity to her face and a hardness to her words like her mind was going faster than most other people's and the work was in slowing herself down to match the common march. Holly said, "Don't wreck them now, fishing,

these elegant arms, a girl pretty as you should keep her elegance long as she can." She squeezed the tired shoulders.

Louella took a very hot shower and looked at all the Goode's shower bottles. It was a rich shower, all these different soap brands.

**

"I am sick with the worry," Shelly spat. She stood in the hall with the bathroom door handle in her fist. Shelly said this thing about sickness and worry often. There was an apology in it that scared Louella. She thought she would rather be slapped. The fuel tank outside was just about empty. It was a Sunday.

Did Louella know, Shelly asked, that it cost an extra twenty-five to have the oil guys deliver less than a full tank. "Do the math on that, Louella. Do the math on that, you figure out how those guys make their money. Poor houses with shit insulation and twenty-five extra a pop."

Louella tried to find the same venom her mother had but her worry came out like boredom, dull and too wide to leave.

Shelly snarled and shut herself in the bathroom and the shower blasted on. It seemed lately that everyday of electric and water might be their last but those things kept going as if there were angels in the payment offices. Outside, a January rain was freezing the snow down to ice over all the trees and birds, the furnace limp and quiet in the cellar. In a moment, Shelly thrashed the shower curtains dry.

The Abrahamse women waited in the Harris house as people wait on a vessel for the eye of the storm and then its edge. When Louella was born, Shelly had waited in a similar fashion. Louella suckled from her in a closed room. Shelly did not leave the bed. She believed calamity was coming for them both. For a time she believed in a way she could not put into words that the

calamity lived within Louella's small body. Already then, they regarded each other as two stricken fawns.

They had taken to apologizing to the other often. For spilled rice. For the kitchen door opening to admit a body and the chill. "Sorry," they muttered, waking the other in the cold mornings. Sometimes Shelly wept, and would say, her face up towards god, that she wasn't asking for Louella to be sorry. "I'm the mother. The mother. You are my daughter."

Shelly emerged from the bathroom pulling a plastic shopping bag from her head. Briefly, under the white of the bag, she looked very much like a version of herself as an elegant old woman. Louella rose from the kitchen sofa and went out onto the porch before either one might feel the need to speak.

Shelly paced the kitchen, smoothing her hair. They both smelled of Citrus Bang! dish soap. After a while, Shelly came out rattling Lamb's truck keys. "I'll be back before the road ices." Then she left. Lamb's old truck reversed hard into the quiet road, and eased eastward.

"Don't ever tell her how you feel," Harris boomed. "Shameful that you love her like you do, isn't it." He spoke like memory in Louella's ear drums. "You see you might not know an iota of what love is at all."

Later, she went into the swamping January day. Drizzle piddled everywhere. She trotted to the mailbox, nakedfooted in snowboots. Wet chickadees gusted from the roadside, shattering water. One old car had gone by half an hour earlier with something metal and significant dragging. There had not been a sound from the road since.

Inside a bundle of coupons for Thomas J. Harris was a pink envelope card from Jacoba Orr. Louella fingered the envelope and stretched sore shoulders.

On the card, a fat puppy dug a hole in a flower bed. *Somebody's gotta do it!* The fifty dollar bill tucked inside, folded halfway. *It's a dirty job, but I love you!* Tulips rose from the ground, snapped like wrists.

She held the fifty between two fingers. "Good goddamn jesus son serving riddance!" she shrieked to the fleeing chickadees. She coughed. Her voice filled the whole world and then sank to nothing. She shoved the fifty dollar bill in her jean pocket. Far away, quiet rain touched the ocean's skin.

Towards the bog an eagle took flight. Dark wings spread easy against the sky. Louella cut through the rotting snow to the place it had left.

She squatted in the style of children with good knees, serious in play. Her hips ached. She looked around once more. Watched the road and heard no truck. She buried the pink puppy card and envelope deep, deep, deep beneath a knob of grass root. A sharp root pierced beneath her nail and she gasped. From the bog rose up a terrible smell. Something meaty and fermented.

So she ran, leaping, flapping arms, back on the deer trail back to the house, hand in a fist around the fifty. She kicked off her snowboots and went upstairs, and with soiled hands laid the fifty with the hundred, the fifties, the twenties and the fives, where she had stowed them under her peeled-up bedroom carpet. Money was a new food that fixed something deep in her. She must have more.

**

Frank asked her slow, soft questions.

She said, "It's my mom and me, Dad's dead. You know how?" Looking once hard at him, as long as she could. Digging at a hangnail. Gambling that abrasive was a good substitute for energetic.

He smiled like a politician at a ribbon cutting for a prison and asked her how.

"Explosion. Refinery. Up north. Midwest. That's where we come from, my mom and me. Prairie."

He laughed a small laugh. She thought she should too.

"Hm hm hm hm," they said to each other.

She could not get herself to ask where it was they were headed this time. Perhaps she felt like she had already arrived, riding a machine sleek as a woman.

The whole history of the planet had shaped the slips and swoops of that stone coast and of those two driving it. They zoomed past a slew of mobile homes grouped together in the softening light. All blue roofs but one, red, in shadow. It had been another warm day, and if she had to walk back these miles she would run. She asked him what he did for a living.

"I've been lucky all my life. Now I am retired."

Perhaps he had won the Powerball in a good year. Maybe he had beat prostate cancer.

"You from here?" she asked. She worked an elbow between the seat and the car door and kept it there, a nice squeeze. She smelled her armpit and tugged on her elbow. As he was saying that he was not from here, no, not at all, her arm came loose. She nearly punched the dash.

He turned his head to her and frowned. "I'm a fine driver," he said.

A patch of bigger houses went by between new growth birch. One with Christmas lights still strung along the gutter. As she watched, a man came out of that house with a collie and opened a car door. In the mirror she saw the dog leap in and the man shut the car door and go back into the house.

"Why'd you move here?" she asked. He did not answer. She took a peek at his ear to see if a hearing aid was sticking a leg out, but only saw loose, lotioned skin. She thought of brush

bristles scraping, tearing the tissue of his scalp. A little louder, straight at his ear, she asked again, "Why'd you move here?"

He turned full towards her. The low car slunk along as though driving itself. That milky smile. "Louella," he said, then let her eye go and turned back forward.

They passed into Red Hill's downtown blip. Red velvety ribbons fluttered everywhere. Inside restaurants, warm people ate slow, holding their glasses at the stems and listening to each other. Perhaps Frank and Louella were about to go eat slow, go hold their glasses like that and talk about books and politics. She could tell him about lobstering and oil.

A few folks in nice long coats walked the sidewalk together, looking like a family. They mingled, they held each other, they laughed beneath one shivering tree.

Then the young, curly-headed mother turned her head and watched Frank's car, a hand to her mouth. Her family walked on but her small daughter ran to her and hugged her about the thigh, pulled her towards the man who waited. The woman's pale face had changed as though the wrong rope had been cut.

When he saw Louella watching this family, Frank said, "Aren't people strange."

They drove on.

"I've lived several places," he said. "This one is the quietest and people don't talk about their money here. Or it is not the same money. Not the same talk, anyway."

Maybe he had never been worried if he had always been lucky. Worry crawled in and stained Louella's head. She did not know if he and she used the same money.

They did not return to his empty lot on the Red Hill Harbor but cruised up a wide road into a deciduous forest. They rose above the whole white-chopped Atlantic. Something swooped

down onto her, held her by the womb and pressed in a bad way. The car pulled them up a steep hill. In the deep ocean, a young porpoise played in the wake of a great war vessel.

"Must be hell in storms," she said. "This hill." Her head sloshed with the blood of her stomach. She was squirming and frightened but could not say why.

He agreed enthusiastically. She noted that talking about the state of the roads and bad weather was good. Men did like the physical, Lyd had said.

The houses gained acreage and height, electric candles pulsed in windows. Frank's hands turned the wheel and the car settled into the very long drive of a house set back from the road. Empty rose bushes shaking in a wind. She saw money.

**

She had once wanted to be a fairy princess. She had thought it was possible. As the red door swung shut behind them, she remembered how certain she had been that magic was real.

The walls of his entryway were a rich man's soft white. Like pearls in flesh, lamps dug into the ceiling. Neither Lyd Perry nor Marce Telhaney had likely been anywhere so good.

Frank slipped off his loafers and put on other loafers. Scarlet socks covered feet that did not seem to move below the ankle. She watched him until he said, "There's carpet. I can get you." He took a breath. She knelt fast at his feet and wrenched at her sneaker knots. "Nice, warm socks," he said.

She looked up but he stood too close to see, she looked up into the crotch of his khakis. Her toenails were too long in her socks. Her white socks were yellow. She was a disgusting girl.

"Why don't I get you socks," Frank said. "To keep you comfortable." He had some socks of his own, he said, that he thought she might like to wear.

She said that she was alright, that her feet did not get cold so easily. Her voice would not stop. “I went lobstering and they didn’t.” The road snow from her shoes had made a puddle. He watched her battle with the other shoe. Somehow, he had brought in no road snow.

He hummed. “You have beautiful. Wrists. Hands.”

They studied her stiff wrists. “Thank you.” Her pink wrists jumped, agreed.

“Let’s sit,” he said and walked away. She followed him and stepped in the miserable puddle. He led her through a room with blue satiny chairs, dark, patterned carpet and graceful lampshades. Many books. She touched a chair back and found it muscular. She shoved her hands in her pockets.

In a bright kitchen he offered her a stool. The counter she sat at was a brown and polished slab, something else taken from the ground and laid here prostrate. He put on water in a beautiful kettle, then he left.

She and the kettle sat and worried. Past the sink window glass, in the Red Hill harbor far below, small white lobster boats tugged at their anchors. Her stomach had hands that beat at her lungs. The kettle began to fuss. Frank was gone a long time. The kettle screamed and she sat with it screaming, the steam fleeing like frightened cattle stampeding a gate beneath the shadow of something tall and growing. She stood and sat again. Perhaps rich kettles were breakable and complicated.

The kettle wailed and when she heard Frank returning she sprang from the stool to run. She knew the route, would thumb a ride in richy-rich Red Hill, whiz home in the safety of a stranger, never leave the Harris house again, not for love or money. The hallway floorboards squawked under his returning feet. She slid around the counter and shut the big fire off. The

scream died in a whimper. His kettle, it seemed, worked like other kettles. She crawled back up on the stool, feigning tranquility.

He offered her the socks in his hand. He held them at his hip. She had to reach for them. Maybe his arm is old, she thought.

She thought it might be elegant to be able to balance on the stool and lift a knee up and slip the sock on this way. He watched. When she was done he said, "You don't want to take," he chuckled, "your own socks off?"

Her skull was a junk attic with chewed wires. She said she liked the insulation of the double. "But you're right. My sock is wet. I stepped in that wet from my shoe." He turned to look at her old shoes. "But I can wipe it up," she said. "Don't want it to wreck the floor there."

"You're from here?" he said.

"Yes. My mom is. We moved because my dad died in the oil boom."

He did not laugh. "Do you think the oil will last?" They spoke facing the hallway, her shoes, the puddle, the shut door.

She faltered, thought, You mean like me and mom's oil? She figured the rich knew more than they let on. Bought people's information like good rugs, and everything else.

He turned and looked at her chest. "The oil in the world," he said.

"Oh," she said. "Sure?"

His eyelids were folded and his eyeball was wet and she thought about those eyes as they were when he was a person as young as her and then of what Sewall might look like naked. Then she thought of this man naked, the one withered stick he could not buy fresh, and it turned her cold and then hot. A swelling of wild, sudden dislike, burst and then scarred over. He asked her if she might fetch him the tea. She leapt for the shelves to which he gestured.

They drank peppermint tea. He asked her if she wanted milk and when she said yes, he said, “In peppermint?” But she held fast. He used the type of store brand milk that she and Shelly bought sometimes, for Louella’s bones, when they had the food stamps for it. She was ashamed for him. The fridge was bright as an angel opening her jacket.

He did not sit. He touched his head hair. He smiled, she smiled. “What do you like to eat,” he said. When she replied, “Breaded chicken sandwiches,” he turned to look at her full on with his wilted eyes wide. When he asked, “What do you want to be?” she said, “Married with good health insurance.” And he laughed for a long time as if she had gotten him good, what a good joke, and she laughed too with all her fine, young teeth.

“Those take skill, don’t they, to get,” he said. “What about children?”

She said, “Sure,” hesitantly, as though it might be legally binding. She did not ask if he had children or how old they were now or if he would drive her home again, but eventually, in the dark, he did, his fingers poking in her front pocket.

Chapter Ten

Things so quiet, people all across the world might have been napping.

But then across the cafeteria, Jimmy Rogers squawked and laughed. Dorothy Goode was sitting with the nerd boys. She was grinning at her beige lunch tray. The boys were giggling.

Then Jerry Lavoie snatched up Lyd Perry's hand, which was something a kid could do if it had become common knowledge that he and she were banging like screen doors. The ten dry fingers lay clamped on the spackled table. Their unoccupied hands continued valiantly to feed their mouths.

Louella watched Dorothy. Dorothy was saying something lengthy with her eyes stuck down, her long fingers shaping ideas, and Jimmy had his chin sunk onto his palm, listening, nodded, faintly smiling. The raw look of a man in awe.

And it was while Louella was staring down this strange new phenomenon that Sewall grabbed her hand, in the crotchy warmth beneath the lunch table.

His thumb rubbed her knuckle to the same beat his knee was jumping at, very fast. She had once held a big dog's foot. The pink pads had felt like this. Sewall and Louella rubbed each

other's skin and like he had caught a fish he had not expected to, he would not let go. Lyd's eyes went to the blue table edge and burned there. Delilah sighed and cleaned her lip corner and looked at her own splayed palms. Nobody said one thing about hands. They rubbed until it was time to empty their trays. Sewall released her and pushed back his chair and left in one volcanic movement.

A bruise went down the backside of his shoulder. Belt-thin and storm-colored and looking hot to the touch. He had worn, it seemed, the loosest-collared shirt he owned. He might have worn a turtle neck, Louella thought. It was once again cold enough. He might have but he had not. Was the bruise not an advertisement better kept quiet? But he was Sewall Goode, and every girl loved him. But Louella did not like that loose-collared shirt or the ugliness it showed. It seemed to her a childish thing to do. It seemed to her to ask for a type of pity she did not want to give. Her hand dried off, cooling.

Sewall did fling himself down next to his sister as he would have had she sat alone. His face was smooth as the underside of a leaf flashed up in strong wind. Bright and resilient. It would only shake when the wind slacked. As he left the cafeteria, he watched his sister. Dorothy did not look back.

Then Jimmy Rogers cracked a joke and it seemed, if Louella had not known better, if she had thought, perhaps, that Dorothy could be cruel to her brother as Lyd might toy with some boys, that Dorothy laughed this time with her face lifted well up so Sewall could see that she laughed at another boy's gags. But all this quick as one footstep.

The clocks clacked forward.

When the bell rang at the end of the day and the weary headed for the buses, Sewall hollered for Louella. The whole hall tittered. Jeremy Tripp was behind her and he walked into

her when she stopped and turned, their elbows banged, their cheeks close as dancers'. She smelled him and hissed. Old pasta water and the grease of an unclean child and the green Jolly Rancher in his mouth. Jeremy did not stop walking but said loud enough, "You're not much either." Then he was gone out the lobby doors.

Sewall swayed up with the plum bruise on his neck. "*The Patriot* is playing at Regal on Thursday. It's playing other days too. But you want to go on Thursday?"

Before she said alright, every person knew she was going to see strong Mel Gibson cry over his dead son with Sewall Goode and how this meant that they would likely make out or more in his truck. She wondered how much a ticket was, and if he would pay, and was frightened of the money lost, and subtracted what she thought a ticket might cost from the money beneath the bedroom carpet of the floor where she slept, and then thought people also bought things like popcorn, and this was a cost, and perhaps there would be dinner involved, or other money-things, gas to get to the big Regal built out at Goodesboro's seam. "Alright," she said.

"Great," he said, as if he meant in fact the opposite.

There was the sense, sometimes, that she had burned in the refinery fire. Things happened and she could not quite taste them. It was like sitting in a theater of her life, and reaching out to touch the screen but the screen was too far. Her hand struck out into shadow and projection. The bruise on Sewall's neck had been a different color at lunch. She was godawful tired from living lately.

She got on the bus and sat four seats away from Jeremy Tripp. Not much either, she thought. She tallied herself up. Jeremy Tripp surely did not have three-hundred-twenty-five dollars of his own tucked beneath his bedroom carpet. Or a date with a Goode.

**

Louella and Shelly maneuvered like big boats in a small harbor.

Shelly sat low in the cushions of the green kitchen sofa, her feet up on a kitchen chair but no weight on them. Her whole thin body was a wire to be sprung. It was a Wednesday half-day and the buses had dispersed the children of Goodesboro home early.

There was a wither in her mother's limbs, Louella saw. What did Shelly eat if not free school lunches? They had eaten last night's rice and canned spinach and the last two eggs for breakfast.

Harris, in his living room, said, "Child, if I had the life to go forgive my mother for every wrong I thought wrong enough to go to battle for. Well, you know. But what am I saying. The conditional is a luxury the dead don't own."

Louella flicked his voice from her shoulder. Outside, seagulls drifted higher wind shelves, sailing as though they had survived something bitter and were not now sure what to do with the life they had kept.

Shelly had $58.40 in cash, $5.81 in the checking, $5.68 in the change purse and hell of a lot of debt. Louella had gobs of the money stuff. She could not get herself to spend much of it. Or give it to Shelly. She thought perhaps once she had a bit more, she would be able to part with some. If there was guilt, it was overshadowed by other things, like a carnal, insane, isolating, all-encompassing, blinding fear that lived in the base of her skull. Shelly sighed and touched her temple, she circled one ad twice.

"Do you ever think of leaving me here?" Louella said. "Running off. You could find some rich guy. Marry up the ladder. I don't really need a mom." She stood just before her mother seated on the couch.

Shelly did not look up from the classifieds for a long time.

"But perhaps she needs a daughter," Harris hummed, in Louella's ear.

In the forest, the dirt in which tree roots dug thawed, just a little.

Shelly looked up. "Maybe I need a daughter, Louella."

The Abrahamse women cracked their necks.

When the silence seemed ready to split the house, Shelly said, "I'm waiting on a phone call." Her face worn down like she was feeling the same sort of thing the weary gulls were.

"New beau?"

"Yeah." Shelly looked down at the papers in her lap. "New sorta job." The pen moved Shelly's hand, made circles in the air. She frowned at the far corner of the kitchen, where the cabinet met the peeled linoleum, where no matter how they poured the bleach on and scrubbed, somebody else's filth bled out. Louella pinched her own hip bones through denim.

At his home that past Friday, Frank had sat her on the resplendent couch beside him. He had told her of war. "Do you know," he said, "Aristotle often drew parallels between war and business? The goal of war is peace. Of leisure, business." He had asked her what she thought of that. "Do you think peace is inevitable in aging?" At the end of the drive this time, he said, "Are you enjoying our time?" Two fingers in her front pocket and a thumb, quick, running the ridge of her hip bone.

Louella said, "Not gonna stay with that old man's lady any more?"

Shelly's hairline looked like she had been ripping it out. "She's dying."

Louella said that that was heavy news. Shelly turned the paper over. Peeling words apart. Trying to feel out which money gig would not kill her all the way and pay the bills too.

"What's the job, then?" Louella said.

"The cannery. Still the cannery. Good pay. Good hours. Still waiting. They said the fishing starts soon and they'd call on Wednesday. Here we are," said Shelly. Her mouth with the softening skin started sucking on her right cheek, chewing the meat. "Work my way up," Shelly said.

Louella giggled. She covered her mouth. The giggle had jumped her. The feeling of it like a too-big tongue. Shelly laid the pen down, rolled it on her thigh. Watched her daughter for the good news.

"Jesus," Louella said. "Ma. When have you ever worked your way up anything?" The giggle was gone. She was not sure if it had been or if it had been, what it was.

Shelly smiled kindly. They watched each other. "I do not," said Shelly. "I don't know." She was sighing. "I really do not," she said. "I do not know how you turned out like this. It frightens me." That a child gets made by what a parent knows and doesn't. Still she smiled softly at her daughter. A gull screamed outside for the sun to come back. The stove clock turned to six minutes to two. The wind blew against the house. "Doesn't it frighten you, Louella?"

**

But the phone did ring. Shelly leapt for it.

Then her face broke up like the spring ice in the river which cannot decide if it is broken and if the flood is coming or if the freeze will harden it again. Likely the freeze will harden it again.

Louella sat across from her, counting things. Money. Sewall's fingers, how they felt holding hers. Frank's fingers. How they felt digging the cotton and muscle of her jean pocket. Tomorrow she would go to Regal with Sewall, which brought her closer to Friday with Frank and to Monday at school when people would wonder if she'd banged Sewall on Thursday. She

weighed the bad dead fire that Frank's old fingers lit in her against the fricken rainbow that was the three-hundred-twenty-five upstairs tucked under the carpet. She had not yet been on any sort of date. She thought that Lyd had never felt a man's hands like Sewall's, and that feeling felt like thinking of her money upstairs under the carpet and like any miracle, more must be done to sustain it. Harris bent down in the living room, listening against the door crack. "What do you think of me?" he said. He had been worried for them lately.

Shelly sat up on her hard ass bones. She looked ill. The fuzz on her face had grown thicker than her skin. Louella squinted. Through a puckered mouth to the Cannery lady on the phone, Shelly said, "I can do that," many times over.

Harris' lonely finger poked around the door jamb. Louella rolled her eyes like Lyd had taught her, a good defense against men. The finger slipped away. It had not ever been.

Shelly took a look at Louella. She saw a daughter to provide for, uterine blood, growing bones, young, unflossed teeth. Louella saw her carpet money burning in a tall, boiling fire, a shadow across the prairie.

"That's fine," said Shelly to the woman on the phone.

"That's great," said Shelly.

"Alright," said Shelly.

"Saturday," said Shelly. "One o'clock."

"Thank you so much," said Shelly. "Thank you." Then she swung around out of the chair and hung up the phone in the gray cradle, then just the ringing of the phone's metal hook. She sat down again. "You don't have to work," Shelly said. She spoke with the heavy fatigue of buried grief, that which is cut and cut back but sprouts often.

"I don't work," said Louella to Shelly. Proud as Lyd would have been to say it.

Their horse-hair insulation grew frost crystals. Roots of the grass living at the bog edge held onto the soil. A chickadee fell dead from a pine. Many months until spring. But Harris' fuel had lasted, had someway, somehow miraculously lasted and lasted, until Shelly had a job.

**

Mel Gibson swore to his country and ripped his shirt collar even wider. Sewall and Louella sat with their hands on the Regal theater armrests like they were offering up their palms for piercing or alms.

Louella thought about Sewall's shirt collar, but he was still wearing his jacket, and it was dark in the theater. She had not seen while he was buying tickets if the bruise was any different. He had bought the tickets. She had offered but done it quietly and he had not made like he heard.

Lyd had called her at home, asked her if she was horny for Sewall, and Louella had thought she probably was. That this sort of conquest feeling was what horndogs felt. The Swoop and Dismay of catching something toothed in a trap. Musket fire went through the theater. Just ahead of them, a balding man slouched beside a long-haired woman. Old. Thirties, forties, both in black turtlenecks. Louella did not know if she liked the feeling of being bought a ticket. She had the fifty with her, in case popcorn was expensive. The lone bill tucked inside her green wallet.

In front of her, the balding man's arm rose up. It came down across his date's shoulders. A frightening thing to watch, this display of Next Steps. Sewall's whole arm twitched. The woman nuzzled the man's neck. A British soldier loaded his gun with trembling fingers, and shot a child. Violins wept. Wind shook green maple leaves. Popcorn everywhere. Louella thought of Marce Telhaney. The August gusts of the wide plains, the heat of fresh lightning broken on gold wheat. Marce Telhaney in pink tee shirts, how the sweat stain had turned two spots on her lower

back's cotton red, how her neck had shimmered. The hair held up from the nape in lovely manicured nails. Sewall's arm began to rise. Mel Gibson was running fast up a hill, and she thought he might be shot posing on top like that and now Sewall's arm came down across Louella's shoulders. Waterlogged rope falls like this. His hand clamped against her shoulder. She considered what was to be done. Mel Gibson ran down the far side of the hill. She bent her neck. Her head came close enough to Sewall's shoulder. The meat of his shoulder, what hauled traps. All her hair fell across her face and she could not see. She did not know if it was proper to move again, to lift her hair from her face. She watched the right side of the screen, on which many redcoats died in a pretty field. Sewall's jacket smelled of something sold at the mall and diesel.

Later, Joely Richardson and Mel Gibson kissed each other, their cheeks on the screen wide as the Tripp house. This was the end. Louella wondered if after seeing movies people then had sex. She had one hundred dollars under her carpet at home because Sewall had taken her fishing and maybe they should have sex because of it. Her neck hurt. It had held her skull just above his shoulder for the last half hour. She had to pee so bad she was sweating.

In front of them the turtlenecked woman took one hand and like her man's arm was a towel she grabbed a fistful and took it off over her head, arms briefly silhouetted before geese in an autumn sky. The man leaned over and the woman turned her head, and they smiled at each other, and Louella saw that the man had silver earrings in his ear lobes. They kissed. The movie was beautiful and people around them were crying now. Her bladder was like a kicking fetus.

When the movie rolled into credits and the drums of American cinema got inside everybody's chest and beat, and the redcoats all were dead, when the colonists no longer had to pay taxes to a now foreign crown for the acres and the people they stole and owned, Sewall's

arm came flying off her and he whispered, “They’re not gonna play bloopers in a movie like this.”

They stood and filed out of their row. Stepping over legs. Then out into the bright theater hall, Louella looked right and left, she did not know from which way they had come. Sewall walked away to the right. He was taller than some of the grown men she saw.

She slipped inside the bathroom and into a stall and the pee came out strong for nearly a minute. When she could think again of other things, she wondered again if they were to have sex now and tried to figure out how that would work. She came out of the stall and at the mirror the woman in the turtle neck was washing her hands. She had long hair and pretty eyes. She did not wear a lot of makeup, but had a little black heart, like a ladybug, painted on her cheek. She had TV eyes. They looked right at Louella in the mirror and she smiled. “Always like you’re leaving one world and coming back,” she said. “Nobody knows if it’s the same world you’re in.”

Louella asked, after a pause, what she meant.

“I mean leaving a movie. You get the sense everything’s changed.”

Louella nodded. Then she nodded again. “You kind of do,” she said.

The woman asked what she had seen and Louella told her and the woman said that she had wanted to see the Patriot. “But we saw another thing.”

Louella nodded. The woman had not stopped smiling. Her face was older than Shelly’s but glowed on the peaks of its creases. They left the bathroom together. Near Sewall in his cool jacket with his good strong jaw, the man in the turtleneck waited. They stood aware of each other as bucks in rutting season.

**

“That was some movie,” Sewall said. He blew on his hand. “It left me feeling some way.”

Sewall's truck was cold. Bits of the machine fingered other bits and liquid warmed inside the engine block.

She blew on her hands. "It was like leaving another world," she said, "coming out of it."

He turned to her and said, "Yes. Oh, Yes." He nodded. "You think of all the guys who serve you know. All the American patriots."

"Yes," she said.

"It was for his family," Sewall said. "You fight for your family."

"Yes."

"He didn't want to hurt anyone, you could see that, but you know how it is. When times are desperate, you know how it is?"

She nodded. She thought maybe they were starting to talk about two or three different things. She thought of the bruise on his neck. Whose country was Sewall Senior defending when he struck this son down? "Cold truck," she said. Then Sewall's hands were around hers and he was blowing hot air from his own living mouth. And that was nice. But she was thinking, do I kiss his fingers. What does a good woman do now. How does a woman make a man. He blew harder than he needed to. Some cars drove past through the lot. She thought one of them had the older couple in it but it could have been anyone.

"This lot used to be a field," Sewall said. He sat back. He tossed her hands away. "Dad took us out and showed us how to shoot a gun. We killed one deer though we weren't supposed to. Ate it all winter when I was eight. Dorothy actually shot the gun. You believe that? She was six, probably actually. She didn't even cry about it. Maybe she was too young to know." He laughed. "But I cried!" he said. Then he told her to come out on the boat again and his voice which had slipped towards the boyish changed back to a boy hoping to soon be a man.

She told him about her dad blowing up. Sewall said, “Shit.” He held her hand. Dropped it each time he had to shift but not until he absolutely had to and picked it up right after. And that was nice, too.

In her gravel drive, in the dark of his truck, the orange dash light lit up his proud chin hairs. She thought once again of the money he had spent and the thing that had put down a warm root and started blooming in that drive folded over dead again. She figured she had better do something nice. She leaned over and put her mouth near his and somehow their lips touched. Young hair, hers and his, lip, pooled spit, popcorn musk, gloss of orange butter, and the gasoline of the jacket. It was almost thrilling. The truck started rolling and his foot slammed the brake. Then he put a hand on her neck which put a hot shiver in a deep place. They knocked together their chewing bits for the next twenty minutes. His whole right leg tensed up pressing the brake down flat. An owl called. The gentle strong wind rocked the truck like an uncertain mother. His jaw clicked the whole time.

Then she said, “My mom’s watching.” She meant, somewhat, the house is watching.

She fled down into the night and watched his truck until its tail lights were gone behind the dark hill. Then the kiss sent a delayed rocket through her hip bones. As she climbed the porch steps she said some things to a god she had never before talked to.

Shelly was on the green sofa. Louella sat down beside her and tucked her legs up. She told her mother about the movie and about Sewall’s jacket, how it smelled like diesel.

And Shelly remembered her own first date and smiled. She remembered her first kiss with that man John Day, though she was not sure anymore it was him actually, and how odd was that. What living long enough does to importance. John Day lived with a man. And he, she had seen, was old now. She guessed she must be too.

Louella said, at the end of the story about Mel Gibson saving the country, "We kissed. Well, I told him about dad. And then we kissed at the end."

"You kissed because you told him about Dad?"

"No. But."

Shelly took a breath like she was pushing down something that was going to come out a wail and said, "Was it nice, then?"

Louella nodded, and started crying. The kitchen was cold. But good things did happen. Shelly held her. They did not talk of money or work. Harris, with his warm cheek sliding against the living room door, listened to how life went on without a person.

**

Small lagoons held congregations of fraternizing crows.

"I enjoy the company of quiet," Frank said to her, after she tried to take the silence and break it several times. The car rattled over the Maton Bridge's east end. They sped towards Red Hill, passing over the Maton river. It was a great expanse of yellowing ice. On this river, ice formed sometimes between tidal shifts. The ice rose and fell chestlike.

She was imagining sacrifice. That day in history class, Jimmy Rogers had given a short lecture on Aztec blood sacrifice, until Mrs. Howe's had reminded him that they were talking of the cocoa bean and not of flesh. Frank was taking her again to his home and there was a certain, new, tense formality in the car. Louella saw the edge of her own naked ribcage, stretched over Frank's couch. She saw her white skin over bone, and then she saw herself skinless and red. She sat riding through space on the skin of an animal.

"I am an eager old man," he said. In front of them, a small car turned its blinker on half a mile before its turn. "But I have been eager my whole life."

The car turned, and Frank sped up.

She said, “Is that the same as being lucky your whole life?” She had not meant to sound snide.

Towards Red Hill a truck passed them from behind. The man at the wheel seemed to wave in apology but in that quick flash it was difficult to tell what was apology and what was a curse. The man was bent towards his steering wheel. He was a youngish man, though he looked quite old to Louella. She thought of Sewall Goode, what he might look down the line and felt a warping tenderness. And the old man next to the girl looked at the young man and saw a human of a different caste but would have traded everything to have his youth. Then the truck was gone around the next bend and they were alone on the road again.

She could not say why, but she felt the thing which had been shadowing her was about to fall and she would soon see that she was hurt. They rode as if a series of ceremonies had been completed and now there was nothing left to say to each other. After the truck passed, Frank drove faster. They entered into the brick chute of the Red Hill business district. There was the sense here too of coming apocalypse. People were out on the sidewalks looking towards a place Louella and Frank could not see. There were too many cars or not enough, it was hard to tell.

A woman stood crying outside a winter-shuttered souvenir shop. She held her two fingers over her mouth and her eyes stood wide. It might have been, Louella thought, the same woman who had watched Frank’s car pass on that previous drive. Or it was only that those two women had made the same motion with their hand.

When the smoke had risen in Lokkertville, when Lamb had died, the school had sent the children all home. All, for the most part, lived in walking distance. The school, like the houses, was a temporary collection of mobile boxes. The shadow of the smoke had covered the path to

Louella's house. She had walked continuously at the edge of it, understanding already, before she had been told, that it was Lamb who was dead.

Frank's car cleared the downtown. They saw smoke and then they smelled it. It was a different type of smoke than the refinery fire. This was salt wood burning, lubricants, engine metal. The smoke rose up from the harbor, where land scooped down to sea. "I was driving quite fast enough," Frank said. He turned at the hill that rose up to his house. They hauled up above the town buildings and low hillocks. The hill was steep enough in places that, should they hit a bump, they would certainly peel off backwards. The smoke made a whitish tower a half-mile to the east.

They cleared low tree tops. She felt flayed, naked, bound, breathless. Below them, the harbor's stretch flamed orange. Or no, only one boat was caught and burning. The harbor was deep winter green. At the edge of the harbor, all around, people stood brightly jacketed. Those in the distance crowded like a type of tideline rock.

Frank said, "It is a rowdy harbor. They fight as if they think they can win. They don't know what they are fighting." He shifted his rear somewhat angrily in his seat. Road snow spat out behind the tires.

She tried to form the words to say, I'll get out now and find my own way home. Don't pay me, don't drive me, I can walk any distance. The naked rose bushes of Frank's drive worried in a stiff breeze. She touched the dash and leaned forward to look down on the bay a half mile's slope away, and said, "Look at that, would you, something's happening down there. Could we go see it wouldn't that be nice?" She heard her own voice shouting to her from above a river's surface.

Frank turned to look at her. She did not know his face could look fierce like that. His house sat waiting as if for the prayer to keep it living. Or that was the man beside her.

"If that's what you want," he said slow. "That is what we shall do then." He accelerated, raced the circle of his drive. She held onto her seat. "It is good you know how to ask for the things you want," he said. They aimed for the road again. "Do you know how important it is to ask for things in life? You could ask me for anything," he said. "There is nothing stopping you. You don't know at all what I would give. Why wouldn't you try and see?" The pea gravel was uncertain material to drive so fast in. He sprayed some at the drive edge from his tire's tread.

He was speaking very reasonably. She remembered this strange feeling, the pressure in her ears, Lamb's teeth were sizeable squares between bearded lips, how he did not speak and then he spoke as if proof that words could be a violence. They drove hard back down the hill.

At the empty harbor lot that once held Frank's house, they stood between stacked lobster traps, snow in the lattices. She saw the bones of birds who had found their way into the kitchens of the traps and could not, for all their flapping, find their way out again.

In the pale harbor mouth one boat was sinking. It had been pulled away from the rest. It seemed they could not put out the fire. The friendly boat that had pulled the burning boat now jogged in place, its two-man crew watching at the rail. Everywhere around the harbor's rim, people watched this lonely boat go down. Louella could not understand how a boat fire could not be fixed with water. Hundreds of people. Perhaps they needed to watch. It was midwinter, after all.

The explosion of the fuel tank was as though the whole harbor had been clapped between two palms or a star had burst or time had shifted and all those gathered braced themselves for the

impact of change. The new smoke it made was proof that it had been and proof that it was done. When the smoke broke a little they saw the boat was all but gone.

"Would you like to go home?" Frank said, beside her. She found that she was on frozen ground. She had been thinking of what it would be to sink.

At the Harris house, he passed her the three bills, into her waiting palm. "Let's try again next week," he said, gently.

**

"Imagine you have the money that will change your life," Shelly told Louella was what Shelly told herself about working a hard job.

The next day, Shelly left for the Serpot Cannery. Before she left, she fidgeted with the coat pegs by the kitchen door. "Do I look alright," she asked. Beneath her jean cuffs the socks went up to her knees. She stood in bright, white jogging Nikes that she had bought the week before Lamb died and never worn, for jogging had seemed suddenly an inane practice. But all Shelly had been told by the factory office lady was that she should wear comfortable shoes.

Louella stood silent. She said, "You look like you can work."

Shelly's face softened. Her tongue unstuck from where it had been bit between molars, and her lips bubbled at one corner. She came at her daughter in two furious steps and took her in a hug. Louella fingered Shelly's ribs through the weaned meat of her back muscle. That body that had suffered something. "I can work," Shelly whispered. "I can I can I can." She put her mouth to Louella's hair.

Louella pulled away, she wiped her hair flat, and then Shelly left.

And now Louella waited alone with Harris. Frost heaves sank under tar. The house groaned, ached in its sockets. Wind gusted up from the sea, moved the trees and came in beneath

the door. Louella stood in the kitchen center, in the center of the quiet. Shelly's newspapers, the classifieds, all those things were gone and the green couch was empty. It stank of warm tidal flat, quahogs breathing in sulfurous mud, a neighbor's brush fire, diesel exhaust, juniper tips, something dead still rotting.

Harris said, "Do you know it's not the mother that decides how the child will grow up?"

Louella eased into a kitchen chair. She was weary. "It's sure not the father," she said, finally.

Those two smiled gently together. As if to smile was not to feel pleasure, but to understand something fundamental about the other.

"You'll know more about it later on in life," Harris said.

She wiped crumbs from the table and considered her money and considered how much it would cost to leave that house and not come back. "Sure," she said.

She was not sure who her friends were at the moment. Lyd had not talked to her, not really, since Louella had told her how she and Sewall had kissed. Lyd had said, after a moment, "He was mine too, my first kiss, you know, in second grade. Don't worry. You'll graduate to something better. Something more mature." And at lunch how in love with Jerry Lyd had been.

Sewall was out fishing that Saturday, the first flat-calm day in a month. He had not asked her to come. They had not talked much at all. In awe of what they had done, perhaps. Or he had found her kissing in the truck to be very boring. Or she had tasted bad. Unclean as Jeremy Tripp. Or only he liked to be with Roy Lavender alone and could see that want in her too.

Roy Lavender, who let his traps sit until the rope was heavy with mussel and the buoy sinking into the fist of the water, the caught lobsters watching the world pass by their cages, eating each other, or the curious, rare codfish or cusk. The other fishermen gossiping, Now he's

finally giving it up. He'll sell his *Ginny* soon as the Goode boy is old enough to take on debt and then slow Roy will be old and done. But Roy made little and spent little. He would have been a good father, Louella thought. Those gentle, working fingers.

Getting kissed again sounded good. In the living room, the junk of Harris settled as warm snow falls from tree boughs. The breeze turned and brought with it the fear from the night before. The boat fire had chased her inland and west, was waiting at the house's edge to burn all she had gathered.

Louella hit the kitchen table twice with a fist. She gripped the table by its edge and shook it and shook it until the leaves flapped and she worried she would break it and what then.

"You and me," Harris said. Her shadow leapt across checked linoleum. He was too close to her, suddenly. She felt as if she were in a triangulation between men. Tossed from one to the next to the next. She stood. Feet into boots then, quick, and her blue old jacket left unzippered. She fled. She cried that she was sorry for something unknown. She fled and for once she left the heaviness in the house.

**

As a child, she had run through prairie. The cattle at the eastern edge of Lokkertville had stood and watched. And she had watched them as she had watched the moon, not daring to look away. The clean awe of childhood convinced her of greatness not to be missed. Or, if not through prairie, then through a front yard, mowed to the quick. She had run on small legs. Had Shelly laughed in a hot August? Shelly's hand in Lamb's, swinging over a tar road baking in the evening after a thunderstorm. The dust of farming was a great inverted sea. Rigs hummed, ordinary as hills. Lamb's forearm had the black hair of a father. There was a wideness in childhood Louella had forgotten.

At the far edge of the bog, a doe bolted, and Louella smelled again the distant trash fire, old sticks and bills and cardboard boxes. When she looked for the moon, it was lost. She stuck her arms up into air. The air came into her jacket, cool and fine. There would be money soon and the day was calm and she had kissed a boy.

She walked towards the snow through which the deer had made a trail. Dung pellets indicated a busy thoroughfare momentarily evacuated. Memory was curved and wide, she could not peek over the far edge. She walked into the woods, and damp snow filled her boots and she walked until the snow melted and her wool socks warmed again. Sun winked everywhere. Suddenly the deer trail was bloodied and she clomped over that blood until it coagulated into the soft shreds of red sumac and ended.

She had money beneath her carpet, and Shelly was out making money, and on Friday Frank would give her money again and though she did not know why it frightened her to think of him, she knew that fear was not always trustworthy. Fear looked like Dorothy Goode, she thought, and was better forgotten. She was deep in the pine woods. Beyond wet boughs sparkled blue stratosphere.

She came to a divot in the snow, and saw that a stream ran through the woods and the snow was melted over it. Down between the snow banks jolly water ran through moss. When had it snowed this much? Or had it only snowed here, in the unpeopled woods, where nobody watched? She crossed the stream and sank into the snow up to her knee but grabbed a young fir and hauled herself out. Good things were happening. She began to cry. She wailed once, long and too loud and was ashamed by the sound after it was gone and the shame shut the moment away.

Sun roasted her white neck. On a south facing hill young boughs shed water like a flashing rainstorm. She stopped and listened. Hot rain fell through corn taller than her head. The afternoon storm had passed across the high midwest and the light stood beating the dark soil again.

A cardinal flew by. She felt the red wing's wind. There were chickadees jumping through the shadows beneath a leaning pitch pine. Chickadees furrowing for red berries that grew on the red branches of a low bush. Not one calling *chickadee dee dee*.

"God," she said. She cried that again, many times, to the woods, as though the word were not a word but a bark, a squawk, a howl.

She thought of Marce Telhaney when she and Louella walked tar roads through hay not yet bailed, and held hands, copying how their parents played at family. They had kissed too, just then, at the cusp between childhood and a boy's promise ring. They had kissed and Marce had giggled. The distant burning trash smelled of the refinery.

The chickadees flew away all at once. She turned to see where they had gone.

The leaning pitch pine, sighed, it gave up, it fell.

Thunder cracks like this, and shifts the air. Everything the tree touched broke a little. Louella did not run though she thought she should. Her feet were cold. The tip of one bough came down and stroked her shoulder lightly, and the trunk crashed twenty feet away in the snow. Then the whole pitch pine was very still for something so recently elsewhere. The yellow sandy earth out of which it had ripped at root yawned open. The earth and root held small gray stones taken by glacier from a place far away, a long time before.

It was time to go back. She followed her postholes home. When the shock left her, she touched her neck and shoulder, and found them bloody. A little scratch on her jaw, a long thin bruise across the collar bone.

She remembered this all her life. The walk, the cardinal, the chickadees and the tree. She remembered it long after the *Ginny* was sold for tourist rides, when the water was too poor to fish lobster and folks younger than her had grown up and moved away or died or both. She remembered it all very well, but she never found the words to tell it.

Shelly came home at midnight. “I made fifty-two dollars after tax.” She was victorious. And she would make the same again tomorrow and the same again the day after and there was a need for women like her who could work so she would work. Shelly’s hands were changed. They were pinker and perhaps swollen.

“Fifty-two dollars,” Louella said. She made it sound small as she could.

Shelly smelled of sardine and adhesive and was happy enough that she looked beyond her daughter and the moment went away.

And disdain, too, in later years, Louella would not know how to speak of, but would remember in the memory of her own young mouth talking, that she was her father’s daughter.

Chapter Eleven

Louella lay naked on her back between Frank and his soft mattress. His spine bent his pelvis forward. He stuck his body in hers again. He held her hair, he held the side of her face. The head of his penis ran towards her gut and out and ran back in again like a rig in a prairie hauling petroleum.

A photo of a family on a white sailboat hung framed beyond his scalp. The family was white-skinned and dark-haired, except for one man who had gone gray in the head. Though the whole of an ocean stretched behind them, they were close to land. The shadow of a spire fell across the water and the prow of the vessel. They appeared wakeless, immobile.

He held her by the stretch of skin between pelvis and rib, he bent his head to the collarbone where was raised the scabbed bruise the pitch pine bough left, opened his mouth and sucked gently. The ceiling had a seam that shifted back and forth.

Then he was out of her for a moment and it was like she had been shot and was briefly in the space between the wounding and the knowledge of the wounding. “Turn over, sweetheart,” he said. “Let me see you.”

She did. She rolled to her stomach thinking maybe it was done. He fingered her to his knuckle. She closed on him as though she could shut herself to him, but the body is not a series of doors to be locked. He said that he was aware of how she felt. He too felt a great urge for her.

She would understand soon that this inability to deny what was asked by a man who had paid her was the skin and the heart and the spine of all labor. Denial took bracing for sudden rupture. She was a child. She had not been given the time. She did not know this sort of thing happened to people that she knew, let alone herself. A little seed of hate got planted in her. The work then was in trimming it back.

It was Friday. Sewall had called early in the morning before the bus. Would the little lady like to play hooky from school and go for a teeny tour on the big boat?

She could not, she said. She had a Friday gig now. Sewall laughed out loud, said he would pay her more. He had laughed again when she asked, “How much?” Frank put his mouth to her chin and bit. His throat smelled of necrosis, menthol.

She had got it into her head to count the penetrations. She could not stop the counting now that she had started.

Lyd had told her about a little blood during the deflowering but it seemed out of Louella now leaked buckets. She would stain his sheats and what then. He had white chest hair. It chaffed her breasts. She was not being killed but she felt as though she was not quite surviving. Each time he pushed forward again, she had the sense of a water in which she drowned. What she had thought would get easier was not. He sweat and the sweat ran down his chin and fell and ran again down her cheek as though he were crying for her. He seemed to have forgotten her. He was mewling like a kitten.

He had taken her upstairs to show her his house. “Why don’t you try it out,” he said of the bed. When she sat on it, he said, “You don’t know how much you are saving me. I feel with you that I am living.” He took a step sideways. “You are incredibly important to me, Louella. You are a beautiful woman.”

She had laughed courageously but he had frowned, he had walked to her and bent his mouth to hers and covered her breasts with his hands. The bed’s mattress was high and pillowy, her feet did not touch the carpet. The whole room was cream. He had left her sitting on the bed then. She could have run, couldn’t she? He had gotten a soft towel printed in blue paisley that seemed to match the socks he had once given her and laid it folded across the comforter. He stood a moment and finally brought another of the same print from the bathroom.

His thumb sank in her anus and she yelped. “Poor young thing,” Frank said, and lifted a hem of the towel patted some blood and mucus away. He kissed the spine’s divot between the shoulder blades. His condom smelled of crayons.

He pressed her down, groped in the living warmth between her legs, guided his penis back inside her. She did not cry, but she was aware that she had begun to make a high keening when kissed her ear and the sound of herself echoed in her jaw. He understood the need. He too had felt a deepness in himself for her.

They were cheek to cheek when he whispered, “It is like two people speaking inside one mouth, inside one head, when we are together.” He put his mouth around her ear as if to reach her brain but it seemed he could not breath so well through his nose. With sudden confounding clarity, she thought of Harris. She saw him gripping himself in the way men did, standing above them, watching from the end of the bed. The arousal she felt was brief and terrible.

When it was done, he lay inside her. His penis melted away and hung limp. He held her and stroked her soft hair. After a while, he told her to shower.

She went out into his hall without her pants. She thought there would be blood down her thighs but there was not. “To the left,” he called, when she paused in the door. His shower was a white, large and tiled box, a metal handrail for the feeble. She stepped into it.

He fed her a cold salmon salad at the kitchen counter.

“Hungry,” he said, and spooned pink paste on a pretty blue plate. He stood on the far side of the counter. He slid the plate and a fork across to her. The salad wad was the size of a man’s fist.

She was not hungry though he said after sex one must do something and he would not smoke a cigarette with her. She smelled mayonnaise and celery and a fish. The fetid fat of baitfish swamped the bottom of a bait tray. She carved a forkful and put it in her mouth and chewed. “Very nice,” she said, and continued on.

“Aren’t you hungry then?” he said, at her last bite. She was eating the last of his salad. She did not have to eat all that he served her, he said. She apologized. One small lump of it remained like a wrecked canyon after a storm.

He drove her home through the late afternoon. He talked to her of his other past loves, he talked very freely of his life. His luckiness. “That salmon smell does hang around,” he said. “You’re a beautiful girl at this age and shape.”

He dug the seventy-five into her hand and folded her fingers and kissed her knuckles before she left the car. She crossed the wet gravel hoping she hadn’t bled through her jeans. She had no other good jeans. His car took him fast around the blueberry hill, past a purple sedan struggling east.

She went into the kitchen with his body still in her, she walked with her legs apart. A little pink blood in her underwear but not through the denim. Shelly was gone at the cannery. That empty kitchen stood wide open in the yellow bulb light like nothing that could ever be owned outright. Stars hummed and would keep humming after most things quit. Her bones were no different than mussel shell. She looked around the kitchen, the stained green sofa, the broken-leaf table. That godawful loneliness might have killed a smaller creature. Her blood beat in her groin. Harris in the living room greeted her solemnly. She sat down against his old mattress and stayed on the floor for a long time.

Harris said, "It might get worse. It might not. I apologize for my earlier intrusion." He hid behind his things.

She said, "What an idiotic thing to like. What a fucked up thing."

He told her he hid for his own sake, not for any shame of her. "You have a tendency to disbelieve me," he said. He sat near her and it was a greater comfort than she expected.

Before Shelly came home at midnight, Louella left the living room. Took off her pants and her cotton panties and scrubbed them with cold water and bar soap at the kitchen sink. Laid them over a heating vent. She climbed the stairs and pulled on Harris' woolies and put the fifty and twenty and five with the other bills under the carpet. She had near five hundred.

Money seemed to come like this. In slow tides made of many rushing waves. She was tied at a wrack line.

Frank had said when they sat paused in Harris' gravel and his fingertips pressed money into her palm, "I've never felt this way before, for any girl." She brought him back through time, he said, to a girl he used to know when he was her age, but without the years behind him, he could not have felt then how he felt now. "And you cannot understand the importance of that."

She must only believe him. “If you are brave enough for this sort of love, I will come again and we will continue every Friday to fall in this way together.”

She had said, “Oh yes, me too, that was fun. Yes, of course please do come back.”

In her bedroom now, between its many chairs, she wondered what had happened to her mouth, to make it work like that, to make it say what it said. Language was a terrible thing, with a mind of its own. It tricked the tongue that made it. Imagine you have the money that will change your life, she told herself now, and put her new bills beneath the carpet.

**

“Fast woman,” Roy said to Sewall. A twelve-string stacked on the stern and baited for setting. Gray chop had been made of two storms way off now colliding. Sewall stood banding next to her. He had kissed her cheek all morning, Roy at the wheel pretending not to see. She stood stiff through it and he kissed her harder. When Roy said this thing about Louella and work Sewall took a step away from her. “Oh sure,” Sewall said. “What other women you had on here, Roy?”

They were a rockin and rollin, Roy said of the way the *Ginny* swiveled in the trough.

The work had felt cleansing as prayer for praying folks. Roy said he could smell snow in the spray of cresting swells. She rocked with the roll of the *Ginny.* She nodded and did not take breaks and held her pee until the boy and the man had their backs turned towards the plotter. On deck, she bared her rear quick to the wind, squatting behind the stern tank. They fished until bitter dark. The sun set purple.

To the man working the lobster car, Roy said again, “This one works like she needs it.”

Sewall drove her home. They kissed in his truck until his chin bristle wore holes in her.

**

Angela braked hard but she hit the squirrel anyway. She swore a long stream and then she pulled the bus over. The squirrel was frantic and broken and dying. Angela crossed herself, rose from her seat, said fiercely to the students, "Stay put. Don't look." Then she went and found a big rock.

The hallway seemed full of a twilight as though Louella's eyes were dim or the overheads dirty with the corpses of too many flies. She blinked and squinted and touched her body and found it the same. Outside, snow accumulated an inch. Folks were distracted, watching the brown snow go white. She knew what a penis looked like. That they hung between every boy's legs and that every boy had the capacity to use them in such a way she did not believe.

She believed it of, say, Jeremy Tripp because he was a mean, ugly boy. She had always known sex could be a mean, ugly thing a boy asked of a girl he did not respect. Purchased cows and a tin of free milk, the cream of it spilled on the eager boy's chin. Sewall Goode, sure. Unknown seniors walked about mustachioed and with thighs like the muscles were made for thrusting the loins. Jimmy Rogers, however, could not ever be a sexual being. If Louella herself was now a sexual being, she was not sure.

During Social Studies, Louella went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. A girl had been smoking and left the high crank-window open. Some flakes flurried in and turned blue in the tiled room.

She had once, recently, been somewhat a child, she decided. Frank's mouth had sucked the pine bough bruise on her neck and bit the clavicle and then her nipples. She fingered the scab. The light in the bathroom was as if she stood in a glass case beneath the bay. Her two eyes hung in bone sockets. She felt a great, ugly maturity like it was a dias she had climbed to cast hate from above but could not now leave. The wind blue and snowflakes fell on her.

She dug her nail into earwax and then ran the water over her hands and tried to see herself in the mirror but she only saw organs prematurely dispossessed of each other. Sewall Goode might only be a child, she reflected then.

Frank was a moneyed man who had told her to trust him. She felt entirely like a whipping, raw spine biting onto reason and faith, over again.

The bathroom door opened and Dorothy Goode passed through and then paused. Those two looked at each other.

"My brother's beaux," Dorothy said finally. She let the door shut. In that light, she looked like a woman who knew things. Eggshell skin, somewhat sickly but perfect, free of blemish. She did not move towards a stall but stood as if she had been out looking for Louella and now that she had found her, thought she might think awhile.

"I wouldn't say that," said Louella.

"He is my brother," said Dorothy, "and you are his beaux." She spoke like Frank, let in air between words. Outside the school a car arrived too fast and braked hard. They heard the poor tires grip tar through snow. Dorothy squinted at the open window. "Somebody's mama misses them bad," she said. The car's door shut very hard.

"Well," said Louella. "There's class." She walked towards the door but the Goode sister stood between her and it.

"Don't you hate it when they touch you though," Dorothy said, quite fast. "The men."

"Nobody's touched you," Louella said, hard enough to spit. All the angles of Dorothy's face flinched. "Who's touched you?" Louella said. "Nobody at all. Nobody would ever. I like it when they touch me. Men touch you when you're worthwhile."

Dorothy half-smiled and opened her mouth and in the school lobby a woman yelled as though Dorothy were a good ventriloquist. Dorothy shut her mouth. The yeller had a powerful voice. The wind changed and the snow blew in hard through the open bathroom window.

Those two girls could not hear words, only the fact of a woman's anger let out. Through the wall, the vents in the door. Louella and Dorothy looked towards the sound but between them and it stood two walls and they only looked into the bathroom mirror. Before they could help it, they saw deep into the other's unsettled eye. It was midwinter in a dark north place. Not a person was doing well inside.

More voices in the lobby now joined the woman's. In the hall they heard a chattering river, classrooms emptying, students pushing ears together.

"Well," said Dorothy, "let's go see then, shouldn't we?"

The woman yelling was large and not Shelly. She was the largest person Louella had ever seen. The heft of her billowed like hot horizon. She yelled. She yelled about sin and the school's lacking care. Did these slothful transgressors know how the bastard father of her child, a man who legally must stay half a mile from his one-time family, had been allowed to pick that child up from this very lobby? She wore loose clothes meant for summer and her hair fell long. She had the look of someone who bought moderately priced art. "Who lets a child get into any man's car? What type of educator lets a child wander loose?" The doofus of a vice principal and his principal and stern office lady triangulated the woman. All stood before her with raised palms as though in some form of puritanical exorcism now forgotten.

From the crowd gathered, black-haired, black-clothed Delilah stepped forward. She approached her mother. She was shaking as if very cold. She was godawful thin, like the bleached skeleton of her voluminous mother removed and set running.

The mother turned a finger on the daughter and cried, “You!” The word made a confusion of love and hate.

Delilah said, her voice very strong, “For fuck’s sake, listen to me.” As though those two were continuing a conversation begun in the shelter of a home kitchen. As though the privacy of the world had been split at its side and inverted, the intimate flesh and organ exposed and the hairy, calloused skin of it hidden briefly away.

Beside Louella, Dorothy Goode breathed, “Poor girl.”

They stood briefly elbow to elbow, then each eased away from the other.

**

There was new food in the cabinets and many plastic grocery bags shoved all together in the corner, a stack of mislabeled Serport Sardine tins. New food and no Shelly to be found for Shelly worked all the long days she could.

On a Tuesday evening, Sewall called Louella at home. He asked if she didn’t want to come fishing. “School can wait. Money can’t so much. Get Shelly to call you in.”

“Bugs crawling in a big way,” he said, when she did not answer. He bet he would clear four hundred dollars with his twenty percent. Could she believe that?

She made only seventy-five each Friday gig. But which work was the harder? Which work bent the body worse?

As she hung up the kitchen phone, she thought he sounded disappointed that she had agreed, at the last moment.

Yesterday’s snow had turned to brief blizzard in the night. Drifts packed up everywhere, fell sliding off roofs. She had slept on the floor to the rumble of plows. She could yell out to

Harris. She could call Lyd. She could not call Delilah, having nothing to say. She sat on the green sofa beneath the phone and then she picked up the phone again.

She dialed the Telhaneys. It was only four p.m. in Lokkertville. No doubt colder than this coastal place. A woman answered as though behind her an ill infant slept that she hoped not to wake.

"Is Marce home?"

The woman stayed quiet too long. She whispered, "That family don't live here anymore."

"Sure," Louella whispered back. "How come?"

"They moved on to better pastures, I think."

"You're talking about the Telhaneys?" Louella said, louder now. "The Telhaneys!" she nearly yelled.

"That's right. That's them. That's right. They moved on to better pastures," the woman whispered.

Louella and the woman sat listening a moment to the oceanic shushing of the telephone lines.

"I used to live there," Louella said. "Is it a bad winter?"

"Bad storms. Good sun," the woman said at a decent volume. Then she whispered, "Good sun," as if to correct herself. "Refinery construction," she said.

Louella said, "The Telhaneys were always lucky people."

Again, the woman thought too long. "They weren't, I don't think," she whispered.

"You have a baby back there?" Louella asked.

The woman said there was no child. "It's time for me to go," she said.

Louella fell asleep on the kitchen sofa. Shelly, returning from the cannery at midnight, gently woke her.

**

Four hours later, Louella crawled out of her heavy covers. The furnace was on steady. There was bread in the cabinet. A new, unscooped peanut butter jar. They owned a fresh cartoon of thin-shell eggs. She hardboiled three and ate them straight out of the shell and burned her tongue. She made toast and drank two cups of orange juice. For lunch she packed bread and sardines and was proud of it. At four-forty, Sewall's dark truck pulled in. She left a note for Shelly: *Mumzy–Gone fishing. Call me in sick, alright? Love. L. Ps. thanks for the food. Hope it didn't go on credit.*

On a steep hill of the Holly Island Road, Sewall's truck slipped fast ten feet on black ice. "Whoopsy-doo," he whistled, when the tires found tar. The truck swooped over the island bridge.

Roy met them at the gangway. He had bought Louella oilskins. "Boy's size," he said gruffly, and that he hoped they fit her through the leg. Standing on the wharf with the skins in her hands, and all the men watching out of eye corners, she did not know how to thank him, so she did not.

Two of her could have fit inside one of the blue bait barrels. The men yanked them from the bait house and tipped them into troughs, spilling silver salted fish. She thought she could shift one if they just let her try it for a while. Salt and pogies or some flatfish spines with the cheek still on filled them. Rock and muscle and water was all. She could move those things, piecemeal. "Dark night," folks said to each other. Clouds bunched in. An elsewhere city turned them pink.

Roy came and gave her a rope and let her let the bait trays down the low tide gangway on it. Every manjack of them watched her do it. “Don’t let it go now too fast at the bottom,” Roy said. “Let it go fast enough to let it go. Faster than that. No need to be frightened of it.”

“Thing does weigh more than her,” someone else said.

Rangy John Rogers swayed in too close to her ear. “Don’t let it drop now in the girlie playtime.” He was long through the face like Jimmy.

She whipped fast about, smiling. “Your son is a heck of a nice boy,” she said.

John Rogers stepped away around her and loped down the gangway. She let the next bait tray full of pogy come sliding down after his ankles. When he turned to hear it coming she called through the wharf light, “Don’t worry now, John. I wouldn’t take you out like that,” and stopped the slipping rope. Some men heard and watched her a little longer and recalibrated. Most gently smiled for they were an aging bunch and had seen too much to want to be cruel. Sewall said later, “Don’t antagonize these men, Lou. They’ve got long days ahead.”

They took the *Ginny* out to sea. She stacked traps. The trap rope lay as though veins had been flayed and crossed on the deck. She thought she could be fast, if she had the years to think through how. The trap rope got tangled beneath the stack and Sewall pushed past her and pulled the rope in line.

“Well tell me Jesus how to do it right,” she said. “Don’t just fix it like that.”

He turned fast. “Rope has to come out the back of the trap where the bridle is see? or else the whole shit and caboodle will go in ass-end up, land on the hatch, not catch one thing. And you shouldn’t get pissy like that out here. It doesn’t serve anything.”

Quiet lobsters yanked up eight fathoms clamped onto each other’s joints and antennae. They shied from the blaring sun, never to be in the deep dark again. Blue-handed warm-blooded

things pulled them apart and banded their claws shut in rubber for the rest of their lives. Louella shifted a trap from the rail to the stern deck, fingers in the lattice and the edge against her thigh, whole body heaving with it when the boat tipped right.

"No need to bruise up your leg now like that," Roy called.

"Can't move it any other way," she yelled pleasantly back.

When you're five-foot-four and most of the world is heavier than you, what else can be done to shift it but to bruise the whole of the body?

When they set a string and it did go ass-end up, Roy said, "Well, that's what learning's for." She'd do it on the next one. That she had cost everyone a bit of money nobody said, for fishing was an imperfect gig and Roy was no longer in life for the money, he told anyone who would listen. He just wanted the *Ginny* to keep fishing after he was done. In the next string, as she swung the second trap about, Roy called, "Check it," and she did, pulling the rope free and clear.

On the steam home, Roy looked across the cabin at her and Sewall plugged together on the bench. His *Ginny* was a glowing orb. Beyond the masthead and stern lights, dark night swamped water. Gulls roosted on old land spits. "Tell her how you lost a basket of twenty-odd bugs last year, Sewall," he said.

Sewall shifted, grunted and told her nothing.

But across the lunch table the next day, Sewall Goode told Jerry Lavoie, "Did you know this little lady can work?" He rattled Louella's bicep. "A good old heifer."

Later, she caught a glimpse of Dorothy Goode in the bland concrete space beneath the school stairs. Dorothy closed a fist and beat her the curve of her skull, her eyes shut and mouth shaping words as if she knew incantation.

Chapter Twelve

Harris, after she had been sitting in his big chair awhile, said, “Sweet girl. When enough time passes by, you will find that there isn’t reason to be found in everything that happens. But thank heavens I believed it anyway.”

She picked her eye corner and smeared the crust on the chair arm. It was a purple Thursday evening. She had not seen Shelly since Sunday. Shelly worked five days at the cannery and would not quit the Sunday old lady, or her five twenties, until the old lady died for good or quit her first. On Sunday nights, Shelly showered for a second time. “Rinsing the apoptosis off,” she said, when she opened the bathroom door and found Louella waiting.

“I understand I’m in a better position to get a good view on things,” said Harris. “But not doing anything but waiting for the event to roll over you, child, that’s not because you’re meant to. Seventy-five a week is miserly pay for what you’re doing.”

“Says the dead man with no mortgage,” said Louella.

Harris thought, but did not say, And you, are you paying the mortgage? What is your money for? Knowing she had no answer she could put words to.

"Better to have more," said Louella. "You'd know that if you'd ever been poor."

"Does poverty have a minimum time frame to call it so?" Harris laughed and the room shook. Then he said gently, "You're worth more than seventy-five, doll."

She did not notice or mind that she was beginning to care for what was left of this Thomas Harris.

When Shelly's truck pulled in near midnight, Louella woke curled and safe-feeling in his warm chair, and waited for her mother to move through the house, dismantling her working self. When it seemed Shelly might be asleep, Louella followed her up the stairs. They slept in their separate rooms. The globe spun. In the quiet beaches, plovers stuck their feet into gravity, raced surf and dug for clams. So did people on mudflats.

**

In the night something found a deer half-rotted. The deer was gristle and ligaments and fur on bone. Perhaps the deer had been hidden in the salt bog and the sun stayed up long enough now to thaw what had frozen in deep winter. It was February, after all, at the back end of daylight savings and two months past equinox. People counted daylight as they did wealth, stoically, waiting for the pulse of more. The deer stank.

Louella was luxuriating in the good food Shelly had bought. There was whole milk and a fresh box of Grape Nuts and though she worried for her figure with the fat and worried for her gut with the fiber, she cracked the lid and the white milk glugged, so rich she could smell it.

The hairy waft of deer rot came in with the first bite. Sour as cream let to sit too long. She let the Grape Nuts settle in her mouth, tongued the grit of them. She had proudly eaten sardines and bread with bait stink in her nose and sea sickness in her throat but this was something foul, mammalian. She went out into the dim breaking morning onto that raggy stretch of globe, and

saw nothing except that way away towards the Bay of Fundy the sun was rising over scarp and water, and soon the edge of it would clip the distant wharf and boats everywhere were loading bait to haul bodies from the sea.

That tall Sewall could fish the water any day Roy asked, that Roy asked Sewall at all, rose a jealousy in her like daybreak itself up from her pelvis and into her teeth. The wind of it blew her down the porch steps.

In that gray light, the deer might have been strewn dune grass, wads of whitish sand. She stood still in the gravel until her eyes saw.

The earless skull lay near Shelly's truck tires. Eyes and tongue and other soft bits long gone but the meatless skin of the forehead remained, the teeth bold and long. Nearby the spine lay stretched on skin and fur from ribs like a storm-downed road sign bent up. The meaty ribs made a bowl, had collected a liquid and frost now sparkled about the curve of it. Louella kicked a hoof and sent the ankle spinning towards snow drift. It was Friday.

She had not called Frank to tell him she thought she was not so energetic as she seemed. She had a sense he might come anyway. She felt she had let a dog off a chain that should not have been let off the chain.

In a half hour, from the bus, she saw that someone had sketched one hand with splayed fingers and another with a thumb raised in the grime of Shelly's truck cap. What friend had Shelly made?

The day passed in a spring-like haze. People wafted about, exhausted by sun, knowing another solid month of winter slop was still to come before the river ran free for good. It was said, however, that Jimmy Rogers had a crush on a girl and that girl was Dorothy Goode.

The ripple of it bumped the edges of the halls. That they had kissed or more was uncovered by lunch. And it was true, when folks really looked, that it seemed the female Goode had a bit of a nervous zest in her step, like squirrels on tar before slow traffic.

In social studies, each student read a fragment of a speech and then sat down. Jeremy Tripp quoted three minutes of Bush's inaugural address given last month. "We have a place, all of us, in a long story. A story we continue, but whose end we will not see. It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old. The story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom." Somebody rustled in their seat. "The story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer. It is the American story." Jeremy Tripp cracked his neck. He coughed like he wanted to say something besides what he was saying. He was a great orator. Louella felt a conspiratorial shame for him. This proud poor child. He continued and he held his mouth like a tiny beak and affected a strange drawl. "A story of flawed and fallible people, united across the generations by grand and enduring ideals. The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born." There was a small silence and then applause. He had not looked down at his paper once. People liked Bush and did not yet grasp that a boy so sullen as Jeremy Tripp could be witty and ironic.

Louella read Eleanor Roosevelt's opening remarks for a speech given in Paris some fifty-three years before. She spoke of a French revolution, not believing old history was anything more than difficult fiction. She did not look up at all. When she sat down, Jeremy Tripp said into the clapping, "Well, wasn't that now something now wow."

Tired Mrs. Howes nodded at the front of the classroom behind her wide desk. It was too early in the year to be giving up on lesson plans, she knew, but it was damn good to sit silent a while.

**

A young buck emerged from the forest. He crossed the road far behind Frank's car, but neither Frank nor Louella saw.

She played with the door lock until Frank cleared his throat. He clutched her hand all the way to Red Hill, shifted with her palm. She asked him if he had listened to Bush's inaugural address.

"Which one?" he asked.

"About freedom," she said. She tried to amputate her hand at the wrist in her mind where his forefinger pressed tendon but she could not.

"Yes," he said, "which one."

He brought her, this time, quickly to the bedroom. Perhaps he thought if given a tea first she would run off. On the stairs he said, "Are you hungry?" She said she was not.

"It's good not to be hungry," he said. She could not think of a thing to say to that.

She felt as if she were in a dream she had once had, and a car was coming very fast towards her. She was at once in her body and a piece of the car's metal. Her teeth were too large for her head. The stair runner had gentle wear, its beige shag was bluing. He tugged her hand.

In the upstairs hall, more photos of a collected family hung serried and between them photos of things, of cars and beaches and boats, and she wondered if her photo would one day be up there in the slew of what he had owned deep enough to prove it with a picture. In the corners of the hallway, no dust gathered. Unsmudged photo glass glinted. There was the smell of lemon

dish soap. Certainly Frank did not clean this place. Who was the maid who tossed the condoms from the bedside waste.

She opened her mouth and Harris's deep voice came out of it: "I'm worth more than seventy-five."

Frank did not stop. There was no hitch in his step. He swung them into the bedroom as if entering a waltz. Some wind raced up from the bay where the lobster boats were offloading and smacked the house.

"I'm worth more than seventy-five." This time it was not a dead man's voice, but her own, more or less.

Frank stood next to her at the bed. He stood with a hand on her shoulder. "Louella," he said. Louella. He looked above her head. "It's not payment. Don't degrade yourself like that. It's a gift to you from me." He asked her if, when given other gifts, she demanded more. She looked out his bedroom window. The stretch of the bay she could see from that angle lay empty. Shoals stretched the water up. Low tide. She was ashamed but the shame was confused with something weightier. She opened her mouth. He cupped the side of her head. "Louella," he said. "I know it has been a difficult year for you. You've experienced significant loss. And change. The change of a move across the country. You are unwell," he told her. "Let me take care of you. I too lost a parent young. Have I told you that?"

She stood still and felt small and bad and piggish. He pulled her into him. He pressed her head to his shoulder. "Don't become someone you are not, Louella," he said. He kissed her cheek. "I will take care of you." When he said, "I know how to do this without being told," it was if he himself was a young boy for a moment, full of reproach for the mother who misunderstood his capacity to feel. He had a broad enough chest, a body somewhere between

Shelly's and Sewall's. "This summer," he said, "I will take you on my boat. We will sail to Portland. We'll go to the stores in Portland. You'd like that." Then he turned her around. He held her from the back and undressed her.

The far wall had a painting of a barn in a snow field with the roof caved in. But at the edge of the painting the snow receded and green grass sprouted dandelions. She thought of money. She thought of money. She would have enough of it to change something soon. To stand so still was an exertion. His fingers were cold and the skin old. He asked her to step out of her pants. He showed her how to put her mouth on his penis, he guided her head until she knew the rhythm of it. This went on for some time. This was work. She imagined she had the money. She did hate this man. There was a frozen ground in her head and she pushed what yelled to quit in her down flat on it, she pressed it underneath the soil. She knelt between him and his bed, her shoulders bumped the mattress. He throbbed in her mouth and if he came she would swallow it, for Lyd had said you must, and if he came he would be useless for sex and perhaps she would not feel him inside her again. She worked harder but he put a hand on her forehead and took himself out of her mouth. He bent her over the bed until his old legs went tired. He showed her how to sit on top of a man. His nipples slid off his chest. He fingered the bruises on her legs and said nothing of them. Her physical life was her own. He had a line scarred up his jaw from his neck that she had not seen before. It seemed to be part of someone else. She watched it. The rest of him flowed away from that scar. Her legs were also tired.

He mewled finally and came when he had turned her again away from him, on her stomach. Again he lay inside her. After a while, he said, "Would you like to take it off me?" He brought her hand to the condom. It felt as if she skinned him. She was tired as if she had been fishing. She saw the world from within a rocking skull, dropped the condom in the empty trash.

In the kitchen, he opened the fridge and stood to the side. What would she like? "Take anything at all. Come," he said, "come look." She slipped off the stool and stood in the fridge's chill but could not understand much of what she saw. She blinked and felt a sadness spreading from her groin, pushing at the coil of her intestines, her porous lungs. "Toast?" she said.

"Toast," he said. It seemed she had failed something. She did not know what. "Toast," he said, and asked her about her mother. What was her mother like as a mother?

"As a mother she is fine," she said, not knowing quite what she meant by what she said. "It's as a person she's rough."

He smoothed his hair and put the back of his hand to his mouth and then she saw that he was yawning. It shook him. "That is," he said finally, "an interesting perspective to have as the child of the parent." He would have to think on it. The bread sat toasting. Frank got out butter and honey and two kinds of marmalade, a small silver paddle for each. When the toast came up he gave it to her on the same blue plate she had eaten the salmon salad. He put more bread in the toaster. "Two is good," she said, "two is plenty."

"These are for me," he said.

Neither said a thing for a while. Perhaps he was tired too. They ate the toast delicately. He spread his own marmalade thick.

He drove her home and because the winter season was beginning its leaching, he drove her for the first time not in night but darkening twilight. They had not seen the moment of sunset, when the sky was a spill of purple rag. At the gravel by the salt bog, he unzipped her jacket. He did not fondle her, but seemed to take pleasure in slipping the money into the jacket's inside pocket. "There," he said, with finality. "There."

She walked towards the house and the smell of the deer got deeper. On the porch it was a foul mess of a stink. She climbed back down the porch steps. Perhaps the frozen ground was all that kept the house upright and spring would dismantle it. She stood still a while. Then, as if she had known where to go all along, she turned east and followed the side of the porch where the roof melt had worn an ice channel in the snow. Around the corner of the porch she stopped again. In the east side, a hole was kicked in the lattice and the deer's spine and ribs of the lay here, pulled halfway under. It was darkish now, but there was a warmth at the tail edge of wind. She stood until the death of it frightened her and then she hurried inside.

Frank had paid her five twenties that day. If this was hourly, it was some twenty-five an hour. The way work shaped a life began, in some young way, to make sense to her. She settled deep into Harris' chair, told him about Delilah and her father, the nice abductor.

**

There were blizzards and then it was the first of March. Shelly arrived home at midnights with the skin beside her eyes tired. As though from smiling, though it was not from smiling, she said, but from the hiss of steam glue that narrowed her eyes behind goggles. But she did laugh too long often, lately. It was Shelly who was like someone newly in love.

The Abrahamses ate sardines, filled their trash with botched sardine cans. "Mark gets first pick," Shelly said, of Mark Tripp. Who worked down in quality control, he had been there that long.

Shelly, after two paychecks and a bit paid towards the past-due mortgage and the twenty-five dollar half-fill delivery charge paid on top of the hundred dollar oil bill, bought tampons and pads. She worked six days a week and made six-hundred-odd biweekly after tax, paid out every other Friday. They used the tampons and pads luxuriously.

They made other trash and filled plastic shopping bags with the wrappers of the stuff they had bought. Not much, but some, and it was colorful. They plugged the fridge back in and listened to it freezing, worried that it might crack itself. When it didn't, Shelly bought ten pounds of frozen chicken all at once on sale. With a chopping knife and shoe horn, she broke two breasts off the pink pimpled lump off it everyday for a week.

Louella's crotch had become a different place. She did not know it like it was part of her. Had it ever been, before Frank? The condom's rubber smell got caught in her hair.

In bed, he put his mouth to her hipbones and sucked. He fondled the growing crest of her cheekbone, where it started in her hair, and the young breasts. She lay and let it happen and thought it would get easier someday. After, when she left the cream bed, and turned her back to him to dress, he spoke to her of her spine. He lay propped on his pillows. "The spine on you," he smiled. "It is like an older woman's." His laugh was a tired mutter in the evenings. He liked her thin. The five twenties every Friday stacked up unspent like a long wail beneath the carpet. She felt often, laying stiff beneath his warm, moving body, that she had tripped, she was falling into fast water.

**

She ate brushing elbows with Dorothy Goode. It was uncertain which of them was in the extra chair. Holly Goode had made meatloaf and asked Louella about the prairie, the high mid-west. She had never been.

"It is a wonderful place, Holly," Louella said. "Great people. The community is something else."

Sewall Senior had a body big enough to suggest universal dominance. Freckled and wide. The lips were thicker than Sewall's, tired and sad.

"It's colder up there than here," she said. "Way colder. People die, left and right. Exposure. All the time."

Sewall Senior's mouth cracked open like a boulder in the woods. "It's that dryness. No ocean. That dryness. Counties up north have it, the dryness. It gets down there too." He sopped meat juice with bread. The table listened to them both. Forks rattled plates and the distant waves broke at land's end.

Louella said that that was probably right.

"But there's nowhere to drown, is there?" he said. He looked around grandly at the old walls of his home.

Dorothy asked for the bread bag and Sewall passed it across Louella's plate.

Louella said that that was true. "My dad died on the job. Somebody goofed."

"Drownings don't even make the news here. All the people drowning, this state. Warm winters are more dangerous than cold, you don't know what to trust to walk on." He was very proud of this.

The white bread was sweet and the meatloaf itself sliced into logs weighing no less than a pound each. The five of them chewed, drank and swallowed.

"Really great meatloaf, Holly," Louella said.

"Sweet dear," Holly Goode said. The secret was that you cooked canned tomatoes in, you crushed them with a fork and baked them in. "In the summer," she whispered, leaning across the table, "real tomatoes." Everyone but Louella looked away.

"The summer," Louella sighed. And Holly Goode sighed too. They made a good act, playing at loving mother and daughter.

"Ketchup," Sewall said. "Ketchup."

"Ketchup," Dorothy said quietly, and passed the Heinz.

Holly Goode asked Louella about Shelly. And Louella said, "She's just started a job, started working at the Serport Cannery. In the office. Doing their paperwork and things. She's doing great."

"She and I and Sewall Senior went to some years of school together. I don't think we were close, that close, but. Is she doing the books?"

Louella said that that was right, that Shelly was doing the books. She tore at a tomato and pink water bled out of the loaf. On her left side Dorothy breathed long and ate. She was like a wide pond you think might have been once thawed and full with spake and water striders, but is frozen now and the surface does not move, you can walk right across. Sewall reached under the table and flicked her leg. His father had thick fingers, hands that might have weighed as much as the meatloaf.

"The cannery is a good place," Holly Goode said. "I had an uncle who worked there and he said it saved his life. He was a veteran. Second war. He came back strange as hell but the cannery, it was like he'd found god again. He hadn't, of course. Born Catholic. War turned him atheist. "

Frank's fingers had dug at her, the first time, when he saw that he had made her bleed. When he held those bloody fingers up to show her, he sighed, "Oh," so softly. She did not know what he meant, then or ever. She sucked on a small lump of meatloaf. Tomato skin plastered a tooth. She thought about how to win a conversation and figured she could not ever lose in the Goode house if Dorothy was there. After, she helped wash the dishes.

**

She and Sewall lay curled like younger children. He held her beneath heavy wool, she rested her skull below his chin. They whispered to each other of tomorrow's catch weight, the price, about the boat the Trundy boys had gone into debt for.

"Will be all their lives," said Sewall. He paused then whispered, "Dad thinks you're something else. You could tell. The best thing ever moved to this part of the world and got on a boat." He huffed all this into her ear, touched her neck. On the other side of the wall, Dorothy shifted and her bed squawked and those two lay still.

"Maybe we could do it one of these days," Sewall said.

Louella had been rubbing her thumb on his sternum. She quit and held her breath. His ceiling had old glowing stars.

"It'd be nice to show our. You know. How into each other, you know." He moved his hand like if he did it slow enough she would not feel. Kept whispering like the whisper was a hand he was waving out to the left while the right wound up for a stabbing. The waistband of her pajamas was loose, and his slipped easy into the hot space between flannel and groin. She watched the ceiling stars. He was nothing like Frank. "Just forget it all," Sewall whispered. His bed was small, a child's twin, a bunkbed lopped in half. Wool blankets pressed on her like the weight of a hot ocean. "I'm all yours, baby girl. Just forget the rest." The wood of the house kept the winter out. The ancient water turned over in the bay. She did not know what she felt, for it seemed dumb to be turned off dead. He was so in love and ready, after all. Frank spent whole afternoons entering and exiting her, bubbling at mouth corners with the exertion of it. Sewall scrubbed her warm crotch, all over. She pulled at his arm crook, but too gently and his fingers kept on working. Frank had knowledgeable fingers. Sixty years of woman-knowledge. Sewall

worked like the knob which neither she nor he had a name for yet was a bolt rusted in fast. When Frank touched her, that little knob did things to her body that she would rather they did not. The day before, his tongue had bent between the folds of her. She did not think she had ever come with Frank, though she thought she had come close and it had not been good to feel that. She did not know if he expected her too. There would be a point it seemed, when he would have enough of her and he would shift his body and penetrate her. The work went lay still, wait. Lay still and don't quit or run. Push back on the hate and deaden what deep guttural fear rises up. The same that kept her fast through fishing's long hours.

"Get off me, Sewall," she said. He tried a different direction, a little harder. He tried his thumb but that was a failure of angle. He briefly inserted himself to the knuckle into the place where blood comes out and penises go, but he did not like it, or he was frightened. He resumed the rubbing of the knob. "Get your friggen hands out," she said, to the spangled ceiling. Her palms rested on her belly. Frank had brown melanoma scars on his scalp. Perhaps he would put her in his will. If it felt with Frank like it felt right now, with Sewall, things would be easier, she thought. A sore nothing. Sewall kept at it as though he thought he knew how to read between her lines. She lay still and waited but all she found was a deadness and a loathing. Finally, she tossed herself around and whispered, "Oh, Sewall, baby!" like Lyd said you were supposed to. His fingers left. There was the smell of old urine and menstruation. He flipped fast on his back and brought her obligatory hand to him. He was sweating and the goo came out with a whimper before she had really gotten a grip. Then he slept, and she lay awake beside the mess in the wool blankets. In several hours, they rose and ate toast and she shat in his bathroom in the deep quiet of the house.

**

The *Ginny* broke from the fog wall a mile offshore. They had enough bait on board to stack eight pogies in a trap and expected a full tank at $4.05 a pound. The lobstermen were feeling like rich was a thing they could give to their children. The sun was out and the cold was biting but they had been this cold before. They fished miles from where pine roots broke rock.

Roy asked Louella about her Friday job. Out there she could believe anything she said for what she said was just sound to stitch two people together, sound just slipping away into the wide open blue. In the back of each wave time turned over on itself and began it fresh.

"Sometimes I read her poetry. She's old. She likes that sort of thing."

"Poetry!"

"Easy money, Roy. Whitman."

"Easy money," said Roy. He smiled quietly at her across the boat cabin. Sewall was out in the red dawn taking a wiz over the stern.

"How's Ginny," she said.

"Ginny," Roy said. "Ginny. She's alright. We're old people, Louella, in a place that seems changed and I think that makes her sad sometimes. I don't know if it makes me sad. You'd have to ask her." He smiled down at Louella and Louella did not know why. "If you get old, do it gently." The sun went straight to the back of Roy's eyes, and she saw how he had been a young man once and he had been handsome once and perhaps he still was, he had bones beneath his skin. The Acadian mountains pinked in the distance. A lone gull flew fast out of the fog, as though late or fleeing, then it cried. The engine worked hard. The cabin smelled of forty years of WD-40 and fishing, of dungy crab cooked on midwinter steams on the small stove, of all the many sternmen Roy had ever employed. It was expected that Sewall would be the last.

"Come talk to her sometime," Roy said. "You'd have things to talk about, I think. She wanted a daughter. She'd tell anybody she did." He brought the *Ginny* around into the swell and the wind cut across the stern. Sewall came back in, shouting about the cold.

They hauled fast and ate the big meatloaf lunch Holly Goode had put in one tupperware with three forks. The day went warmer. The wind came up but then laid down flat and they hauled until the yellow sun set. She still stacked traps some fishing days, but she was going thinner, for Frank liked waifs, and the traps had gone heavier in her hands. But she could band all day, there were that many lobster back then.

Chapter Thirteen

A jay bird sat on a pine branch eating a chickadee. The chickadee's head fell. The jay looked down at it. The swoop of loss catches a person like a joke. The chickadee had bled a little in the snow, and the head landed in this spot. Then the jay flew off with the body.

Shelly had not come home the night before. It was Tuesday morning and the truck tire ruts lay gleaming and empty.

Louella ate toast and eggs and waited for Shelly. She scrubbed the pan down and dressed and waited for Shelly. She looked for a note explaining things. Then Pat Nigla was outside filling the mailbox which meant she was about to miss the school bus. She poured coffee in one of Harris' tall travel mugs slow and still Shelly did not come out from where she was hiding.

"You never did travel anywhere, did you?" she called to Harris. Then she said goodbye to him.

The bus rumbled three miles over new frost heaves, towards the Tripp trailer. She drank her coffee.

Lamb's red truck sat parked in the Tripp drive. Or it was another red truck. But those were the Abrahamses' bright plates, there was the grime-drawn thumb. Ed and Jeremy fled from

the trailer with jackets flapping. She pretended she had not been watching Lamb's truck for it to become someone else'. Or perhaps Shelly had been at home in bed this whole time and the Tripp boys had stolen the truck for a lark. Or perhaps Shelly had broken down and Mark Tripp at the cannery had hauled her home and maybe he was a mechanic and would fix the truck in the drive. Lyd had said he would do anything for a woman after all. Shelly, Louella reflected, was a woman.

Jeremy Tripp hummed Yankee Doodle behind her. "Your mum is nice," he said, through the plasticky gap between window and seat.

"I truly don't know how you stand living like you do," she said.

"Eat, sleep, shit. Just like you, friend. Your boyfriend fucks his sister."

"You're a twat. Get a grip. Take a pill."

They learned some things in school. In third period, a fire alarm sent them outside through lunch.

Students gathered in clumps on patched tar. Teachers took a tired headcount and the numbers seemed about right. Sewall held Louella in his arms and angelic Lyd eyed them and smiled and turned away.

At the edge of the gathered students, a freshman girl with a good voice began singing Jingle Bell Rock and then a senior girl joined. In the distance came the wailing fire trucks. The freshman had a voice like a sexless child, the senior belted the high notes quite long. As if sea-bound together, Louella and Sewall swayed close. Perhaps Frank would die and she and Sewall could live comfortably on what money Sewall made lobstering. The senior went low but could not sustain the note and it was just the freshman girl with shut eyes singing flutelike, and

young friends watching like she was not a girl but a fledgling at the edge of a precipice. Then the senior caught up and everyone relaxed.

Louella turned her face into Sewall's chest. "Who'd hire me," she said. His jacket roughed her temple. Perhaps they could lobster together. Captain and his wife. Perhaps she could have her own boat. Two captains, married.

Sewall asked what she meant by 'hire.'

Someone cried that they smelled smoke. Another answered, yes, she too smelled it. One of Sewall's old buddies left in his Impala. The firetrucks rammed up the hill and the milling students made way.

"Hired like for fishing," she said.

Firemen jumped from the red truck, old men, people's fathers and brothers. Half the state was women, where were they.

"Hire like for fishing," Sewall said. "Hired like for fishing." He asked her if she didn't want to go to school, do something gentler. But he was not making fun of her.

"Who would hire me," she said.

The firemen rushed through the building. Some people had not brought out their jackets, and stood miserable and shivering. Some left. Worn out teachers watched them go, decided the afternoon was shot as is. Louella saw firemen pass by windows.

"I don't know that anyone would, Lou." It was apology, how he said it.

The two carolers moved onto Dona Nobis Pacem. They sang three words back and forth. Old leaves blew and bell buoys listed far away on the slack tide and trawlers offshore scraped the last of the Atlantic Cod from the once teeming banks. Plenty had turned already to watch the girls. Mrs. Howes, folks saw, was crying without shame. But then, she had been a war widow for

three decades. She liked old movies with symphony scores. She often cried. Nobody saw Jeremy Tripp listening with his eyes shut, taking deeper breaths than he had to just stand there. The girls finished. Nothing but the yapping fire alarm. Then the older girl called to the younger, "How about Mary did you know?" The younger did not know it and the moment was fumbled. Everyone turned away to watch the building.

No fire but a wire in the old walling had fizzled. Winter squirrels seeking warmth had found a hole in the infrastructure and crawled in, chewing. Thin smoke did curl through the library vents. The shelves that housed the books on the bits of history the US military was proud of would be cordoned off through June. The younger girl tried Rockin Around the Christmas Tree, her voice like one ribbon hung to fly. She sang until a friend tugged her arm.

"I don't understand you women sometimes," Sewall said.

"I know it."

They went back inside but nothing they had been learning before the fire alarm was so important anymore. Every single person, for an afternoon, felt alright.

**

The Harris roof was tender as skinned knees. Soon the rough seasons would wear it through. The junk on the porch in the warm air had gone brighter. The low-flying planes had returned with the good weather. The deer carcass was mostly gone, and the smell too, or at least they had forgotten what their porch was without the stink. And the Abrahamses had money to spend.

Shelly had a grin that split neck from eyes, suggesting she had not known hope was gone but now that it was back, it rode her hard, it whipped her. She seemed newly baptized by a near

drowning. She pulled in and out of the drive with great oomph. Shelly's money was in the bank and Louella's under the carpet.

The carpet had begun to feel less like her own and more like Harris's skin. It resisted less when she pulled it back, it took the money easily. But the house might burn and where would they go then? Shelly and Louella and Harris. And the rest of the American dollar would be worth that much more, once her carpet money was soot. Better to will it into safety, add more, let the top layer protect the bottom. Neither Abrahamse ever said a thing about Shelly parked overnight at the Tripp house.

Louella carried a fifty on her at all times, for the thrill of it. She had yet to break it. And there would come a time maybe, that she could use the hundred. It would be a little like pawning a family ring. She had bought conditioner, however, at Bev's. Though she had had to say, because Lyd said, "You use *that*?" that this conditioner was for rug cleaning. Her hair wafted pink and purple smells.

She stood on the school tar in the pattern of her life. She felt dulled, for even fear can become boring.

Four o'clock came and Frank did not. Seagulls who saw in the distance the end of killing storms wheeled over far pines. The school was deserted, Louella thought, but every once in a while someone would get in a car and leave or the basketball team would slog by. If she ran he might come right then. She did not know if he would sit in the car and wait. But then, he had said she was the most beautiful little girl he'd met, that she made him feel fresh. She did not think he could so easily find another with her sort of power. She held her hair up to her nose and sniffed.

The school hill was yellowed with dead grass, winter's rot. Sewall said that in summer they would, he and she, pick blueberries. He did so every summer, with Dorothy. Filled pails. Dorothy made good blueberry cornbread, better than anyone's. Did Louella know that?

Mark Tripp's Toyota came up the hill, Jeremy Tripp crouched in the passenger seat. They both cupped their hands into soft wind as though the car had sprouted fleshy wings. Mark slowed and waved kindly to Louella. She sucked her cheeks. He was half a decade older, a man full grown with nothing left to learn, nothing left to become.

"Say, Louella," Mark called, "Jeremy says you're a math whizz. That's something to feel good about, that is."

Jeremy unfolded himself from the car. He did not meet her eye. He was growing quite tall and seemed to have not quite figured out his limbs yet.

"I was too," Mark said. "Good at math. There was a math team when I was in school! Way, way back in the day!"

As Jeremy flung past her, Frank arrived and braked hard. He stood, ushered her into the passenger seat like an eager chauffeur new to the job.

She held herself regally. "Thank you, Mark. Goodbye." She stepped down into the school drive and fell into the leather seat, down there where it was suspended just above tar by tire and let those Tripp boys see her, she thought, let them see what a girl like her looks like, framed by a good car's metal.

At his house, Frank hugged her between the rosebushes. As Lamb once had. Lamb with his chin upon her head, his hand upon her scalp, father's chest and a father's arm.

Her body and her mind with their horns locked, wrenching, bellowing, waiting for dispersal.

**

Frank cupped her genitals as if catching water. He pinched her bones and praised them. He said she was like a dancer, she had a dancer's body, a different species than girl. He had likely been to ballets, as Lyd had done when she went to New York. The skin on him smelled always of a milk that had gone sour, that fatigue of an old man's cells. When she herself was quite old and the world she had been born into felt irrevocably changed, the lobster gone north seeking life, she would understand the lengths that people will go to, to pretend they are not closer to death than they are to birth. Certainly she would be one of Frank's later memories.

She lay still and waited for patience. His chest was white-furred and coarse, breasts hung like drained bags. Patience was not simply an act of waiting. He cupped her ears, he bit her chin. Each Friday she wondered if she would come back. He liked to thumb her face when he neared his final pump. She thought it might get easier, as jobs often do. She had accepted that she hated this man, and so she had been reexamining what hate might be, and so had begun to make a nest for this new idea of hate to reside in her. His thumb stretched her cheek skin, opened her lips, touched her teeth. Over winter it seemed he had slowed in his walking. If he died right now she would not take his car.

"Your hair's different," he said. He lay beside her. "I didn't want to say, but it's different."

Wet spilled out onto the bed. "I switched conditioner." The lubricant felt like a bodily accident. Who changed this man's sheets.

He slipped off the condom. It was very full that day. Leaned across her, plopped it into the trash. She did not know if he used that wicker basket for anything else for it was always empty when she arrived. He was quiet and did not touch her head. And though she did not like

his palm on her, rubbing at her jaw, her scalp, the absence was a type of change that worried her. She tilted her forehead to him.

He said that maybe she could not smell it. He took a breath. He turned away. “It is not a very nice smell.”

Later, when she was drier and he had rested and they had worked at cups of calm tea, he left her by the front door coat hooks with her shoes on. She heard him walk the stairs. She wondered if he had forgotten this part, if he did not want to drive her home today. She traced the route back, and thought that she could hitch if she had to, that people always picked up little pretty blonde girls.

But if she could not, and she walked until the dark came, she had no jacket, and she would freeze and likely die. She could take one of his jackets, if he did not come back. They were good jackets. She reached a hand and fondled a long black wool coat, the type she had seen a woman wear once, when she and Shelly were hauling furniture. Nice thick wool. She would not freeze in that.

He came back with a shopping bag. He put it in her hands. “The good stuff,” he said. When she did not look in the bag he said, “Well. Go on.”

Then he went out to the car. She followed and pulled the quiet, heavy door shut. The bag held a square, white bottle of conditioner. They drove out of Red Hill. The days were longer now and they did not drive into darkness.

The pretty sunset smelled of living dirt and icemelt. Frank told her another story of good luck. He had been a taxi driver in New York and had married the daughter of a rich man. “It wasn’t on purpose. We were very much in love. It wasn’t on purpose, the richness.” He had borrowed the money from his father-in-law for an apartment building. It was the first building he

owned. He had owned it all his life. He had only just sold it. “It was the last thing I owned, from those years. But everything else has come from then. You start wondering how things would have been different. If we had not met. We met dancing. If her father had not been rich.”

At the bay side of Maton Bay Road, Sewall Goode’s truck came towards her out of the brilliant western sky. Her and Frank’s visors were down. She did not see the truck was Sewall’s until the two vehicles were passing. For one brief moment, she and Frank and Sewall and Dorothy Goode sat in a row, two facing one way, two facing the other, and passed quickly. She saw Sewall look down at the nice car. Then they were gone, taillights heading nowhere. She watched the side mirror.

“You know them,” Frank said, finally.

“School friends,” she told him. “The girl’s weird.”

After a half mile or so, the bog blooming up on their right, mayflies out tumbling in columns, Frank said, “I didn’t find my stride until after those years. You’ll find yours.”

She did not know if he meant highschool or his years in love. At Harris yard’s edge, he took the plastic shopping bag from her and slipped the five twenties from his wallet into the bag. She showered, and washed her whole body with the conditioner. It smelled of something she did not know. A plant.

**

The prairie in winter was no less killing than the ocean. By a miracle someone might strike out, cross it alone.

Louella swayed at the drive end. She thought of Lokkertville summers and missed the wide fields and the simple rigs, how she knew the people and the language for that people and

how their money moved. Her elbow nubs were dry and sharp enough to gut. A blustery Wednesday morning. It was spring.

The skyhigh pines across the bog made a dark wall. This property they were bound to was three acres of bog, brush and trouble. The pines might fetch a lot if they were to hire men to lumber. She kicked gravel. She was sixteen and tired inside her body. She lifted her palms and spat on the new yellow scars there, calluses that would soon peel, if she never hauled a trap again. Light enough to see the edge of cloud out towards the Atlantic and the color of the flesh beneath her fingernails. The coming engine of Pat Nigla's mail truck on the dewy road. If she never fished again, it would hurt her.

Harris had said, as Louella slipped from the house, "What cause have you, dear, to keep flailing yourself against a sharp thing like this?" If that winter and its mean poverty were over, was the thing that whipped her to working bound soon to die?

She had turned and she thought, for an instant, she had seen the man who spoke, but it was a tree's bending shadow, shifting on the kitchen wall. "You know. You just can't quit knowing nothing is certain once you know it," she said. "Maybe you croaked before you knew it. But you can't quit knowing something like that."

"Dear, there is a slim but treacherous leap between the three summits of fear and hope and knowledge. Mind you don't confuse them too long. It will one day be an old dog and new trick sort of thing."

She had passed through the kitchen door then, and snapped it shut behind her. Harris rumbled from the windows of the house like a made-up woman who flirts with her eyes, "A few hundred more dollars won't save you, dear. Quit the frightened thing that pushes you for more. You are a child. With or without it, they will still see you for what you are. Don't I know it."

In one swift spin she had bent and scooped a handful of gravel and lashed it at the house and shattered a living room window pane. The glass simply gave up. A slim mountain cataract paused then falling.

Pat Nigla's jeep pulled in with the breeze. Warm chickadees gusted. Pat Nigla looked as though she had spent the winter eating desserts. Louella wrapped her own elbow in a palm and caressed the bone there, the swoop of the rough skin from tiny bicep onto the joint end, she pinched what fat she could find and was hungry. Pat slipped a wad of bright coupons inside the mailbox. She turned and called, "Have we made it through, Louella?"

Louella frowned down her nose. It was hard to do this at the tall woman, but she managed. "Might come back," she said, of anything.

Pat smiled. Her teeth were very straight. Moneyed-teeth could always be seen from a long ways away. Poor teeth too. The breeze took what frizz on Pat's head was not scraped back into the elastic and turned it up in a halo. Things that the winter had kept from changing were decaying. Log, beetle husk, fox shit, bird carcass. Bog water upwelled decades-old junk.

"Rough job standing out waiting all the time, is it?" Pat said. Not laughing at the girl, not quite. Pat swung back up into the mail jeep and was gone. A spring plane cut low overhead and scared up the crows, shook Harris' roof shingle.

Louella stood at her locker as if dropped. She had been thinking of the money under her carpet. She had eight-hundred-and-one dollars and forty-three cents. She could buy a plane ticket, though she did not know where all those passing planes landed. Midforest fortress, hidden. She leaned her forehead into the grate of her locker. It was comfortable to close her eyes like this. Perhaps if she were suddenly sick, broken-legged, struck dumb, she could lay in her blanket bed awhile and Shelly would come home in the evenings. That she missed her mother

something godawful stung her throat. Shelly's new joyful and fleeting presence was not a presence at all. Where was the dim mother she had grown up with?

At her side, Lyd Perry whispered, "Are you praying, Louella?"

Louella rolled her forehead on the locker and opened an eye. There was Lyd.

Lyd was nodding. "Yes. It is time for prayer."

Louella was hungry. She was dead dog tired. "Is it?"

Lyd put one purple nail to her red lip, breathed Oh. "Did Sewall not call you, Louella?"

Sewall had not called Louella.

"Dorothy," Lyd said. "He's out looking, Louella. He's out looking. God knows, the boy is out looking."

"Dorothy Goode," Louella said.

Had Louella not noticed? Lyd pressed a palm to Dorothy's locker door. "Her locker is right here, Louella. She's been gone twenty-four hours. Missing! Twenty-four hours, Louella!"

"Aha," said Louella.

Lyd took a step back.

And if Dorothy Goode was missing, what then? Winter, at its leaving, took things all the time.

**

On Thursday, Sewall wore his pale, loose-collared shirt. He smelled of aftershave. He looked both older and younger. A scared boy caught in the dry skin and muscle of an aged face. He guffawed often with wide-open eyes and then clamped his mouth shut. He would not say Dorothy's name at all. It was a pain in his ass, he said, driving around for nothing.

He grinned very wide for everyone and stuck to Louella like spack on a dumb wall, kissed her cheek often and hard, held her hand too tightly in the hall, hauled her into him, as though she were a skiff on a line. She pulled away a little, by the water fountain. He pulled her back. She laughed and twisted and he kept her.

"Stay," he said, like a boy to a toy.

In Home Ec, they burnt brownies. The cardboard boxes of plastic babies rested on the high shelf, their batteries taken out. The boxes each read: My Little Learning Baby™, except one, which was turned around and showed instead its disclaimers and instructions and choking hazards.

Louella left with grease on her wrist bone. She could have laid down and slept on the floor, rested happily on a gurney for months. She shouldered her bookbag and stumbled. Sewall was there, waiting outside the door.

"Jeeze," he said. He pried her hand from her pocket and held it, tugged her through the shifting hall. Their bookbags were big lumps of other people's thoughts they hauled on their shoulders. He had picked the small pimples across his neck, one leaked orange goo. Under the little blue hallway beneath the stairs where boys and girls in love made out and where she had once seen Dorothy beat her own head, Sewall hugged her hard to him. "Aren't you horny today? Hard to not be horny on a spring day like today." He scrubbed at the denim of her crotch, and sucked on her neck.

She said it felt nice, oh.

Flecks of bait salt behind his ear. When her mouth was near his scalp, she tasted fish head, deep water, Sewall Senior's cologne. The flat shadows of folks slid across floor tile. It was colder under those stairs. He breathed like he was trying to calm a seasickness, frowning at the

horizon on a rough day. They had not taken their backpacks off. She shoved her hand between the bag and his body and there it stuck, where it was warm and damp.

Later, Lyd said, "That's right. You've got to keep his spirits up. Maybe it's time you did the deed. Bang him dead. You know. Yazam. He needs it."

Funny how a memory forms. Becomes into a little path one can walk down. Follow the bigger flagstones until the path sinks in a mud season and the grass grows over. When the path ends, keep walking that direction. Perhaps you'll find it again, if you never turn once.

The next day, Sewall was not in school. It was said that he was fixing traps in Roy's yard, but someone had seen him driving through Goodesboro's downtown towards Maton Bay and had told Jimmy Rogers and Jimmy told anybody who stayed still long enough.

It was a small town. People muttered. No secrets here. John Day had walked to the police station in the basement of City Hall. He had stood at the little wooden counter and told Officer Nelson that he had gone out for a cigarette in the nice purple evening on Monday. Gone out to sit with his cigarette and a tea on the little back deck.

He lived in a one-bedroom downtown apartment with his long-time roommate Ronnie Schrüder. Ronnie estimated that it was around six o'clock, because the sunset had been so pretty, mackerel skies, but it was coming on for dark, too.

John Day said he saw Dorothy Goode on Tuesday evening wearing large red mittens, walking the dirt and gravel of Front Street. Potholes. All the winter potholes. She was walking slow around them, they were gray potholes, the color of the old clay, the same color as the ocean bottom and John Day had thought it was strange. Dorothy, how she walked. Not the color of the potholes.

He thought it was nice that she was out walking, the evening being so fine. He just thought, now that he thought of it, that the red mittens were strange. It was a little warm for them now, and they were so large, as though they belonged to a slightly different type of human, which is why, likely, he had remembered her at all.

Chapter Fourteen

Each warm sunrise and sunset was like a fine meal after a long sickness, saying in the gut, Yes, you made it, yes, it's done. Let's see if hope alone will hold it.

Louella lay in her nest of blankets. She watched through the front window a sunrise the color of seagrass. It was Saturday morning. A plane came from the west and landed in distant trees and the roar of it was tremendous, sudden, and then forgettable.

Two seagulls sat on the Harris roof, cracking jokes. She reached a hand between her legs, pressed her palm heel to her warm groin until she felt blooming life down there but then it was Frank she saw. She stopped. She dreamt of dropping through air in a nice car from a place someone told her repeatedly was heaven.

Shelly's knuckle on the door woke her. Sun shone through dust motes. The motes rose as gnats in frenzy mate in summer.

"Louella. Sweetie," Shelly whispered through the door. The sound of her was too kind for a Saturday morning.

Louella watched the dust motes and asked who had died.

"There's bacon on."

"Did Grandma die?" Bad luck followed some families. And Jacoba was old and fat, after all. Louella sat up. She saw dark tree tops, soft as close clouds. A long car horn was carried from town on the wind. Somebody angry or perhaps joyful, still drunk, saying goodbye to a lover. Shelly was quiet long enough. Jacoba was certainly dead.

"Are we inheriting? Is it a motherload? Is she in the hospital?" She would not ask about Dorothy Goode. Things happened, she had wanted to tell Sewall. Things happen and then it gets worse, boy. Under the stairs, she let him bruise her neck like an infant on a nipple, and he did not cry in front of her, but she could see that he had, those soft waves beneath his eye. "She's freaking fine," is all she had said to him. And he had stretched his jaw as if surprised, and said that he knew that, he did. Yes, he did know that. Frank had seen the hickies, pressed them gently.

Shelly leaned on the door as she opened it and studied her daughter on the floor. Her daughter looked back. Shelly looked good for seven in the morning and for someone who'd gotten home from a hard job at midnight. Clean jeans, tighter, a periwinkle button-up. She had a friendly cleft growing in the softness of her right cheek.

"There's bacon on," Shelly said again. The salted fat came in through the door. "Somebody is coming to breakfast that I'd like you to meet," she said. "That I've been spending time with and that I would like to spend time with here." Shelly began to say that this person was not replacing their Lamb, but stopped and looked out the window. "Anyway," she said, and turned and left.

Louella rose. She got dressed as if going to battle. She combed her hair out and sprayed it down with White Rain, bought at Bev's Corner Store for two-dollars ten-cents. It was like spraying Marce Telhaney on her head. She applied eyeshadow in what Lyd's Seventeen Magazine had called the Throw it On! Look. She marveled at the things she now owned, these

precious plastic cases which could engage her in the silent language of the put-together, superior and beautiful, the grown-up.

Bacon smoked in the oven. Dark coffee sputtered. Shelly had spent money on grapes and name-brand Wonder Bread, there was an unopened quart of milk. There was creamer! Shelly ripped the top of a white sugar bag. She hefted it, and poured some into one of Harris' little bowls. The sugar from a different, hotter part of the world, bleached to nothing but a sweet taste. Shelly patted her neck as if to check for firmness, wiped the counter and stole a glance outside. She stuck a spoon in the sugar, looked at it, and took it out again. She said, a long while after she had looked, "You look nice."

Louella said, "You spent a lot of money."

A bank of white clams, when touched, will clench their strong hinge ligament, shut out water and predator. Like so, Shelly's spine shrank, her shoulders rose. Fat in the oven popped. The sun was fully risen, spiraled out over the water. People were far into their fishing days.

"I didn't mean anything by it, Ma."

But the quiet continued. It had already been there. They would forget where it had come from. Memory would rot into other things and Shelly and Louella would grow older together, they would have hurt backs, cut their hair, learn to use the internet and cell phones, have good years and bad. They would hope for things. They would, in the Harris house, drink their coffee and talk pleasantly enough of their days, but the talk would not go much deeper in any direction, for they would not know, anymore, where the source of the silence lay. If they dug too deep, it was possible they would burst the vein and not know how to staunch it.

Shelly shook the coffee pot. It spat. "You go to school with his little brother. Both of them."

Louella took in a breath. Then she swore in a variety of ways. She asked her mother and God why. Not quite knowing what reason she was looking for. Their blue eyes locked and snapped. A bit more came out. About Mark Tripp's age and Shelly's. What was she supposed to tell folks. "I mean really what am I supposed to say? To anybody? I'll be a leopard."

A ways off, a vehicle labored on a small hill.

"A leper." Shelly sighed. "That is melodramatic."

It was illegal, basically, what Shelly was doing. Louella did toss up her hands. "You know," Louella said. "You got shit taste. Fucking dumb. You're a dumb fucking woman."

The vehicle drew closer. The Abrahamses twitched. "Mark is a very good person," Shelly said very quickly. Mark was very kind. It was commendable how he was raising his two brothers on his own. The rackety engine came around blueberry hill.

"Fuck commendable," said Louella. And then the rough car was pulling into the gravel. The engine quit. The Abrahamse women looked that way as if someone had shot the house. Their eyes met once and said to each other, Time to be women now. They smoothed their jean fronts with sweating palms, touched their hair with their left hands, sucked in stomach organs. Young Mark, twenty-one years breathing on his own, unfurled out of the little maroon car, looking scrubbed raw and sort of handsome.

Louella put on her sweetest show through breakfast.

He washed the bacon pan, said the coffee was very good, and cried, "Yes, yes! She is such a twat," when Shelly spoke familiarly of a Regan on the sticker line. There was a strange sort of humming in Louella's head. She watched the clock. She laughed when he laughed, frowned when he frowned. Perhaps those two heard the humming also. Her ears were full. Maybe it was early pollen. He left at nine-thirty.

The morning was blue and open. Shelly followed Mark out into it, in her bare feet. She closed the kitchen door behind her, but Louella was experienced enough now to know the cottony silence of kissing.

The Abrahamses did not speak while they wiped the counter and put away the creamer and ate a few more red grapes. Louella closed the running fridge. She said, "I'm not a virgin. So."

Shelly turned. There had been a little smile on her but now it left.

"Sewall and I are very in love. Actually. It's not just play."

Shelly nodded, closed her eyes. They closed their mouths at each other.

**

Worry was sticky. Once it got on the skin, it was tricky to scrape off. So Louella did not call Lyd or Sewall. It would be neighborly. But she could not fit more worry inside. Nor could she pretend at worry, like Lyd. Nor could she believe anyone would really miss Dorothy Goode.

"You not talking now?" she asked Harris. When he did not answer, she was surprised at the disappointment she felt.

She went into the yellow bathroom, damp still with last night's shower. She looked for a long time at herself. Perhaps if Louella could find Marce Telhaney's better pastures, Marce would forget they had not liked each other, in the end. She could tell her about Shelly dating a boy and they could laugh. The green bathroom light shades needed dusting. Things worked out or they did not. She squeezed the blood and pus of a good fat zit, squeezed until nothing came, and stuck a speck of toilet paper in it like a man.

In the kitchen, she called out again. "What, you don't like me now?" The house closed its mouth on the sound.

There was algebra homework to do, simple stuff. She sat at the kitchen table and did it. Mrs. Howes had asked her if her mother helped her. Bacon grease stained the edge of her paper. On Monday, she figured, Dorothy would be back in the school halls and would Lyd now be nice to Dorothy, turn towards that other locker and that other girl and would things change now? Numbers fell out of her pencil tip into place as though her pencil knew them, they fell out onto the graphing paper and all she had to do was nudge them like sleepy children into place.

She screamed. Cried Christ's first and last, in the square ear of the kitchen. Wished she knew his middle for the maturity of it. Mark Tripp had spoken to her as if she was a child, as if he had not bought Lyd beer the last midsummer when Lyd asked him. He had said that Jeremy said that Louella was a nice girl. She stabbed the tablewood but the pencil did not break. If anyone had been there she could have done the same to them, easy. She felt it in her hands, how to hurt a person. She snapped the pencil in half, threw it. It clattered harmless as twigs against the sink window. She slapped herself with an empty hand.

"Oh hunny," Harris said from the other side of the living room door. "But people just say things, you know." When he knew she was listening by her breathing, he said, "My brother Rodney thought he was sad I was gone. I was his little brother, after all." But in truth, Harris knew Rodney did not know how Rodney felt. It wasn't sadness. "Relief is wonderful, isn't it?" Harris said, after a moment. "And then from there it is easy enough, isn't it, to make relief into any old thing. Grief, sure. Rodney didn't like a faggot for a brother." Thaw wind outside. Some unhunted deer starved.

She pushed spit through her teeth and watched the living room door.

"But don't you think there are worse things, sweet child, than what you've asked for and what you've got?" Harris said. "It's not that I'm saying your moping is tiring. It's not entirely

that." An angry finger reached up from the kitchen floor and poked at her uterus, at the dumb slot where Frank went and Sewall wanted to. She could not remember if anger had always been housed there.

"Go back to hell," she said. The house moaned. Kind Harris sat back like a father at a sickbed's side.

In the cellar, ground water seeped through granite into flood channels. Mice dung and spider carcass were caught up and cleaned away. Far off, in the soil, a large root pushed towards the house. It would take many years to reach the foundation. Over decades, as wind got stronger and winters softer, the root would grow faster. By the time the lobster fishery failed, when the oceans were warmed into a new epoch, the Abrahamses would find that their foundation was cracked, that the root dangled through granite into air.

In the coming weeks, Harris began to sweat in the living room. They smelled it. Perhaps in the summer, when living got a bit easier, they would clear out the room. They had the money for the *Uncle Joel's* ad now, after all. And Mark Tripp was strong. Shelly could string him along for that.

**

All around, snow melted.

Melt ran down the winter hills of Acadia, digging the ground into the sea, moving tracts of long-dispersed bodies into the mouths of the small, wandering plankton. The plankton who the smallest and the largest beings of the ocean ate. The smallest fish who the lobster ate. The lobster who dispersed their children as plankton, as cloud, trusting that whatever change came would not come too fast to duck it.

Farther east, the melting burgs of the Maton River pushed Dorothy Goode's spent body back and forth. The bergs rode the tide. Crows gathered near puddles on yellow ice above her. She was caught by a sleeve on the berg. A full moon coming and a spring tide with it. She would be flushed into Maton Bay soon, be left on rocks after the ocean sagged back towards another continent.

**

He was living at Roy and Ginny Lavender's people said. He was sleeping in his father's sleeping bag in the back of his truck way away on the Kancamagus. Somebody said he'd been seen by a second cousin down in Portland at the U.S. Army recruiting office. He was out scouting the rest stops on I-95, looking in the women's restrooms for Dorothy.

More rain threatened. It had rained all night. Green, gentle mist rose from the ground. The twigs of things were far from budded but the trees were somehow not so naked as they had been. The futures of many leaves inside the twigs and bushes, of petals in the mulched bulbs and sulfur yellow scrub flowers of the hills. Beach peas waited to uncurl. Things trembled at the cusp of seasons, preparing for summer's thrust.

On Friday afternoon, Louella stood beside Delilah outside the school doors. Nervy with the seasonal flux. Rutting season, one of a few. Wind blew old leaves. Delilah shrugged her shoulders as if committing to the inevitable and said, "Would you like to come along?"

"Hum," said Louella. She listened for Frank's car.

"We just go to the bookstore," Delilah said. "The one in the old TV repair shop. The guy is smart. He's my dad's friend. He can tell you about any book you pick up. That's good for getting into college too."

A lost white dog ran up the school drive barking at the girls. “Go the fuck home,” Delilah cried. The dog halted, abashed. He stood on lanky legs, his collar was red and made him look loved. “Anything at all could be rabid,” said Delilah. Her father’s car arrived and the shameful dog ran. Delilah said again it would be alright if Louella came.

Louella said she had her own college prep plans.

Delilah said, “Oh,” very softly.

On the drive, Frank told her of a day when he was a child, when in the woods he once played in, far away, out this state, where a stream cut through the neighborhood, a hot day had come, and everything wet had begun to steam, until the air, “Like this air,” he gestured, was green with the fog, and no one could hear a thing but the roar of the little stream echoing in the woods. “That stream’s long been built over, though. It goes through a culvert now. Do you know what that is? It is a tube. It is tall enough for a girl of your height to fit in. Do you know that you might eat the eyeballs of fish if you are lost at sea and dying of thirst? They are fresh. Water will be more of a problem than we know. Thirsty people are angry people, Louella.” They drove over the river. Far below, Louella saw that the black crows who had survived winter were gathered together as if mourning those who had not. Joy would come soon, after the grief, and they would murder the sky, singing.

In an hour, she lay on Frank’s bed and turned her head. His dry body rubbed against hers. She watched the photographs on his walls. Proof of having been, for a man whose aging knees would no longer let him kneel. The right hip going. He said, “Your legs are thicker, aren’t they. And your breasts. There’s more of them.” Later, he ejaculated with a hiccup. She thought of fishing, the hauling of the trap up onto the rail, the way the gut muscles clench at the spine and the sudden drop of the bow into a trough.

When she climbed out of his shower he waited with the towel. They had their own rhythms. She put her face in its fine weave.

"Would you consider yourself more of a child or a woman, Louella?"

She took her face out of the towel. "There's a big space between those two," she said. Knowing enough to know what would please him to say.

He pressed her warm damp body into his own, the towel and her hands caught between like birds. "A wise child, mine," he said.

He made them toast. She sat on the stool and told him about Delilah asking her to come along to read books with her creep of a father. "Does she think we're friends or what?"

"She might," said Frank.

"Who're yours?"

"Mostly dead," said Frank. "That's not true. It feels that way. Mostly elsewhere. You need them near you less, as you age. Enough to just know they are out there thinking. It's the new friends that you need to keep things moving."

"I'm like a fiber pill," she said.

He laughed so hard she thought he would die. Buttered crumbs blew into her crumbs.

At the end, when he drove her home into the rising full moon, she said, "I don't think I've ever felt like I'm on a planet so much." The moon billowed out beyond the tops of pines. Companionship, she knew now, was a convoluted thing. She thought then that she was going to cry. The yellow moon stuck up there, clouds around it pink as throat's muscle. "You know," she said, "like in space."

"I know exactly what you mean. It's a beautiful night, Louella." He said her name again. They coasted down the road that led away from Red Hill. The moon cast shadows when twilight

ended and all the birds were silent. He pulled on the knob and sprayed his windshield with sudsy fluid. The fluid ran off, onto the tar, small bubbles caught in their spin drift wafted into the bushes and young twigs of spring.

The five twenties, this time, he put into her hand. But it was not her hand, how he held it. He took it from her lap, and pried the fingers open with his own. She tugged back, just a moment, just a little. Lowbush chamomile seeds sprouted under the tires.

Caught in wire traps at the gravel of the benthos, lobster ate slow fish or bait fish, and felt the strong tide pull out past them. They could not follow it through the trap's wire.

He folded her fingers over the bills and then took her hand with its fist about the money and beat her twice in the face with it. It was a limp beating, but it was a beating. Her knuckle broke the tiniest lip seam on her tooth. "Oh, stop being so cruel to yourself!" he joked.

She crossed the gravel, into the dark house.

**

Roy saw Dorothy first. She was like laundry on the rocks, draped on the basalt shoals in Harper's Inlet, those that got tall at low tide. She had been missing a week. The old man and the boy were hauling everything again, for something to fill the godawful time, and though the traps had not soaked too long, even the near shore testers caught two pounds each, for these were the good years.

When he saw what he saw without knowing for sure what it was, Roy thought that he would turn the *Ginny* around and head for the dock. Complain of a hurt back or a different way his heart was beating that he did not like. Let the rest of the traps soak a day longer. Call up Paul Perry, and then Officer Nelson too, and tell him to come but with his lights off, and don't make a show of it, the three grown men could go and get the laundry off the rocks.

But Sewall was a wary boy who did not miss much. He looked for a long time at his sister. She lay far away, prone on barnacles. It was not quite winter anymore but not yet spring on the water, and the wind was gray and the rocks were black as the dark part of a dream. Roy watched Sewall look, saw the boy get older. Like all the hurt he had ever taken and packed down inside, braided into something he could hang off in the corner of his body and forget, all that came fraying out, came undone, flying into the wind and he knew the boy might not be able to catch it all again.

The water below her broke in the old basalt channels. Gentle salt air overhead that day. The lobster tank was half full though they had only hauled ten strings, the price near five dollars. All the birds cried now how they only cry in springs and dawns, like the winter is one long night and each day they are shocked again that the darkness has ended. White birds circled, interested in the bait and the body. The tide was pulling all the bright buoys towards the open Atlantic.

Sewall said, and his face did not change or turn from his sister, "Let's go get her then."

Up close her skin was blue. Sugarkelp caught in her yellow hair and she was still in her wool jacket though her hands were naked without mittens and it was strange, Roy thought, that she had not sunk, for cold bodies sink fast. The birds had been at her face a little and her eyes.

Sewall leaned far over and caught her by the jacket. He still thought he was strong as hell enough to haul anything, but he had never before hauled a body. Roy turned the *Ginny*. They almost lost her to the bottom then, her joints were that loose, she almost slipped from her jacket. They turned the *Ginny* and Sewall walked her down the length of the rail until there was no rail and it was just him and his sister and nothing between. He hauled her up over the open stern edge and her salt-soaked spine bent like kelp. Roy had seen bodies. She was not his daughter, Sewall was not his son. He had seen them grow up. He had thought until that day he would see them as

grow old as he could. A wave pushed the *Ginny* towards the rocks and Roy turned from Sewall where he knelt with his sister hugged stiffly as though Sewall and she were falling from a tremendous height and Sewall as he fell still thought he could brace for the impact. Roy got them turned into the current and out into deeper water. Sewall's blue-gloved hand cupped her scalp. She did not smell yet, the water had cleaned her. Roy took the *Ginny* into the wharf, and docked it.

When the ambulance came without lights on to meet them at the wharf, people turned out of their winter houses to look. They pressed their lips and turned away. If they had children they found them. Sewall had covered Dorothy's head with the white plastic bag Roy had brought his lunch in. He had not said why, but it seemed he thought the way her face had been chewed was indecent. With her wooly body draining in his arms, he climbed over the *Ginny's* rail.

Holly Goode emerged onto the Goode porch some four hundred feet up the Cove Road. She stood with her hands outstretched into the air as if feeling for warmth. When her distant cry to Sewall Senior came floating down across the bay, and when she and he began separately to flee from the house to the wharf, as if one were chasing the other, folks saw that young Sewall would not put his sister down. He stood watching them come with his face full of fear and like it was a wedding the onlookers looked from the one who waited to the ones who approached.

The rest of the day, caught lobster crawled forgotten in the stern tank. When Roy remembered, and left his house in the moonrise to offload, Sewall caught him in the street. He had been sitting in the dark of the Goode porch.

"You need me now?" Sewall said.

Roy looked away from the boy who had not yet cried and said, "Sure, then, Sewall, why not now."

They unmoored the *Ginny* in the dark and brought her back to the lobster car. The man who worked the lobster car was long gone home. They weighed their catch themselves.

Sewall talked of his plans after he turned eighteen. He said he would go work out in Alaska, maybe. Maybe he'd find an oil rig. Maybe he would go find another water. He seemed full of hope. "Isn't there no man, Roy, who works like me?" They moored the *Ginny*. "Maybe I'll go to the army. Maybe I'll build something. Maybe I'll captain a trawler. Maybe I'll leave soon. Sooner than eighteen, you know, Roy?"

Sewall slept at the Lavenders that night. In the morning, he was gone from the island in search of a better place. He would not find one for all the fishing money on that coast. He came home in two days. And though he would try, he would not fish for money on the *Ginny* again, as though he had learned some great truth about the life he had thought he was going to lead and now that what he had known before was proven false, he would not touch that which had once been good, for fear of finding that it was still bad.

**

At four o'clock of that same day, the Abrahamse women sat pleasantly in their kitchen, watching wind try to break their pines. They were laughing about Mark Tripp, making jokes about cougars. Frantic long laughing shouts of laughter as though just learning how again and thought they had better do a good job of it.

"Milf," said Louella, standing to get water. There was food in the fridge that had never belonged to Harris, vegetables in the freezer and Shelly's bank account had three digits, excluding the cents.

"Milf?" said Shelly.

"Milf."

Wind bumped the storm window above the sink. Still, it was a warm wind, and it felt like the roads would not slick overnight.

"Milf. I don't think I like that."

Everyone lived at the surface of time. It went too deep, they could not see the bottom.

They were silly with the weird, good weather, the hot storm. "Milfoil?" It unspooled them. Down in the bays and river mouths the water was leaping the granite and basalt and changing the shape of the beach.

"It all depends on your mindset," Louella said. "Everybody just wants to bang somebody don't they?" With her water glass, Louella sat back down.

"Milfoil," said Shelly again, slower. She said that the plant itself was rather beautiful, but it had came from somewhere else, it was bad. "Milfoil," she said, "is a beautiful word." She'd forgotten where it came from. Somewhere.

The storm outside exorcizing winter. They did not think winter would win out. Beneath leaf litter, rhizome began a deeper breathing. When one woman looked away, the other studied her. Then the first studied the latter. They found each other older than they had been in Lokkertville, when Lamb was still whole. Shelly mourned her daughter's childhood. Perhaps they would still have time to mourn Lamb together. It was work enough to patch the exterior together, let alone the interior. But perhaps, yes, sometime down the line, there would be time for it, to look inside together.

"Long winter," Louella said.

"Long winter since August," said Shelly.

"I don't think he's actually, you know, dead."

Two blonde, blue-skinned women, knocking against each other's lives.

"I just find it hard to believe," said Louella.

"You know," said Shelly. "Do you know." And then she said that when she first married Lamb, even then or maybe before, when she met him here in Goodesboro, he'd been a hand on a pogy boat. Did Louella know that? "He was gone all night some nights, came in with silver tanks." At that time, when she was just meeting him, Shelly didn't think he'd live that long. She had a feeling about it. She said she couldn't figure out how it was she felt the way she did. Like a memory that she'd been unsure of and every time she tried to look at it straight on, it slipped away like fog she'd walked into. Louella fidgeted. The earnest woo-woo of this talk unsettled her. "He used to be so goddamn bitter about the lobstermen," Shelly said. "He used to say they had a complex going."

"They do."

In the next room, Harris said, "I knew a lobsterman once. He had a wife."

Neither of the Abrahamses paid him any attention.

Shelly said she guessed that where a person grows up, no matter how they feel about it in the end, it gets in their priorities. Even though she didn't agree with a lot of the conservative politics.

"It. It, Ma. It. You're on one."

"Oh it. It's fear, Louella." The fear of change she thought some of fisherman had. Maybe they had it because when something changed that meant they had to change the way they fished it meant changing a whole life too. Different traps in the yard, different tools, a fear that the invisible place they pulled from was, in fact, make-believe, as it sometimes seemed. Louella shut one eye and looked hard out of the other at her mother. Shelly said, "And even if the change is good there's the sense of waves coming through life at you and those waves are bad things." And

even though Shelly didn't feel like she fit with that so much, she couldn't help but feel the fishermen were heroic in some romantic way, how they went out and worked in all weather. She nodded at the table. "What I mean is, I was so proud. So proud, Louella, to see you going out on that boat."

Louella pushed spit through her teeth and sucked it back in. "Oy fricken vey," she said. "I'm not now am I."

They went quiet. Then Shelly said comfortably that she thought Lamb would be turning in his grave, his daughter doing work like fishing work. Wind scooped the bog and flipped it over like shaking blankets. Feathers, needles, human trash and old loam lifted. Wet twilight would soon press down, everything free, flying in the wind. "We have to clean out his room," Shelly said.

Something then slapped the sink window hard. Shelly swore, Louella ducked. Against the glass was a pink card. Very wet, a blonde puppy digging at tulips. The wind split around the house. The great spiral of the storm turning like skirts, sweeping the dirt of the land up. The Abrahamses stared. The pink card trembled there, and then one edge peeled away from the glass and the wind took it back.

"Good to have a roof," Shelly said, after a moment.

In the dark living room, a draft had spread Harris' papers around. The title page of an unpublished epic lay centered on the floor before his black chair. WHAT CAN BE DONE IF LONELY. Around this print scrawled in Harris' own hand, iterations of this title. WHAT CAN BE DONE IF DONE. WHAT CAN BE DONE FOR OTHERS/ THE SELF. WHAT HAS BEEN DONE AND WHAT CAN BE DONE. WHAT I HAVE DONE. WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE IF THIS HAD NOT BEEN. Finally, WHAT CAN BE DONE? was written, circled. The Abrahamses knew nothing of this man at all.

Chapter Fifteen

In the water, lobster crawled, cod spawned and minke whales filtered plankton. Land-bound folks birthed babies. The babies tasted raw air and found it acceptable. Elsewhere, folks died, and brilliant, dark gardens in stomachs began to feed on the brief host. Felled trees bled sap from midriffs. Their roots in the earth rattled, stunned. All around the planet's water, nets dragged fish from homes, net mouths like spoons peeled lung coral, warty sculpin, graysole, halibut, sea grass, the clay that only fin and earthquake had moved since the ocean filled. People chucked much of it back in to die. The long arms of the industrial predator reached deep.

Louella went to school and learned about slavery, which she had known about before, but had somewhat forgotten. It was dull as any fact that happened elsewhere in other times, though how Mrs. Howes framed that old stuff in terms of money and heroics was interesting.

Mrs. Howes said, "When there were slaves, they made things like cotton. They grew cotton in big farms. Who can tell me what's made out of cotton?"

A collective lowering of eyes, until Jimmy Rogers said, "Well, my shirt and your dress." He blushed. Mrs. Howe's dress was not, then, a modest growth on her skin. She had an old,

heavy-breasted body beneath. It was cotton. It could, in fact, come off. Jimmy's skin went red as the school's brick wall in high heat.

Mrs. Howes said he was absolutely correct. "Also jeans!" she cried. Jimmy Rogers watched his knees and nodded. Mrs. Howes then listed all the many things slavery had produced. Money was all. They sat and listened. Some thought about Dorothy Goode. Her death was a strange thought, though less of one than, say, slavery.

Which had not happened here, in this state, not one bit. Not ever. And racism was gone too.

"Only good people live here. Everyone is equal. Even the Native Americans," said Mrs. Howes. "And our men had fought," she said, "for freedom. They went down to the south where the rich plantation owners were, and fought for freedom. And that's that." Mrs. Howes drew herself up. She said there was no more slavery in America. "We don't think about skin color anymore in this country," she said, to the twenty white students before her. "We are a loving, color-blind country. Say it with me now." They said it. America was a free country and they had things like child labor laws, which they would talk about in a few weeks, too. Other countries, like China, were eons behind. "America is all about freedom. That's what it means." She eyed them all. "Who can tell me what a patriot is?" Several boys raised their hands.

All week Sewall was gone. Lyd, too, until Friday. A rock falls and leaves the sod to bleed out of the hill and then the grass grows a hide. Teachers had said, "There's been an accident, and we'll have a moment," and then began their lessons. Louella did not call anyone's house. Nobody called hers.

Friday afternoon, Louella sat with Frank as the car's many parts carried them forward through space, shortening time. Perhaps they burned gasoline from a Lokkertville rig. They

drove through soft thaw air. Dorothy Goode had begun to become gas and sediment. She was in the Bangor morgue now, and blue-gloved fingers had poked around to see if it was, in fact, sadness that had killed her.

Frank drove fast. He liked to, in good weather. After a while, he spoke of an investment of his. He rarely spoke of current finances and she wondered if his speaking now meant he was likely to propose soon. He said that he had invested in energy.

"Let me rephrase," he said. "I have invested in a wind farm." It was local, they were building right there in the hills. "This state will change," he said. Soon there would be many turbines in the hills. "All money is born blood-money, Louella. How long do you have to wash money through better things to clean it?" She looked crossways at him, there at the wheel. Where his elbow bent his red shirt, embroidered horses galloped. He never spoke, even about her body, so passionately. "People are idiots," he said. He flicked the steering wheel. He floored the gas and then slowed. A blue heron landed in gold grass mudflats, dark wings going wide. He met his shadow. He stood still and watched the car pass. "It is an incredibly promising investment," Frank said.

Frank and Louella drove over the Maton River, alone on the road. The wild rain of spring fell, wild for its softness. Red-vested buds thickened tree shadow, spruce tips grew tender and green. No leaves yet, only the blades of bulb flowers in mulch, new grass fingering up through its yellow dead.

Beneath the car and bridge, the Maton River ran wide, though it had not flooded, not yet. Though there was still time for the upriver banks to thaw, for the downstream rush. There were still ice shacks standing up north, where pulp mills pressed wood and clogged the air with a slow and constant thunder, where a dam split what once kept time. The river was perhaps fifty feet

down from the bridge and not deep in places, if the tide was wrong. Louella looked as they drove over. Dorothy would have broken legs on the fall. Or perhaps she knew where to aim herself. Or perhaps she had not cared about her legs. Louella watched the railing's rungs, down at the peeping spring.

She had the sense of trying to catch something. Of watching it roll away from her. There was time still to nab it. But then they were across the bridge and no, the moment to stop it was long gone. She wondered if a person can choose what they do, at the moment of jumping. Keep their eyes open, to see the world shift. Frank had stopped talking at the edge of the river. He drove them on.

She felt something when Frank, later, pushed her legs apart. It was in the tendons, perhaps. They kept her thighs shut. She did know what her body was doing. She figured a person should not think about the dead when having sex. The condom smelled louder that day. She did not think he would drive her home, or pay her, or call her again if she fought him. If she pulled away and kneed him where it hurt, in his own bed. His hand flopped on the lump of breast. When he pinched the nipple, she felt all the times he had ever pinched the nipple. Memories fell off a bridge and broke their legs, over again. She cupped the little seedling of hate, she watched it twist higher. The white root dug, latching on.

They had tea and he spoke of Miami. A deer crossed into his yard. They watched it idly.

When he was a boy, he had known about Florida, for one of his better-off acquaintances took trips there every year, but he never thought he would go. He owned an apartment down there. Had he told her that?

"No." She smiled. "You own so much." She had never before noticed that he bragged to her. Was it bragging? She was sixteen. Where was the rest of his audience?

He nodded, and sighed. After a moment he said, “You’re right. Yes, you’re right,” as though he had forgotten, and was relieved to remember. The deer nuzzled the new grass, clomping over ice shreds and eating. He was a thin young buck who had been even younger before winter.

“Let’s go shopping,” she said. “Let’s take a trip.” A broken bird flopped across the iced grass. She stood. The unflying bird met the deer’s nose.

“Shopping,” said Frank. “Shopping.”

“To Portland. Wouldn’t that be fun.” She turned and looked at him full on once and then walked to his window. One of the bird’s dun wings tried to take flight. The other was limpish and though it rose to beat the air it could not hold the proper form.

“That’s a robin,” said Frank. He had come around the side of the counter. “That’s a robin, they come back in the spring.”

The deer followed the robin. The robin led the deer across the yard as a kitten might lead a dog. Louella said, “Sweet.”

Because there were no more timber wolves to hunt the deer, winter hunger got some instead. It had been a bad, long winter. The buck opened his mouth and took the robin in. The robin fought but not so hard. The buck chewed as if it were a task. The legs and wings of the robin shuddered between the hairy lips and then the deer swallowed the bird and all of her sharp bits. Perhaps the deer then would die a bad death, sliced through, inside out.

“Perhaps not,” said Frank.

**

The cafeteria chatter swelled and sank. A young girl cackled. Another young girl hushed her with flapping hands and meaningful eyes, penitent for them both. The sun came hot through windows and kept the food trash smelling alive.

Sewall was shrunken through the jaw and dry-skinned on his forehead. He had been picking at the flakes of himself. He looked around past his fries and burger at the cafeteria eaters. People chewed with tongues and teeth, flapped their hands around. Lyd pressed a manicured hand on his elbow. He looked down at her hand as if the hand were at the bottom of a tall bluff, and he was wondering how the fall might be.

At the next table over, Jimmy Rogers yapped about a sailboat and his summer plans with a red-haired uncle. They would leave on June eighteenth! Promptly at dawn! He had been yapping in this vein since before Dorothy Goode died. He had taken a three-day break to mourn.

"I have never liked his voice," Delilah said suddenly. She shook her white skull. "I didn't realize. Something you been hearing nattering your whole goddamn life. And just now understanding that I hate him."

Lyd chewed her lip. Jerry frowned at Lyd. People had gone funny lately. Spring fever and a dead Goode. Lyd cleared her throat. She took a fry off Sewall's plate. "Sewall," she said. She dipped his fry in his ketchup. Between two white fingers she raised the fry to him.

"We'll sail everyday!" called Jimmy Rogers. "It's a two-man sloop!"

Sewall did not eat from Lyd's hand. But a cafeteria's worth of lunching eyes watched him take it from her and chew. Louella looked at the ceiling. She did not think she had ever had anything worth stealing before.

Lyd dipped and lifted another fry. “That’s my Sewall,” she said, when he took this one too. As though they sat in an empty kitchen they both owned. The third fry dripped ketchup on the table. “Whoopsy,” Lyd said and continued to pass the fries.

Sewall said softly, “I can feed myself, Lydie,” and then spilled ketchup down his shirt.

Lyd leapt for napkins. Louella sat with her hands spread on the table top, watched her one-time soulmate lean into the cafeteria kitchen and cry for damp towels and saw the white damp towels passed to her at the end of a freckled arm, watched these towels come back and the red-nailed hands that carried them press into her one-time beaux’s chest and scrub. She looked away, at anything else. Across two tables, Jeremy Tripp squinted back. He cocked a brow, jerked his chin towards Lyd and Sewall’s inclined heads, he smiled like Meryl Streep. Louella pursed her lips in a way that could have said something about the houses she owned if she owned houses.

Lyd leaned into Sewall’s orbit.

“I know a man,” Louella said.

The table jumped. Twenty feet off, Jeremy Tripp pressed himself forward as if he could hear through the rumbling cafeteria.

Lyd paused with a towel half-folded in her hands and made her eyes big at Louella and coughed, Him-him!

“I know a man who has been through life. He calls what he’s experienced lucky, because now he is very rich and generous. But really, there isn’t such a thing as luck, and he is only being modest.” She spoke like Eleanor Roosevelt. What he meant by luck, she thought, was just always keeping his head up, not getting beaten down by anything. “If he was beaten down he did not stay down.”

Lyd hissed.

"He used to be a taxi driver, and now he is an investor." She told them that this man had suffered so much, but that you wouldn't know it, meeting him. "He would only say that he was lucky." She was speaking loudly, people watched. "I've spent a lot of time with him, and I have learned a lot about getting through." Her voice was loud and fine, like a bell buoy over waves' clapping. The table listened. Jerry's face polite as ever, for he had a mother he liked. Sewall watched his fries. Lyd looking like she knew what Louella was saying, and like she would have tossed the table and bit her, if they lived in different times. "He's an investor, and he's invested so much money in wind energy, he's ahead of this age. That man has been through so much," she said, "that I don't even know the half of it, but when a man gets to be that age, he's certainly suffered more than any kid."

She had not looked at Sewall. He was turning his chocolate milk carton in circles, but she thought that he'd heard her. Across the room, Jeremy Tripp had turned away. She could tell he still listened.

Then Sewall looked up and said, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about, do you?"

Lyd laid her hand on his wrist. Said to Hush, now.

The rest of lunch went by like the quiet before a vomit. The week passed in a similar manner.

Delilah said to Louella on Wednesday, after a brief gap in conversation, "Best to give up on the hunt." Though they had been talking of a book Delilah said Louella might like. For its stomach-fulls of revenge and god-fearing sentiment, Delilah said.

"I'm not hunting in the slightest," Louella said. "I don't mind at all."

"Well," said Delilah. "Well." She scrubbed her brow and squinted at Louella and said, "You might have given him a call when Dorothy did what she did."

Louella said that was a little besides the point.

Wise Delilah gave up.

At lunches, Delilah now spoke. She talked to them of SAT scores. Of what scholarships she would, come senior year, apply for. She would move to California. "Sewall," she said, "you would like it. Babes and surf." Delilah was a delightful host. She nuzzled herself between Sewall and Louella, talked to one and then the other and Lyd talked to Jerry and then Sewall as though Jerry were a charity case she could not get herself to tell she no longer could afford to benefit. Jerry fiddled with a hair on his Adam's apple. Louella watched the empty lunch table where Dorothy Goode had spent the noons of her highschool career and at the plastic seat her body had warmed and it seemed Louella had done what Shelly said people did and ridden too high and fallen too hard and now perhaps she, too, was bound for isolation. She considered flirting with Jerry but that he was nothing but a broken heart was obvious.

On the Thursday bus ride home, Jeremy Tripp sat next to her and said, "You're pretty much my step-sister now. Times change and don't ever stop. You think you're gonna make it?"

It was a few hours later that Harris said, "You know, dear, you can't poison everything. The boy might have meant well."

"You're dead and he didn't."

They sat in his living room. Again, a draft had screwed the stack of his papers across the floor. She had been reading the last line of a page over again. *That I would stay and he would go, whether to sea or to another life, became apparent. We, he and I, existed separately. That existence* But the rest continued on a lost sheet.

"Both of those things have become something else lately," Harris said. "Haven't they?"

**

The lights in big city Portland rose up through brick and low fog. Along the grand promenade, brick manors faced the wind as if heat cost nothing. At a busy intersection, Louella watched two men stand on opposite verges. One sang and smiled and stomped for change. The other, with a cup and a sign that said, I HAVE KIDS PLEASE HELP, crouched, watching the busker. The land was lower here than in Goodesboro. The edge of it sank down into water. There were no cliffs. Ice sheets had rumbled over softer rock. A city had sprung up instead of hills. Louella had never been anywhere so fast.

"There are beaches," Frank said. "Sandy beaches," but they were too rowdy for him. He drove aggressively like he knew those streets well. Even here, his car was one of the nicest, though maybe not the nicest anymore. She was certainly not the poorest.

The hotel they went to was grand. Louella stuck close to Frank's elbow. The lobby was high-ceilinged, gilded and ferned. It felt somehow to Louella like the person who had made it had thought Jurassic Park did a good job.

"Two beds," Frank told the receptionist.

The receptionist nodded, bent into the computer, typing two-fingered. The big box of the computer sat whirring like a hot cat. She was pretty, big red teased hair, glossed and womanly, something tired about her eyes. A line across her forehead like Shelly had, but she seemed younger than anybody Shelly's age including Shelly. Frank shifted on his feet. He shifted just so, away from Louella.

"There's an elevator," the receptionist finally said. "You won't have to walk any stairs at all. Fifth floor, room five-eleven." She had an accent like she had come from the mud of the Bay of Fundy itself. Louella shifted just so, towards Frank.

"It's my granddaughter's birthday," he said to the woman.

The woman said, "That is nice." Her eyes, big dark doelike things, pointed two slightly different ways.

When they had the key and were crossing the big lobby, Louella slipped her hand into Frank's. She had never before tried this. He flopped away as if she had taken two fingernails and tried to pierce his knuckle skin. "Come now," he said. He walked just a pace ahead of her. "Come now!" he said louder, as if to part a crowd.

He had told her: "Tell your mother you won't be back until Sunday. I will bring you home on Sunday."

She had left Shelly a note that Friday morning: *Gone with friends for the weekend. You understand. We need each other right now.*

When the hotel door was shut he pointed to each bed and said, "That is the love bed. This is the sleeping bed." And so she wondered if at his home, there was a room that had hidden in it the true bed.

Later, holding her, he told her that when they had first begun to know each other, he could not tell really if she enjoyed him. Perhaps that is something of what attracted him. Her reticence. "Other women," he said, "they think they have to put on a show. You put up with it because it is what women do."

"Oh yes," she said, thinking of Lyd. "Yes, women are bitches."

"Well."

After a moment, he said, “You are more energetic lately. You are assertive.”

The drive had taken five hours. They had not stopped except to pee three times. They rarely talked. She sat in the car and considered what this sprouting hate was doing to her, she felt it made her quite strong. “Hate-sex,” Marce Telhaney had whispered once. That sex was a violence dolled-up she would continue to believe for a long time. It was a hard thing to disprove. Hate was better anyway than the feeling of dying.

Their hotel looked over the Portland wharfs. They were bright, busy wharfs. Some diners walked the spring dark sidewalks of Commercial Street but it was the off season in a sagging tourist town. It was still affordable, a cheap wet city to live in. She sat up on the love bed. Her hip recently had begun to pop in an uncomfortable way. Frank lay behind her with his cartilage just barely holding his bones together. She walked to the window and pressed herself to it to see what moved way below on the street. Somebody had stacked brick upon brick until these floor beams she stood on were hoisted a hundred feet up. Down the sidewalk far away, a woman walked a trotting poodle on a leash and a man walked close behind her. Louella felt, suddenly, looking down at the wharfs here, tremendous fear. She was so far from home and it seemed that at that home, not a person would miss her. Again, she felt as if poised to fall, or as if already having let go, and falling. A great nervous elation. A sense of utter change in the perspectives of things. She caught the fear in her mouth before it fled out into the hotel room, she bit it at the neck and packed it down inside. The man caught the woman, the poodle turned fast, prancing, the woman’s hand jumped from her pocket from where it had been kept warm.

In the morning, Louella and Frank went shopping. He was an old man among young mothers and their daughters and teenage love-boppers. She laid kisses on his cheek in a strange mean tenderness, knowing that he did not like it. “Stop that,” he said. His fingers screwed her

wrist away. She leaned close to him. She pressed her hips into his seated shoulder. “Stop that, Louella.” He moved away from her in his plastic food court chair. A small family rolled two wailing strollers by.

The mall smelled of boy’s cologne and nothing else. They shopped all day. She worked through clothes and small plasticky earrings and shoes like she might find unexploded land mines from a different time in those racks and shelves and figured it was better to be done with the wait. She heaped bag handles on her wrists. He stood stiff by her side and then he left her and returned with a pink paper bag from Victoria’s Secret that he stuffed inside a pink plastic bag at the bottom of which jangled her jewelry from Claire’s. At lunch he said, “Go put that on yourself,” and she did.

She wore the white bodysuit for the rest of the day, though it was far too large in the breasts and itched incredibly. She bought these things with his money as she might have taken a pick ax to ice to clear winter from wharf wood. She walked until the bodysuit chaffed her. At night, again, they fed themselves silently in the Saturday evening mall, young teenage couples kissing everywhere, she and old Frank at their center eating sweet orange chicken on rice from plastic trays.

Finally, he looked at her chewing from deep inside his own skull. “Have you had enough,” he said. She swallowed and sucked seeds from her teeth. She sipped Coke until the ice rattled. The slurping of it echoed around the whole food hall and a hundred people looked to see what was suffocating. She and Frank watched each other. They watched with the comfortable dislike of people who have together made the mistake of believing fantasy is mobile, that it could be taken from the quiet cuts of a nowhere place and be made to stand on its public own.

“Are you really named Frank,” she said.

**

They went to the rowdy beach. But it was still winter in the ocean and no one else walked the tideline. Pink styrofoam rolled in wind, passing them from behind. The dark fell and they walked a long time in it until the ocean was black and the waves rushed up the sand from a galactic nothingness. Here, too, she felt far from all that she knew, but she could not fall into the water from a great height if she stood so close to its surface. He would get old and die before she did. That everything only became memory and that memory was what made everything else she was beginning to understand. Frank slowed and then stopped and then she found that she had too. When she pictured herself old, she pictured Pat Nigla the tough mail woman or Roy Lavender or the curving hill of a slick wave over shoals, the heft of it in her gut. She struck out ahead of Frank through the sand.

"Time to turn around," Frank called after her. The beach was a strip between city lights and dark water.

"The thing is, Frank." She hollered his name over her shoulder, like a woman laughing in a different story. He followed her at a clip.

"The thing is," he repeated gently back to her.

"I don't like this anymore, is the thing," she called into the night. When she opened her mouth to call, salt wind off the water filled it. He caught her up. The bodysuit had worn pink holes in the skin of her crotch and rear, the pain stuck in her throat. His hand took hers in the dark. She swung their arms wildly. They walked on this long beach until near midnight when they felt a fine spring rain lift off the water and fall bitterly on them. This was not complicated. They were two shoppers worn out by what they now owned.

On Sunday midday, Shelly's red truck was home. Louella and Frank idled at the gravel edge of the Harris yard. "I'm busy the next Friday," she said.

"Alright," he told her. They sat side by side, looking at the laid tar of Maton Bay Road, stretching out beyond his windshield. "That's alright," he said again. "Busy age you're in."

She got out of the car and shut the front door and opened the back. Frank watched her sling bags and bags onto her wrists, then shove the handles up her forearms to load more, and then up into her elbow crook until the bracelets of the bags hung off her like great, colorful wings. He left her when she stepped away.

Mark Tripp's Toyota rattled around Blueberry hill and into the yard. Young Mark stuck his shaggy head out of his car window. Yelled about what a haul she had. "Shopped til you dropped, looks like." He really was a clown of a man.

**

On Monday, Lyd Perry stuck her head around Louella's locker door and cried: "Oh, a diva has arrived among us!" She looked at Louella from her pleather shoe tip to bejeweled neck.

"Yes," Louella said, "I've got means."

"Oh hunny," said Lyd.

On Tuesday, she caught Sewall looking at her over Lyd's shoulder. But then, her camo shirt was particularly revealing of the sternum, wasn't it, she could understand that he could not help himself, poor boy. He was not lobstering anymore at all. It seemed he watched the edges of crowds for a familiar face.

"Snap out of it," she whispered at him, at the end of fourth period. "Snap right the fuck out of it," she hissed at his back. Time slid by like coins off a tip plate and she could not catch it. When some of the clothes lost their perfect newness, she growled like it was mourning.

On Wednesday, she graced a smile on Jeremy Tripp and regretted it. “You smile like your mum in the morning,” he called down the hall. People everywhere laughed.

And in the hollow thumping boom of that Thursday evening, she and Harris tried to arrange the pages of his old book but, he said, the order of it was now juvenile. He had always expected something monumental to land before him when he was living. That it was death that might have been the climax of the entirety of his life, he could not stand.

“Hard saying not knowing,” she said. “Something like that.”

He coughed. The papers turned on their edges. “You know, dear. I kept all sorts of things in case of worldly change. I thought I would be part of something,” he searched for a word, “magnificent. Do not trust in hope.”

On Friday she wore a long white dress over her low jeans. It was colder, briefly. She wore the stained old blue jacket to the bus stop. Angela looked at her and said, “Ain’t it a confusing time, this weather.” The cowboy boots had acquired a greenish spring smear.

At lunch, while Delilah talked of the way most west coast kids could have fun in the sun all year and still end up at Stanford or Berkeley or one of those, Louella dripped bright mustard down her dress sleeve. Delilah had been puking lately enough to make her voice sound like Bev’s at the corner store who had smoked since prepubescence.

And though she waited in the bathroom until the school was quiet and the buses and Delilah and her father were all gone, at half past three Louella went to the school curb. There sat Frank in his car. The car’s grill like the glorious false teeth of an aged woman caught light and dazzled.

Louella watched Frank. Frank watched back. Both alert and bracing for a change. She could step back into the school. The heavy doors were still swinging shut behind her. She could

return to the bathroom where once she and Dorothy Goode had stood. Frank sat, turned and leaned towards her in his car shadow, watching. She did not know the color of his eyes. She could not picture his face at all.

She stepped forward, back into the swift current of that year.

At a quarter past four the car hauled them up Frank's sloping drive between rose bushes. "I'm a lonely man, Louella. Don't you know that?" A rabbit leapt from a bush in front of them and passed before the tires into a bush unscathed.

**

Later. Mourning doves cooed. Frank stood beside her prone form. Again, he hit her face with her own closed fists. He bent her arms at the elbows. The elbows got jammed under the rib cage, lifted the bone. They were sharp enough to split her skin. He was careful as a surgeon. He lanced the mons pubis, the skin and its soft whitish hair peeled back. "The abdomen is severely elastic," Harris had said once. She repeated this fact to Frank now. He severed the gutty web blanketing muscle and cut the womb from her.

"Look," he said, tapping the fundus and soft ovary, the round ligament still strung taught to her. Purple flesh of her thumping. With a pinky nail, he dug at a fallopian tube. He returned the whole organ to her, pressed her shut. "In case of accident," he said. An egg on the pinky nail. "In case of accident. I have the child. Dumb women," he said.

She lay loose on cream sheets, dreaming of the walls of his house when they had become so many other things in the mouths of beetles.

"I'm busy next Friday," she said an hour later, at the edge of the Harris drive. "Don't come."

"Sure," he said.

**

A spring storm rolled over the water. It shook the water column down to its root. Rivers upwelled ancient sediment. The anatomy of everything was fundamentally galactic. She slept for a day.

With sticky fingers on Sunday afternoon, she spread her money on Harris' carpet. She listened to Shelly and Mark make eggs for dinner. They were singing Tom Waits in a pretty good duet. "Don't let me," they wailed. "I hope I don't," they said. They were brief lovers in the early blip of the new millennium. They sang in a spring kitchen full of mystery, a whole childhood hidden inside each one. Their voices ran up the stairs as if stuck on the heels of something retreating. Then it was quiet. Louella heard Shelly squawk. Shelly had never squawked with Lamb at all, unless the squawking preceded the child.

Before twilight upended bending tree shadow, Louella counted her money twice over. Forty-four twenties. One one-hundred, two fifties, twenty-one ones, thirteen hefty quarters, a nickel. Fourteen pennies.

She passed through the kitchen while Mark Tripp do-see-doed hooting Shelly. Shelly's yellow hair flipped about Louella's shoulder. Mark had hands wide as loose boards. Where he held her mother's spine, Shelly bent. Elsewhere, a squall shook electric lines and the kitchen light bloomed and sputtered. Louella crossed in bare feet onto the porch. The killing cold was dead for now.

In the gloom beneath the porch floor, five red gas jugs sat clumped. She saw them by their smell. Propped oblong on the nearest jug handle, a deer's skull barred teeth at a paneless basement window. The glass lay shattered as if punched out from within, glinting in the spring

light unfolding over Louella's shoulder. She hauled the nearest jug out and the skull fell over onto its face. In the yard beside the house, she hefted the jug.

The jug was lighter than a jug of seawater but not by much. In the privacy of the house shadow, she took the jug by its mossy base in two hands and hauled it to her midriff.

She swung her body like a crane and set the jug down at her right foot. The snow was gone, mostly. Scabs of ice covered respirating lichen. She hauled the jug up again and set it down once more on the left side and then again on the right. Rich people in planes criss-crossed her sky and left their marks in the clouds. The work went down into the tendons of her pelvis. She hauled the jug and now she was sweating. Her bare feet sank through the thaw layer into the ice still stuck deeper, she shifted but her feet stayed raw-cold. The jug went up and down like it wanted to be hauled. Her work made a sound of liquid shifting, made the quieter sounds of the bending body. The plastic thunked on old rocks. She hauled the jug up away from the earth's iron core until Shelly sent Mark out looking.

He came calling onto the porch, "Suppers ready, you girl come on in, now!" She saw the jaw of him through the porch lattice. He could not see into the shade where she stood breathing beside the jug. She moved back into deeper privacy, and lifted the jug until she could not anymore. Then she went into the kitchen smiling, full of an old life like she had reached back and borrowed something from childhood, and ate with the stink of fuel on her palms.

**

A little dawn bird cried, Ha-Ha-Ha! near the edge of the bog. Early, but light enough to see the forms of the pine trees, old mountain stumps. Beside the porch, the red jug sat as if cursed and unwanted by even the spring insects. She hauled it every second she could.

It was looking to be a fine warmish day. Settled in the mid-fifties and with no mean breeze. She ate five eggs and put on a denim mini skirt and little T-shirt with buttons sewn between the breasts. With a pair of Harris' scissors, she cut the tags delicately. In the bathroom, she balanced on the tub edge and looked in the mirror. Two boy thighs and boy knees stuck out below the denim hem. It was a miracle, she thought, that a dick did not dangle. She tried smiling but it seemed the bits of her face were borrowed or bought cheap. Dirt had gotten in her nails from the gas can. She was an ugly son of a bitch. Pat Nigla's jeep rumbled near and then moved off. Through the tiny bathroom window panes the world looked a bit greener. As she ran to catch the bus she felt that ugliness stream out behind her, covering all that she touched.

Angela gave her the up-down. "Now what if there's another fire drill, huh, hun?"

In her classes that day, she likely learned some things. There was a month of school or so left, a whole host of things an adult at a blackboard could teach a child, but while the morning fog was still breaking, in the center of the school lobby, Sewall Goode was kissing Lyd Perry and Lyd Perry was kissing Sewall Goode.

They grappled at each other's skulls and other bulges. The entirety of Goodesboro High turned out to see that mesh of tongue, metal and teeth. "That's a kiss to break the fricken generations," a girl Louella did not know said beside her. They kissed until the office lady caught a whiff of turpitude, turned around in her chair and banged her stapeller against her window glass like she meant to break it. Sewall and Lyd split solemnly as cells, rolled apart to see what had changed during fornication. The office lady jerked her thumbs in separate directions. And for all their assured, spitty maturity, those two obeyed and opened up a space for Jesus. In this space, just beyond them, the office lady spotted Louella and her half-foot of gamey thigh. Her face went harder still. She crooked a finger.

Later, jostling in the lunch line for peas, Delilah said to Louella, "You get lost in her wake, don't you?" Delilah stepped away towards the potato ladle scooping down-up-down on the end of a lunch lady's arm. "She does that to you. She doesn't mean much by it," Delilah called back. "She doesn't know jealousy from want and want from love. But that can't have felt too nice to see." Then Delilah walked on to the old waiting lunch table.

Sewall and Lyd kissed all week.

**

Frank arrived between the yellow buses. People eyed his car. He eyed them back. She waved to him like she would wave, she thought, to a grandparent, if she had ever in her life seen a grandparent at a distance that a person could wave across. A kitchen did not count.

She trotted to his car and slipped in. She did not know this man. If she did not run to him, it was possible he might rise from the car screaming Whore. She sat beside him and did not feel well in her stomach, as though it sat outside her body. She watched the waiting people see her in a rich car and that was fine. He snaked them out from between the buses.

"I came," he said. "Just in case your plans had changed. Things change all the time. Things stop ever changing for you Louella, and I suggest that you take a look around, see what's sighting down the barrel at you." A moment later he said, "That's no threat. I don't mean to sound that way. It's just that I understand some things. You do, after decades." As he drove past the corner store he slowed as if he might park. John Day was nowhere to be seen. "You will too, sweet," he said. They did not stop for soda, though it seemed Frank had thought for a moment they should begin again, do everything over.

Above the springtime Maton River, Frank said, “Did you know a girl jumped from this bridge?” The tide was in and a person could not see how shoal the bottom lay, except for the thin strip of saplings growing improbably through water.

“She went to my school. I know her.”

“Ah. So you are speaking still.”

She told him she was tired. “I’ve been exercising.”

“You’re wearing new clothes,” he said.

“You bought these.”

“Did you enjoy that.”

He undressed her in the living room. She stood naked like a new statue he had unwrapped and now prodded. “You smell of gasoline.”

“I’ve been exercising,” she said again. Outside his window, the rosebush rows had gone greener. Tiny buds just forming. At the distant end of the meandering drive, a firetruck screamed past, heading inland.

“More and more of those, lately,” he said. “Do you worry about the future?”

“God. Yes.”

He laid his palm tenderly on her shoulder. “Do you think you will be alright?” He squeezed. He sat clothed on his couch, stroking her unscarred abdomen. He pressed his face to her.

“I’m going to be a lobster boat captain.”

He took his face away and looked up at her.

“It’s true,” she said.

He looked a while longer. He nodded. “I don’t doubt it, Louella. I don’t doubt it.”

"I think that I am going to leave."

He pressed his face again to her belly, he held her by the buttocks, his fingers reached in and swiped her anus.

"I am going to leave," she said, looking down at his old skull. He opened his mouth wide and blew hot air from deep within himself onto her and then rested that open mouth above her womb as a suckling child might search for the breast and miss. "It's really true," she said. She took his wrists and pulled his hands away. She stepped away from the couch and his open mouth followed, his eyes were closed, and for a moment she saw his tongue search blindly for her in air.

"I'm going to go." She raised her palms to him. "I am going to leave." She began to shiver and rattle and she did not know why. "God," she said. "I am going." She stepped into her skirt. When she pulled her buttoned shirt over her eyes she thought, Now, this is when the man kills the girl. Then her head was a brick, and there was no thought in it. In his hallway she pulled on her pretty white boots and she took one of his wool coats as easily as if it was her own and then she left out his good front door. He did not stop her. When she looked back once, she saw him sitting on the couch with elegant crossed legs, watching something that was not her out the window.

It had been April for some time. But it was a cold northern place. It seemed the boom's fire was just now beginning to shake her. She walked quaking in her white cowboy boots until her feet bled and then she walked some more.

The road from the Harris house to Frank's had two turns. Cars drove by. A plane aimed for the airstrip in the woods and a deer walked parallel to her in the woods and then sprang onto the road before a truck so for a moment it was the plane, the deer, a man in a swift truck and a

child passing clenched altogether in time. All four continued on unmarked in their separate paces, the plane the least conscious of all.

She took off the boots when she thought the whole of each foot was skinned, when the bone might be fresh below the meat. She walked barefoot and this was a different type of pain. Dark came down and she shivered and she knew that she had been wrong to think that the killing cold had left. People died of exposure all the time. But it was more common that they were drunks and junkies, she thought, transgressors down on their luck in a blizzard. She would not trash the wonderful cowboy boots. A red truck came whizzing past her and she could not see if it was Shelly who drove, but the truck did not stop, for whoever it was was not the type to open their door to a strange girl in a long coat and a short skirt. A screech owl in the woods flew on ahead and screeched again, like a signal fire sounding the way.

When Mark Tripp's Toyota slowed on the road, she was crossing westward on the Maton Bridge. There were four miles to walk for home. She had been walking already long enough to believe in three or four separate actualities. Guilt was a weird tool made by a cruel man. It shaded most things, was and was not of regret. Mark did not ask her from where she was coming. "Well shoot," he said, "I'm glad I know where it is you're headed."

She sat beside him with the boots on her knees. "I would appreciate it if you did not share this with the maternal powers that be."

Mark had thin bones and wide knuckles. "Or my brother," he said and tapped the dash twice. "You're a funny kid."

The wounds on her feet were bad, stuffed black with the boot's cheap lining, but they would heal. In cold weather for years they would purple over. At home, alone, she rinsed them in

hot water longer than she had to. Harris worried around the house, crying for her. She cursed in pain whenever he went quiet. Like a siren pulled, his worrying worked back up.

It did not hurt so much to stand on her feet if she stood still. She went out into the dark and hauled the gas jug until it took yelling to lift it. She ate five eggs and bread with milk for dinner.

Chapter Sixteen

Overnight a red maple opened its infant leaves. The leaves shook around like so many loosed palms about to grow bigger. Clouds scudded together and it rained warm rain. In the morning, a sweet fog burned off fast.

Louella knelt at her bedroom window and peeled back the carpet. The bills she owned smelled of money, carpet adhesive and something like moss. She took all of her money and stuck it in a new red bag's inside pocket. She checked the bag's zipper. Her feet were pussing but the skin was stitching shut. She fondled the bag's bottom. No holes to be found.

Then she lurched the three miles into town, with duct tape and Superglue and last summer's pair of too-small sneakers strapping her feet together and cursing the dumb pain the whole way.

But it was warm out and blue like the daylight might last forever. The shorts she wore no longer smelled of a refinery. Cars passed fast on Maton Bay Road. She knew none of them and some of them had out-of-state plates and drove with the wearied look of those with high expectations. She stopped once to hide herself in the new-growth forest, to retape her feet. Sweat

had loosened the duct tape, glossy blisters peeled. Bending close, she saw her own skin's stratum. Her heels had no skin at all. She poured in Superglue and taped it all away.

The walking hour passed, the open roadside turned to neighborhood. She passed old homes built on whaling and cod flesh. Someone played trombone badly in a side garden. At the downtown edge, she checked, and her purse was still on her body, with all the money in it. On the downtown cement sidewalk, an elderly stranger she did not know said, "Shelly Orr!" and tipped his newscap to her. She stopped and nodded ceremoniously at his back. When she passed Rimmie's Bar, she liked the smell of what slipped out, over the granite stoop. Inside swam low music to which she thought she could move to, blue light and a man fixing a bar stool in shadow.

Down an alley where the air was cold between brick, these urban folks had dumpsters. And above the gravel of Front Street, on little wood balconies, worldly people sunned themselves, smoked Camels and watched her. She put back her shoulders. She was not so short anymore, had an inch on what she had had last August. She was a strong woman with a good neck and hot spots on her jug-hauling hands that would firm soon to callus. She was walking to John Day's place, to buy herself a car.

"The thing about it," John Day said, "is that it's just fine for close driving. But if I were you, and I'm not, but I still wouldn't, I just wouldn't take it on the highway. So think about that. Before you buy it. Where you're going to." The car was purple and low to the ground. It would not be good for winter driving, either, John Day said, after reflection, but was a fine summer town car. "Take it for a test," he said.

She stood on Front Street, where the bushes were pushing sturdy leaves. Lost white wing butterflies, recently unfurled from damp chrysalises, sought sweet puddles. The quiet stink of weed smoke settled, for it was the warm season again, and people were okay. Arms out in sun,

resting their thawed heads. Standing in his shadow, she glanced once up at John Day. His scalp was that of a younger man's, soft and showing through. She thought of Shelly's clenched fist on the stick shift of the red truck, a sudden upset in the truck's gut and the truck leaping, crying as though choked. She got in the driver's seat.

The car jumped towards the Maton River edge when she turned the key. John Day still standing beside the driver's window clapped his hands over his young head and yelled to Jesus, lord Christ! But there was a low bulwark there and the purple car's summer tires rolled into it. Miles upriver, a tributary's ice dam broke. The flood of it surged far below the river's surface. She sat breathing for a while. John Day stood at the window beside her. Somebody poured a basket of cans into the metal bottom of a dumpster. Garlic fried. Someone else played Enya through the breeze. People seemed to live here. She was not always sure if she and Shelly and Harris did.

John Day bent down to the window. His face was a good face. All her money was rolled in her red purse. He asked in a rush, when her hand went for the key again, if it wouldn't be better if he got the car faced in the right direction. It was a tricky spot to pull out of sometimes. "The river makes me nervous too." They thought about the river and about Dorothy Goode, but in that place what was thought was not often what was said. Above them, a dark-curled woman knelt on one of the small wooden balconies, repotting a long-dead plant. Dry earth sifted down through the balcony boards. "Why don't you and I take it around together," John Day said. He pulled the car off the bulwark with a screech of metal, got out again, and let her in, and crawled into the passenger seat.

"It's in neutral," he said.

"I need the car for work," she said.

Solemn and unasking, he nodded.

The small flood pushed the upriver tails of sturgeon, flowed against the tide. A gush of silt would settle before it reached Goodesboro. She ground the clutch and the truck choked and jumped and they moved. “Somedays,” John Day said, “there’s just too much on the mind to do the little things, isn’t there?”

They went up and down Front Street until the light began to turn. Her shins went tired. She could drive the half mile length of the street by four o’clock. John Day had gotten them Pepsis from his fridge. She had used his bathroom. It was a small apartment, and she wondered how two men lived there so snug.

The woman with tight black curls and loose clothes on a big frame had come out to them in the road, her hands dirty with soil. “Takes sleeping on it, sometimes,” she said. Then she had gone back up a set of wood stairs to an apartment deck. A moment later, Pat Nigla had looked down from that same deck and cheered Louella on.

Near five, John Day said he had to go to work. But that, how about this, he would keep the purple car for her, and if she wanted she could come back and get a lesson from him again. He offered her a ride home, but she thought she saw something else in his eye, what it seemed was in every man’s eye lately. She said that she liked the walk.

In later years, when she was not so much a child and John Day could talk more without old bad times threatening to flood an opened mouth, he and she and Pat Nigla would laugh about a few things all together.

He hunched over the hood, the sun warmed them both, he wrote her out a bill of sale on a piece of three-ring-punched paper. “This is yours,” he said, and slid the paper one-fingered

across the purple metal. She could still change her mind about losing all her wealth. It was Saturday. She began the long walk home.

In a cotoneaster stand, she retaped the duct tape and then continued along the Maton Bay Road. She was worn out from the jolt of the purple car's yipping cry when she did make it go, but the folks on Front Street seemed to like her. She did not quite understand why. It was the way Roy Lavender seemed to like her. She liked it down there on Front Street, the fattened river carrying itself by. Odds and ends of folks living, all coated in the mystery of having aged. The black-haired woman, Pat Nigla's friend, had called from her deck across to John Day, when John Day went to get their sodas, "Perseverent son of a bitch, isn't she!" She smiled on the roadside, thinking of this. She would have a car. The light got ancient and beautiful on the walk home.

**

She turned her head on Frank's pillow and watched the working boats from his bed. A sailboat, a big one with red sails furled, came in. He was at her feet, his pinky pushing ointment on the wounds.

His car had arrived at the Harris drive at half past four that Friday. "I thought you might be ill," he said kindly. He had in his passenger seat a can of soup and salt crackers and a jug of orange juice in a bag from Bev's. His tooting horn had brought her out into the yard.

She had not gone out to the buses at the end of the school day. She had not gone to school at all. "I'm sick," she told Shelly and Shelly tongued something from a tooth and nodded. Shelly, whose laugh lately stretched rooms' parameters, who seemed to Louella daily now to hope to escape her daughter quick as she could, into the cannery's meaty rhythm, into the long young arms of a lover. Her mother's eyes bounced around Louella's form. She said, a half beat later and taking a step forward with a hand raised at her daughter's forehead, "Oh hun. Should I stay home

with you." Eyes slanting out the kitchen, out the front door, to the truck waiting to take her on elsewhere. "Should I?"

"Sickness won't get better on missed out money," Louella said.

Shelly stepped back, dropped her arm fast. "Sure," she said. "Sure." She took the truck and left.

Balancing on slim deer trails that sometimes went nowhere, Louella had carried the red jug all day. She carried it with the air spigot rubbing her chest bone until she saw that the spigot was leaking gas down her as if she had been shot in the heart. Then she turned the jug around and kept walking. She followed the deer trails until the deer trails went where ice no longer made land. In the deep bog, grass roots held up canyons. Later, Harris wondered if she had finally cracked. He owned some good self-help books.

"Don't own them anymore," she said, from her seat in the black chair.

He was less and less sure, he told her, what ownership really was.

"Well ain't that something only somebody with too much time on their hands can spend time thinking about. You're dead and gone. With all respect."

She had found folded beneath the black chair's right foot the next missing paragraph of Harris' text. *–I thought then, would have fed me well enough. Or, rather, I thought that without it, I would die. It was as though the thing he and I shared–I don't know that it was love and if it was, I am disappointed in the thinking so far done in this area–had made a second stomach beside my own. Certainly, I thought I would die. I did not.* She had not said a thing at all about this to him. She had thought that a man would not fold a paper like that and stick it beneath the chair of his death if he wanted himself so examined.

She considered Harris' writing as Frank's pinky daubed ointment on her pussing heels, his whole hand about her ankle. Here, on Frank's bed, with sounds in her head like thoughts that had fallen down a long bumpy cleft, she considered the alternate possibility that Harris might have always wanted to be examined a little more than he had been.

Later, when Frank came with a pulse, she felt the bulge of the old penis, the chorus his wet throat made, a hum that tightened until it died, his thumb stretching her lip from her teeth. She did cry, she cried out.

He drove her home. In the car, he said, "Who was it, do you know? Who was it that said war is beautiful? War is beautiful," he said. As though they lay in bed as married folks might, and his voice was just closing itself, but here is one last thought slipping out to end the day. "Whoever it was. War is beautiful."

She was going to have a car. She was going to own it outright. "I didn't know it was," she said.

He did not speak again the whole drive. He tossed the five bills onto her thighs, they fell.

"If you come again," she told him, "I'll say to everyone what it is that's happened."

An empty logging truck went by quite fast. The heft of it swayed the car. And what was it that had happened? "In the whole scheme of living," he said, "I've got so much less left to make it through than you."

She stepped out of his car. He left.

Before she ate, or thought, before she put the five twenties in the red purse tucked in the closet, she called Roy Lavender. It was Ginny who answered and coughed gently away from the phone when Louella said, in her best voice, "I'm looking for Roy Lavender." It was light still

outside, barely. The sun would come again, up over the water. Spring is a cruel season. Asking you to be happy when winter has beat you thin.

"Who's this then?" said Ginny.

"Louella Abrahamse. I've been out on the boat with Roy. He took me out."

"Well." Ginny said, "that's good of him." A woman sang in the background, then some advertisements for a water park. All the fun a family could have, they could have it nowhere else but this water park. Hundred foot slide! Feels like flying.

"You made me and Sewall ployes once."

"So I did," said Ginny.

"So is he there?"

Ginny sighed.

When Roy came to the phone, she told him straightaway: "I heard you're out a sternman."

"Who's this then?" he said, after a swallow.

She told him, with a man's casual force, she thought, that she had heard from reliable little birds on the wall that Sewall couldn't be on the *Ginny* anymore, that he wasn't doing anything at all anymore, really, that he was letting himself go, it seemed, and that Roy had hired Roy's own second cousin, but she'd heard too that he was a drunk, and she, Louella Abrahamse, had a car now. "Or I will, anyway, soon, next weekend, just some paperwork to work out," she told Roy, who had not said another thing, and she'd be willing to work any hours at all, any days, and to start right away. Just as soon as she had the car, she could start.

In the background played a Shaw's advertisement for russet potatoes and chicken thigh. Half off!

When she hung up the phone she was screaming.

Harris came flustered out of his things, crying, "Christ, girl, Christ, Christ girl, what?"

She told him all that she had done. Then she asked about the man he had loved and if he was real and if Harris considered that love really had been the most interesting thing in his life. Outside, blue jays flew in a tormented spiral. One landed upon the other as if to kill but it was only to mate. A private jet zoomed over the roof.

"There are different ways of looking at it," Harris said, after a while. "I regret not knowing myself how I do now. There's no hunger in the way now, to cloud the knowing. Which is to say, it was all living, even what felt like not, and I'm glad. You know what I mean by hunger, don't you?"

She ate sardines wrapped in soft bread for dinner. Then she duct taped her feet and went out into the yard and hauled the gas jug.

**

Pink and lavender and daisy-yellow and white and shiny and silver and plastic and paper and good-smelling, the shopping bags sat lined up in her room on Harris' variable chairs. At first, they had been quite lovely to look at. Some with ribbons for handles. She could save the ribbons for a future flourish, a bow in the hair on a romantic summer day, which seemed likely, at that age, to come inevitably and often. Seventeen Magazine said it would.

Louella rose from where she had been squatting. She shook dust off the bags. Her father had been parboiled now eight months. She dressed in flirty jeans and a teeny little tee shirt and put her duct tape feet in the tight sneakers. The wounds of her heels seeped yellow mucosal sludge. She walked the three miles into town.

Through his balcony screen, John Day gave her an up-down once-over and caught his eyes at her white downy midriff stuck between hem and hem. Inside, from a coffee dark kitchenette, Ronnie Schrüder called, “Babe, tell her we’re not the sort of guys to want it, what she is selling.”

She gave John Day the up-down once-over and said, “So. I’ve got to get going on this, okay, John.” Below them on Front Street’s gravel a car hit a young spring peeper but nobody noticed but the peeper.

John Day told her it was nine a.m. on a Saturday. “But that’s fine,” he said, “that’s fine.” Raising a hand. “That’s fine. That’s fine,” he seemed to say to himself.

“Fishing you’ve got to be up early,” she said. “I’m about to start working a job.” She told him she needed the car. She swung the red bag up and shook it and said again, “I need the car.”

This time the whole of Front Street turned out. They rested on their balconies to watch John Day in his red pajama bottoms give this cold strange girl a lesson. People sat in their summer chairs with their coffees steaming up and the smoke of cigarettes and morning tokes mixed with the breath of dog walkers and the exhaust of Main Street on the louder side of that brick row of buildings and with the estuarine fog off the salty river, the stink of hatchlings growing in their bloody shell shards. It was spring, thank God almighty, and down on the gravel a girl was learning to drive a purple car.

By ten o’clock, John Day stood with the dark mug Ronnie had filled back up and watched this girl drive on her own. He did not know why, but he thought soon he might start weeping. He was thinking of worse times in a way that felt like they were farther behind him than they had seemed on some other days. Men like John Day didn’t think war was beautiful.

Ronnie came out on the balcony with three raisin muffins from Bev's pastry case and three Milwaukees on a silver serving tray and yelled down into the rivery morning, "Tell that girl if she can drive up the hill on Central Street without burning that clutch out she can eat breakfast alright, John, you tell her."

He told her. She did. It took her half an hour to go the half mile up Central hill with its many red stop signs but she did it. Maybe she stalled about fifty times. Then it took her longer because after she did it once, she did it twice more. The whole downtown choked briefly on the burnt clutch. She came driving back through Front Street and people outside cheered. They liked this girl.

But it was not that Saturday that she took the purple car home. John Day said, "I don't feel likely liable to give you a machine if I feel like it might end up in the river." He did not know why he phrased it like that. They stood by the hood of the car near noon.

"It's not giving it though is it," she said. Again, she shook the red bag by its strap. She had not unslung it from herself all day.

He looked away towards the river bank as if she were showing something indecent without knowing and he would rather let her see it on her own.

**

The week passed like something dying too swiftly.

At school Sewall Goode caught up to her. He walked several paces with her.

"I went to Portland a couple weeks ago," she said, when he said nothing. "It was great. There's more fishing down there."

"I've been to Portland. There's the same fishing. There's more people buying is what it is." It was a small school. They could only walk so far before hitting a door or wall or window.

They could not walk at all without people looking. “I hear you’re going to be sterning,” he said. “I hear you’re going to try it out with Roy. That’s sweet of him. I hear you called him up and said that you would.” They had reached the cement stairwell where people kissed and fought.

“He’s out a sternman isn’t he,” she said.

“I hear you called during dinner,” Sewall said. “I hear you about begged him. Nice girl like you. What’d you want a job for.” He and she stank of bad times. If the people could have smelled the way grief rolled out of their skin, they would have thought the halls and the vehicles and the homes of their lives were poisoned. “Lou,” he said, he held her by her shoulder bone, “I miss you.”

“Somebody told me you fucked your sister,” she said, when he was far away down the hall.

On Friday, she took the bus home. And the whole way home, Frank’s Mercedes followed at a respectable distance. As she stepped down out of the bus, Angela told her to enjoy herself that weekend. “I heard you’re driving!” Angela called down after her.

Louella turned with a wild, fearful grin splitting her skull. But Angela was already checking her mirrors, pulling off into the road. Frank’s car came slow down Maton Bay Road, around the bog’s curve.

A low car with turquoise plates whipped past him in the wrong lane. Angela honked quite hard, but its rear lights were gone fast around the blueberry hill.

Frank’s car pulled onto the gravel.

She and he waited. She stood in the rock yard of her home over which glacier and salt water both had once passed. There was oil under every hump of shale. Like everything, at every

instance, she stood on a planet between epochs. A new Ford came from the east with yellow traps stacked in the back. Frank sat up and watched it take the bend in the road.

Slowly as a deer who does not know she has been seen, she turned and walked to the porch. She wanted to sprint the yard but she did not. She opened the kitchen door and closed it and fiddled with the lock she had never before used. All her life, she had lived in small towns. Most people were richer than her by long shots. But the windows she could not lock. If he opened his car door and ran at her and trapped her here, she would kill him with Harris' good kitchen knives.

From her bottom teeth she sucked spit and let the lump of it fall to the linoleum. She watched it land, then spat between her feet again, wads. Then she dropped to the floor below the window's view, covered her neck with her hands, her sneaker was in her hand, the sole hit her chest and left a dusty print. At the corner of the window, she put an eye above the sill. She had never seen Frank from such a distance.

He was bent, staring at the house across his passenger seat. Then he got out of the car and stood looking at the house that had shut him out. He and she stayed like this a long time. He would not cross the yard that day. Soon the blueberry flowers would open like so many palms and the bees would come back.

The next morning, she walked to town and climbed the wooden stairs up through strangers' balconies until she got to Ronnie Schrüder and John Day's. When John came to the screen door, she had the paper bill of sale out in her hand in the tall breeze of the morning balcony. She said: "I'm taking it. I need it for work now. It won't wait."

She paid him exactly what the *Uncle Joel's* ad had asked for. When he said, "Why don't you keep some of that," she said, "keep it for the lessons. I'm about to make more. I'm a

sternman. The fishing is good." He could not have been older than Shelly at all. But something had happened to his skin's weft, she thought, or his eyes or the bone of his nose, for it seemed he had known more than he ought.

"Good on you," he said finally, slow as if from sleep. He stood on the balcony and watched her go.

She drove the bucking car home and parked it beside the ruts of Shelly's truck's tires.

Harris said, "Well. Isn't that a funny looking machine. Do you plan to get lucky in it? Or is a car just a car."

"Harris," she said, caught on a wave of mighty change, "I'm glad you're here."

Near midnight Shelly arrived with her stack of botched sardine cans and Louella was up waiting. "It's mine," she said, before Shelly could say a thing. "I made the money for it and I don't owe anybody a thing."

**

Crazy gulls wheeled.

"Get out a barrel," said Roy Lavender. "And tip it in a trough." He and she looked at the low roof of the bait shed. The gulls sank down out of the sky and landed on the roof. "They're heavy barrels," Roy said, after a moment.

The bait man stood by, watching. When she opened the bait shed door he came up close to her and bent down. "Look," he said gently, "there's a hand dolly, if you can get the bait on there you can move it like that." Inside the bait shed, the light was yellow and the ceiling low and there were some seventy blue barrels full of bait each belonging to a different captain, each weighing some one hundred pounds. *Señor Lavendero*, someone had written on Roy's.

She got a grip on one side and yanked with her whole bent body and it moved and inch. She yanked the other side and it moved again. In this way she moved it out of the bait shed. What took grown men with heft three-quarters of a minute on a clumsy morning took her five whole minutes but she had done it. The bait man stood by watching. Nobody had given her gloves and she did not know where to buy them.

At the trough lip, she could not tip the barrel. She pulled at the barrel edge and the plastic bent, the barrel stayed flat and full. She pushed it, her whole body in it. Up the gangway came Roy again, his face looking like he did not know how to say no to a child not his own but would have liked to sometimes. She crouched low squatting with the barrel between her knees and her naked fingers under the barrel bottom's edge and tried to upend it this way, but the core of the earth was a great magnet and held on to what had already been pulled so far upwards.

Roy then stood beside her with a pitch fork and said, "Some shovel it out. Make it lighter. Save your spine for later on." A pogy boat came into the harbor but went to another wharf. She did not know if he meant later on as in that day or in the whole sweep of her life. What blisters the gas jug had begun now opened and salt went in. She forked two trays full like she had seen Sewall do in the dark dawns and was beginning a third when Roy called, "Two's all."

The baitman watched her. "I'll put it back," he said.

"I'd rather do it."

Everything in the world was tremendously heavy, what was one more barrel hoisted.

The baitman pretended not to watch but at the ramp he was at her side and in one yank they had the barrel back in the shed. "It's a bitch of a thing," he said. "A bitch of a thing." He spoke so harshly that she thought about it for a long time after, until she decided he was not speaking of the weight of the barrel at all. He looked over the pink part in her blonde hair, out the

bait shed door to the bay. She thanked him but would not smile for him, did not think a boy would have to. She looked beyond the bay, where the Cove Road intersected the Holly Island Road. At that juncture stood the Goode house, rigid and shut and angry as the fist of a man who does not know why he is sad.

Roy and Louella took the *Ginny* out to sea and she was godawful happy. The sea was calm and had a yellow pollen tint all across the swells.

"The girl can work," Roy would tell Ginny in the damp chill of the late afternoon.

And Ginny would frown and say, "You won't try to get him back, will you, Roy?"

Louella did work. Roy and she did not talk much at all, though she thought it delighted the old man when she did. His fingers were thick as hammer handles. Loose cotton sleeves soaked to the elbows and the freckles of his wide forearms spoke to a boyhood out in sun. She told him of Shelly dating a child. He watched her act out their kitchen flirtations from the side of his eye, a grin let fly before he could catch it. She wondered then and in later years how only some people end up so kind. That kindness was a push and a pull she knew. She knew already a man cannot always be kind.

All day, she kept her body's distance from the man. He did not close it, though the *Ginny* was a small place.

A yellow trap caught a slim cod. When they hauled the trap up, the cod was banging about with his swim bladder pried loose of his chest and hung out of his mouth. Good thing the sea life could not scream at all, though perhaps they would be killed quicker if they could.

At day's end, Roy eased the *Ginny* to her mooring buoy. Louella was nervous to fail at the job of catching lines and she did fail, she dropped the line, she missed with the gaff, but she was nimble on the bow and Roy called, "I've taught plenty people before. Everybody learns."

They had hauled just a third of Roy' traps. She had made one-hundred-twenty-eight dollars. It was good money. It was not enough. But Louella would never again in her life feel that she had enough. Deep lack did that. Poked a hole in the bottom of what a person tried to fill. Same as an unloved child who grows up with a great, insatiable hunger. And a helpless child will one day crave power.

Roy Lavender shuffled across the wharf. He climbed in his truck and sat in it a while. He watched the girl drive off fast. She was not the strongest or the fastest but she was fast enough for a beginner and she seemed to love the work like Roy remembered folks in his childhood loving it. She seemed to him to be proof of a very old memory he had begun to think was false. He thought then that he understood somewhat about Sewall and Louella.

**

On a Sunday in mid-May, Louella and Shelly ate fried hot dogs, cornbread and sweet beans on the front porch steps. It was purple twilight. From everywhere green sprouted, as though the color itself had been held underground and in trunk, twig and rock since October and now the many small fists that had restrained it released it and up it curled in fiddlehead, smooth rock tripe, spruce tip. Shelly was talking quietly of Mark Tripp. "He likes maps," she said. "You ever know somebody who likes that? I mean he likes maps. He has them all over his walls."

"Sure," said Louella, though she did not.

"Who's that then?"

Louella took a bite and waved the hotdog on the fork towards school. They looked towards the horizon. A plane hummed over blueberry hill.

"Sure," said Shelly.

The plane glittered, catching sunlight. It flew very low, its engines rattled the house. Shelly looked once at the plane and then continued in her slathering of bean on cornbread. “They do think they own the sky but why don’t they stay up in it then,” she said. She rolled her knife and wiped the other side clean on the bread.

The plane did not stay up in the sky but plowed down from it like a heron who remembers a lower water line. It was small, a private plane belonging to a family nobody knew, heading to an acreage and home nobody had ever visited. That it would make a divot in the road out front their house seemed to stretch what the Abrahamse women knew to be true. It had blueish stripes along its side like a belted woman. For the five odd seconds or so that they watched it fall, they believed that it must rise again. In that same moment, they believed that if it fell it would be on their red truck and purple car parked side by side or on their house for that is how lately the unexpected did land. It moved quite slowly before it hit and then it hit. In a great roar, the metal of it pleated like the skin of an infant. It hit parallel to the place where Frank and Angela delivered Louella. Tall pines bent back on their spines. The plane ran east through tar and earth some fifty feet and then stopped.

The Abrahamses had not stood. They sat hip to hip with their yellow plates still balanced on their knees. Shelly held her slathered cornbread between two fingers. They watched the downed plane. What they felt was the unease of feeling little when they knew they should feel more.

Shelly pushed the cornbread in her mouth. Louella started laughing a laugh that was a My god my god my god my god, a true deep laugh sure as fear in her. Shelly blew corn crumb. And then they were hooting, screaming, whooping on the slant porch of their house. Down the road, the plane made a commotion. It clicked and whirred. Shelly laughed, “Hi hi hi.” They turned to

each other and panted like people choking. It felt like the laugh had drawn something out of them that now hung from their mouths and could not be pushed back in.

Down the road, the plane groaned like the last whale killed. The east-bound lane was a gravel furrow. Harris pressed against the broken window of his room. Some birds that had been in the roadside trees were way the hell away now. Pavement ants who lived in great scurrying kingdoms below the road, fled ruin and found that it was, for the time being, too wide a thing to flee.

"I suppose somebody should do-oo something," Shelly cried. "I don't want to." She set her plate down. "I would rather sit here." A lone holly blue rested for a moment on the porch rail and sought holly but there was none here. On work-stiff limbs, Shelly rose. She was a giant beside this butterfly, and a small animal below trees. "Don't let the bugs on it," Shelly said, of her sweet bean plate. Inside the kitchen she stood looking out at her daughter's spine, tanned curve of her neck, changed already from fishing, fingers plucking at porch paint. Shelly called the proper authorities. They came and so did the rest of the town.

Sons and daughters and parents rode vehicles in from the east and west ends of Maton Bay Road. They parked in flanks on the roadside and blocked each other in. They eyed the downed plane. "Warm night," they said to each other. They watched John Rogers' cousin and two other part-time paramedics climb in the plane to see what was left living inside.

Sewall Goode parked his truck in the Harris drive and Lyd Perry climbed out in a white summer dress like a salty-haired angel. Louella felt something take hold of her gut when she looked at Lyd. That she was the prettiest woman in town, everyone knew. Louella tried looking at Sewall. Then she looked at the dead plane and the fire trucks and their red lights.

The pilot had busted legs. The single passenger was mostly unhurt but would suffer later from very bad insomnia. He emerged as if this was a political event and perhaps for that man it was. “Kennedy-looking guy,” is how the Goodesboro people would describe him. There were three windows on each side of the plane and nobody else at all in it.

Sewall stood in the back of his truck and tried to get Lyd to sit on his shoulders to see the action but she would not. The both of them had eyed Louella and Shelly still sitting on their porch with their plates filmed over, sweet bean attracting the small energetic flies of spring. The plane sounded like five hundred woodstoves cooling all at once. Murky dark settled in. It did every day.

Lyd climbed down out of the truck bed and stood before the Abrahamses as if she were the spokeslady for the crash. “How *are* you both,” Lyd wondered.

Louella looked Lyd up and down like Lyd herself had taught her. And she had learned with Roy the art of waiting out a silence. “You’d make a good newscaster,” Louella said finally. “How you stand like that.”

“Lou,” Lyd said, “I’ve got to talk to you, sweetie.”

And Shelly said, “Would you like some beans and cornbread, Lydia.”

“Oh yes, ma’am, thank you and maybe Sewall would like it too, if you can make it a big plate, he’s been hungry lately.” Lyd dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s getting his strength back you know.”

The ambulance left and the fire trucks stayed. The pilot was a quaffed woman who had, from the gurney, looked at the crowd gathered and the beater cars they had arrived in, at the dandering shingle of the Harris roof and called to young Officer Nelson, “Don’t let a person in that plane please. It is personal property.”

"It's the shock," people said.

Shelly saluted Lyd, said drily, "Oh, sure ma'am," then disappeared into the house. Louella felt a surge of something like hunger like she and Shelly could take this girl-woman Lyd down with their teeth if they wanted. Lyd stooped, sat and cupped Louella's knee cap. Louella looked at the blue-nailed hand. She would rather it have not been.

"Louella," Lyd said, "I don't know what it is you're getting at with this fishing thing."

Louella shrugged. "Making money."

"Yes. That's been Sewall's job and was meant to be his job."

"When he wants it sure he can have it. I'm just working." Perhaps to say the first was to lie but to say the second was simple truth. The two girls watched the boy stand in the truck and look at the plane, picking at his ear.

"He doesn't know what he wants. Louella, he and I are in love. It would be so nice, Louella, if you could love us back. We miss you. We feel," said Lyd, "hurt by your absence." Lyd squeezed Louella's calf.

The plane was leaking fuel. The fuel slipped into the earth that made the bog. The fuel did not shimmer in the dark, but it would be a shimmer on the bog surface for the next half decade and they would forget, somewhat, that the shimmer was not of that place. Louella whistled the tune of a canon she had heard once but could not just then remember where.

Shelly arrived back through the kitchen door with a heap of a plate and two forks. She said, "Take that why don't you over to young Goode and get him fed." A piece of cornbread fell off the plate edge. Shelly stooped and blew on it and put it back on. She handed the plate down to Lyd.

"Oh!" Lyd said. "Lovely. Thank you, Shelly."

Shelly and Louella met eyes and found it was a good feeling to know the other. Lyd left the steps with the plate and turned and said, "Alright, Louella?" She was too beautiful for her own good, Louella thought, it had wrecked her. At the truck, Lyd passed the plate to Sewall. Then she hauled herself up beside him with surprising grace for somebody who pretended to be breast and bone and nothing in between. Sewall raised his fork to the Abrahamses with a hot dog stuck on it and called Thanks.

Roy's drunk second cousin fished when Louella could not. She had gone fishing twice. She had made near four hundred dollars. That the hours she worked were longer than what she worked for Frank was besides the point of it. She was a good worker in both gigs. She killed herself to move what was too heavy to be moved.

People left and then the fire trucks and the plane stayed.

**

Yellow jackets swarmed a roadkill squirrel. They hummed near Louella's purple car in the school lot. She stood with her key in her hand. She had not thought of the boom that day until now. Frank was not there.

The sky was big and blue, the pines had freshened up their color, nobody wore jackets anymore and Frank was not waiting. He was not there still when she started her car. He was not there as she drove down the lot road, and the thought that he might not come that Friday was like something that had been buzzing in her head for months reaching crescendo before the final quiet.

He was parked in a dumb place on the road, where the buses had to maneuver around the back fender of his good car. She stamped her brake without meaning to. A senior boy she did not know honked hard behind her. When she passed Frank by, she did not look, but she thought she

saw the purple reflection of herself flash in his car door and it jumped her, somehow, and her hand came up and flapped a wave. He zipped out just behind her.

She did not know where to drive with a man on her rear so she drove to where she felt good and strong, which was the water. As the Atlantic opened up on either side of the big island bridge, she thought of this flapping wave. That she had not wanted to wave but her hand had done it anyway scared her. She did not know why she was driving somewhere with a certain dead end. At the Cove Road turn, she kept her head pointed straight forward like if she did not look at her sweet working wharf or Roy's house he would not know that the man who paid her now lived here. She parked before the pay-a-quarter binoculars. The water broke on the basalt and tugged bladderwrack hard, crabs hid everywhere. A nice brisk May day.

He parked beside her. After a while, he swung his legs and then his body out of his car. With his hands open and raised, he shuffled to her open window. From where she sat she could see from the tight bag of his old stomach beneath red wool up to his chin's clean shave.

"Louella," he said. "I just want to talk with you. To understand what it is that has happened between us." He stood there a pace back from her open window. The wind was warmer now, but had a cold center.

She was sixteen. She could kill him and never feel sorry, she thought. She leaned down through the window and smiled because she was frightened. "Oh Frank," she called. "I'm so very sorry. I'm so very sorry how I went away." She heard her own words from very far off. Just inside her ears was hot as though swollen. The words sounded to her like she was listening to an old black and white movie and it was the moment of reconciliation between the beautiful woman and the complicated man. This was not at all what she had meant to say.

He put his hand on her open window. “Louella. Let us sit a while. Let us sit together a while.” His fingers fell into her car. “I only want to be near you.”

There is a bit of hell in every want. She could kill him if she wanted. She thought she was stronger than him. The ocean broke below beneath a long bluff. The land she was parked on had once been taller and then there was ice. If she took his wrist in hers and dragged him into the car she could send the car and him and herself too over the promontory, where the waves broke fast as a man nearing climax who has forgotten the woman. He bent down and put his face near hers. She wrenched her car into gear and backed away quite fast. It seemed he thought for the slimmest instance that he could hold her in place. His other hand came up to clamp her window’s edge and she saw his tendons straining. Then she drove away to home.

She slept with a steak knife by her bed. The heat in her ears was gone and she could think again. She considered calling Mark Tripp to ask if he had a gun, for the Tripps were rural people and might. But he, like Shelly, worked the late shift. She had cried to Frank as he stumbled from her car window, “Excuse me now, excuse me. I’ll see you soon!”

**

Fridays continued in this manner. In their two cars, they drove together. She did not ever drive back down Holly Island Road. When she stalled the purple car in a bad way he pretended he did not know her at all, sitting calmly on the slope, waiting for her car to begin again. For two Fridays she found a loop through town and drove it round and round and around again. “Practicing driving,” she would say, if anybody asked. He followed her until she gave up and drove home and then he paused in the road near the airplane as if he were a spectator of its stilled crash. Watched her leave her car and enter the house. Then zipped away, around the plane, on towards Red Hill.

"Clean man like him was dirty with time," she said in later decades, to dear Pat Nigla and John Day, who would take that young being into their balconied flock if they had not already. Time like sin. She told the story of this winter in a series of unfunny jokes that her friends, eventually, knew well.

At home, she did her math homework and no other homework and she carried the red gas jug around the yard. The plane had not been moved. One wing had been pulled down Maton Bay Road on a flatbed, slowly as a funeral procession for the limbs of an otherwise lost body. The proper authorities had moved some other metal away but worried for the sparks of a saw in the combustible fuel. They worried so long it stopped feeling like a pressing problem and then they decided they might as well wait for the pilot to retrieve her personal property. The Forgerty's had had little traffic before. They had none now save Pat Nigla and some belated reporters.

Harris called to her sometimes and she went to him and sat inside the warmth of his chair and felt less lonely between his many things for he whispered in her ear stories of his life that drew warmth up between her legs, of men touching men and women touching women, the fluids of living passed between.

Chapter Seventeen

She shoveled bait in the dark with the men. She was stronger than she had been. Sunday dawn. Two cords ran the length of her spine. Out in the bay, a boat chugged halfway to life and then died. “Fried plugs,” the good-looking sternman sighed to no one in particular.

Most were kind. To some she would always be the coquette who stole Sewall Goode’s job. The elfin bugs of spring battered the wharp lamp in its wire cage. She and Roy loaded the *Ginny* and took her out to sea.

Roy gaffed the first buoy where it waited strung to the ocean bottom. She filled twelve irons with pogies stuck through the cheek bone.

The lobster came thick in the traps. She shoved them into the square tank which leaked and held ocean water but was not an ocean at all.

She and Roy worked in silence. He was a kind lump of a man, at the top of him sat a skull with a brain. She thought perhaps she better warn him of someone coming for her, that she might be gone one day, onto better pastures, but she did not know how to start the story or what

to tell that wasn't too much. It all seemed like too much. She banded claws fast as she could. Her arms went tired. Quiet Roy stood behind her, looking for the buoy.

"There," he said, without moving. "There, Louella." She turned. He pointed without lifting his arm. "Check it," he said. "Check it." He pointed away from the work towards the edge of horizon. She saw the spray of whales.

They blew a half mile out. Roy stood still at the rail unworking. The whole belly of the Atlantic before him. The spouts were small white flags pulled north on a sea breeze pushing inland. Beyond them was a flat pale rock of an island on which many waddling puffins nested. Roy stood staring until Louella finished banding. She turned away to bait the irons.

He said, over his shoulder, "Oh, it'll wait. It'll wait." He watched empty water now. "Humpbacks. Should watch them while they're here."

She stood with a sharp iron in her hand, leaning against the bait tray. When the *Ginny* drifted near what she should not, Roy jogged her to open water. Louella watched the old soft back of this man. She began again to bait the irons. Roy stood watching for the whales a quarter hour more. Then he brought the *Ginny* around, gaffed the next buoy up over the hauler block.

"You could whale until nineteen-eighty-six," he said. The rope coiling up and spitting seawater. It seemed to Louella that he was uncertain if he was unhappy that times which had once been were done.

**

Louella was young enough to want to believe the boom years would keep on like this. But perhaps she had seen enough to know that things often changed when it would be better that they did not and things stayed when it would be better that they changed. She would be forty-five

when she could not make a living like this anymore. The thirty years in between would be good years.

They did not haul as many traps as Roy had hauled with Sewall or Roy's second cousin, but, Roy said, that was alright with him. He was old. Teaching put the life back in the work. They tossed back many berried females. Cut a notch in their uropods. In this way the females could live to spawn.

She and Roy offloaded crates to the man at the lobster car. She looked up once from habit towards the Goode house. It was a house. Sewall's truck was gone. In the fisherman's lot waited her loud cheap car, which had made itself back in money like an old strong horse who eats very little. Beside her car, in front of the FISHERMAN PARKING ONLY sign, sat a tourist's good car, a man who thought he could park any place.

She and Roy counted out the last of the catch. Together they heaved the last crate over the *Ginny's* rail to the man who waited at the metal scale with his damp notebook and his own personal memories held in his shirt pocket. "Good morning out there," the man said, and wrote down *Ginny. Lavender. 503# Abrahamse. 303 check.*

When Roy took the *Ginny* around the whole string of full floating crates, when the *Ginny* was turned once again out to the cove mouth to be moored, and when Louella had climbed up to the tall bow twenty feet above the water to cleat off the mooring line, she saw that the tourist's good car was Frank's car and it was Frank who stood waiting beside hers.

It was Sunday. It was not Frank's day. The work she did here was not Frank's bed. She stood on the bow with the ten foot gaff in one hand and the mooring line in the other, her hands salted with the working water. She turned away from him, hauled the rope up and cleated the boat fast. He too had a boat, Frank had once said. The man could follow her to any place.

He spread himself like seed upon the field of her life. He had planted memories in her body that would not go. He had bought the power to do so and now he made a memory in her mind in a place that had been clear of him, she felt it grow like a hot scar on her cheek. He sat in his car watching how she walked with the heavy mooring line. He watched her bend in her slicks to cleat it. The tide was coming in and the *Ginny* nosed to the sea, wavelettes breaking on her and then sliding around and breaking again on the cove beach.

The man at the lobster car fetched them in the skiff, the outboard hiccuping as if drowned. He brought them into the wharf, talking of the day. Two cardinals, he said, had mated right in front of him on the lobster car. It was strange for a lot of reasons. "This might be a rowing-in day," he said, when the outboard yakked.

Frank stood watching up on the hill between her car and his like he was a man in the movie in love or with plans for murder and either way bold music is playing in the background. How she was sitting on the bow plank of the skiff, she could see him over the cotton shoulder of the lobster car man. He watched her back.

"How birds mate seems like it should break them." Their feathers, red and yellow. The outboard died then like something dropped. "A rowing-in day then," the man said and hauled the outboard up dripping. "Fixing it, the tide would have time to take us out and back, I think."

"Get up there and row, Louella," Roy said.

The man said, "That's alright." But she was already half crouched, the dead skiff lazing a slow circle. Let it take us out, she thought. Let it take us to another island and I will live there my whole life. They have fishing boats everywhere, don't they.

"Let her up there," said Roy. The man flexed his jaw and they swapped, all three pressed briefly together. She slipped between them, the skiff dipped. Then they were settled. The big

oaks on Howe's Hill dug roots into graves where old bodies let loose good dirt. Young leaves unfolded and were green as cankerworms. The oars in her palms made no sense for one moment. The eyes of the men floated like the bodies of the men in which they were held and watched her.

She quieted her thinking and felt. Water was a place to push off from. Below the skiff three fathoms, red rock crab crawled. She pushed and the skiff moved. This low in the bay water, in a crowd of tall boats, she was hidden from the eyes on the hill. She tacked between hulls. Scraped one when the wind that funneled through the mouth caught them and a push did not push straight. "Racer girl," the lobster car man said gently.

She docked them with a clunk and Roy said, "No doubt we have arrived." He wrapped the skiff rope about the old dock cleat. "This is needing," he said to the lobster car man. The cleat waggled in his hand, bolted to ancient wood.

"Don't tug on it Roy, then."

Out old Roy climbed from the skiff. How she had docked she could not see Frank but he burned there on the hill. Roy moved slow across the wharf. On the *Ginny,* she was his legs, though his hands were still fast enough. When he stopped working, everybody knew, he would die. He would not stop working until Ginny Lavender was gone.

A tourist in a fast yellow car rocketed the last length of the Holly Island Road. The lobster car man stood bolt straight in the skiff. He stood with his hands clasped at his stomach like a choral singer and bellowed, "Goddamn you there's children here!" His big low voice echoed around the bay's rock basin. But the car was far away and lost in its own engine. The Holly Island Road was a trip through make-believe and the lobster boats were quaint quiet things made for show. Roy had turned at the bottom of the gangway to watch it. He shuffled around

again, walking like his big feet hurt. Up on the bluff, Frank watched too. The yellow car sat at land's end for a half moment and then rocketed back north.

"Sons of bitches!" the gentle lobster car man cried.

She let Roy go far ahead of her. He hauled himself up the gangway. His feet had walked that tar paper since it was laid and then had walked all the tar paper ever laid on the gangway. He had walked when there was no fancy tar paper and only shims to hook a toe in. Let him take his old truck, she thought, drive the one tenth of a mile home to silver Ginny. Wind washed below the gangway and around the rough barnacles of the wharf pilings. Let him leave before Frank could put his hands on her and move his mouth in a way that said he had and could still own enough of her skin to kiss it. Let these two men who paid her for what her body could do not ever meet. She was far from old enough to consider that shame was a bad gift inherited from everyone, though she one day would.

At the top of the gangway Roy turned. "You sleeping in that skiff tonight?"

She walked him to his truck. She cut her steps in half to match his own. Frank's face turned like a gun on the parapet of his body kept those two in his sights.

Roy's truck was an old black beater of a thing. It had once had a make and model but those sorts of things went irrelevant when the back fender got replaced by driftwood. He climbed up into it. He touched the ring and the twig hung on the rearview. She asked before she thought quiet Roy might not want to be asked, she asked to stretch out the time between the now and the then of Frank, "What's that twig from, Roy?"

He looked at her. And then he looked beyond her at his home or the cove beach on which he had played as a toddler or perhaps at the man who waited. "I had another sort of family one time. Old man like me." He smiled to tell her that that was alright. To have once had something

and to have lost it. “Weather’s looking good all week,” he said. She nodded and stepped back and let him go. What she did not understand but had to live with seemed to pile up like logs against a dam, somedays.

His truck backed up out the near wharf lot where he could park for he was in body if not age the oldest of the fishermen. He drove through bright spring air a short distance. She watched him bend the curve towards the fisherman’s lot and she watched Frank step out into the road and raise a hand to Roy and she saw Roy’s old brake lights blink on and she felt something in the cavity of her chest bite at its fingers but it bit too hard and the fingers all came off at the knuckle. Frank stepped forward to Roy’s passenger window. What was inside her could not yet decide to grow into anger or fear or deep helpless sadness so it spun like it was limbless now and drowning in the log-dam’s eddy.

**

Frank in his car followed close behind Louella. They drove the Holly Island Road. Louella might have gone elsewhere. She might have driven again to land’s end and hurt the man. It was Sunday and Shelly’s truck would likely be parked in the Harris gravel. She might have pulled off and done what he asked and sent him back to Red Hill. She might have driven all the way to Red Hill herself, save him the ride back. She felt too tall in her car as if the car drove dizzily on a foot of air. She passed through town and an old woman yelled, “Fisherwoman!” after her taillights and Louella cursed her wildly. She drove the Maton Bay Road. There was Shelly’s red truck, parked in the yard.

Louella slowed, she passed around the bright cones that marked the divot where the plane had first hit and drove on the west bound lane. She stopped dead still and Frank stopped behind her like neither of them expected a house or a plane to be there at all and were waiting for

somebody to tell them what to believe. Then she cut her wheel hard and turned into the drive. She did not get up and go into the house. Frank parked beside her where cars did not typically go. His tires crushed lowbush chamomile. Things had been changed at this house since she left that dark morning. There was a mess in the yard down the porch steps.

Harris' junk was scattered everywhere. The jumping tuna statue lay sideways on the steps, a tangle of chairs had grown like many mating spiders in the yard, the gold-framed painting of the Madonna, the five foot wide stiff print of young men traipsing across dunes on a blue day, empty bookshelves. Napkins and calendar pages and letters tumbled in a breeze. In their separate cars, Frank and Louella watched the white closed door of the house.

Frank turned to Louella. Then he got out of his car and shut the door carefully. He stood with his hands in his trouser pockets looking at the house as if he remembered it from a boyhood long gone. She sat in her car. She could still leave. She could break this man at his pelvis with the whole metal tonne of her vehicle and nobody in that world would know the difference, for odd things happened all the time. There was half a plane in her road.

He swiveled on one foot then and walked smartly to her window. He rapped on it but she did not open it. He pulled at the car door and she held it though it was locked. He pulled again like a son on a mother's hem. "Louella," he said through glass. Their eyes met and flashed.

"Louella," Shelly cried. Her voice shook around that whole gravel yard, fell down into the bog wells. "Louella." Her voice was very strong. Frank flinched.

Shelly stood just inside the kitchen door. She stood in the shadow of the kitchen, half-hidden behind Harris' wide, stained mattress. The head of it poked out the door. But it was too large for the small opening, it seemed impossible that it had ever passed through.

Shelly watched Louella and Frank through a sliver of space. She rammed the mattress with knees and body, but it only shivered and stuck. She wailed her daughter's name. She heaved against the mattress as if it would bend and break before she or the doorframe did. In one mighty swing she crouched and snaked her arms through the door and kicked the mattress and got it out halfway through the door and then it stuck again. Only her shoulders now and wild blonde skull of a face were visible. Her eyes and mouth made three black holes that seemed to look through her skin into the dark of the kitchen behind her. The two lovers in the drive watched her ram it with her shoulder but it would not shift much now, the woven polyester plastic had caught like skin on the doorframe's latch. She looked at her daughter from inside that bought house. Through a car's windshield, her daughter looked back. The man Frank looked from one Abrahamse woman to the other and he said nothing. He stood between them, their cars clacked and cooled. Mating butterflies spun. Louella's hand rested on the key in her ignition like she might give up this life she had, find something warmer. Frank laid a hand on her purple car's roof.

But when Shelly, with the frightening, reptilian agility of a mother who hopes over some great distance to reach her child, began to scrape herself between the mattress and doorframe, when her blonde head and arm poked out of the house's darkness into the slanting sun of the porch, he turned slowly from Louella's car.

He walked towards his open car door with one hand in his pocket jangling his keys. But then he paused, turned back. "You are a damn dumb woman," he called to Shelly. Shelly cleared the mattress. She came down to him.

If somebody else had been watching those three besides those three, if, say, Harris had been there still to see it, he would have thought Shelly had been chasing from her own property a

man who had too much useless pride to run. If that man believed that that was the case, he would not let himself know it. He backed away from Shelly. Hand working fast in his pocket in a nervous twitching lump. The visible rest of him was calm, untouched. Shelly crossed the gravel in four huge strides. She was for a moment taller than the roof of the Harris house. She cast a great shadow that reached across miles, down to the Atlantic shore. Birds took flight.

Frank looked way, way up and laughed at her. But it was the small, practiced laugh of someone who, accustomed to holding the whole of the power, is unsure for a moment of what he holds at all. Shelly's shadow cooled Louella's car, what light Louella saw was silvery as dawn.

Frank drove away fast in the wrong lane past the downed plane, over the slick of its spilled fuel. Shelly turned her head but not her body in the gravel. She was small again. She looked over her shoulder at her daughter with her eyes bent so hard they must have ached in her head. Her daughter still watched back through glass. Neither one would ever say a thing about this man they both had known, for a short while, in Red Hill.

**

She had been beating him for years. She had been kicking him with heavy boots, it went rhythmically as hauling the traps. Sometimes she quit him, and there was a silence in their two bodies. Then, like the work beginning again, a buoy gaffed and a string of traps pulled from water, she felt the calm need to hurt him enter her and so his body appeared and she began to kick him again. She was kicking in the soft parts of his back, in his testicles, they popped at the swing of her boot toe many times, and the spongy liquid of them was returned into his body as though she were time and had broken him from adulthood. He stuck his hands into his groin, the cry he made was two-toned, low and deep and high and pining, a long extinction sound. The tissues of him tore and swelled and weakened, he was only dark, used blood inside his skin. She

kicked him in the mouth and the blood went out into the dark. His grown hands covered his face. He bent in on himself like a child under heavy covers in an unheated night. That he did not fight scared her, so she kicked him. Her boots were heavy things and they swung at his neck, snagged his ear, pumped his eye. She thought to herself in this dream what's one more blow on this boy what's one more in the whole book of blows, what's one more and what's one more. The reverberation of his bones, over all these years of beatings, began to sliver apart and become like sand in him, and her foot like a wave and then one day, the colors changed from the red of the beatings into a clear black night, a milktooth moon, and she found she was hauling Sewall Goode with her whole body as if he was a barrel of bait, she was hauling him somewhere better.

Louella dragged his body like she dragged all heavy things, with her whole self, she hoisted him under the armpits and got him out the baitroom door. His skin was near to bursting, it would leak soon. He was naked and so was she, she had a cock and it thumped against his back. Something in him had ruptured and filled him and he let it. He turned his head from her and though the wharf lamp was off, the moon was close and she saw that he was tired. They were on the wharf and the wharf was very long. There was Roy Lavender now, he waited in the bay in a skiff that turned in circles. He called to her, words big and throbbing as stars in that cold, old night, "Bring him down, Ginny, bring him all down," and she was happy to let him believe that she was not she, but Ginny.

But she could not reach the gangway, it was too far, and something now tugged back on Sewall. The loose skin of his backside was caught on a nailhead, the skin ripped like gravel crushed. When she went and fumbled at the nailhead, it was the feeling of touching herself, warm and electric and wet and then she woke. She lay in her bed and watched the window and saw there was a secret rain falling. No one else would likely know it had fallen for it was quiet,

and seemed to not want to be known. The nailhead had ripped a hole and though she watched it, waiting for the blood to come slipping out, for his body to empty, his handsome boy face to become the plastic of a glove, it did not.

In the kitchen she stood in front of the fridge and sucked the salt from deli ham. She chewed the purplish pulp down, spooned in peanut butter and good fresh cream cheese off the foil. Lately the hunger was of growing and of work, it was no longer the hunger of lack.

Shelly's truck sat parked in the drive, the rain fell from gutters, whacked the porch roof. She waited for Harris to speak to her, but he did not.

"Did you get beaten up for being a fag," she said to the silence, frightened of the answer. She dug in the peanut butter jar and sucked the spoon until the jar was half gone. The rain turned violent, shook the whole house, she could not hear the fridge's hum. When she crossed the kitchen to Harris' door, she could not hear her own feet. She listened a moment with her hand on the knob and then she opened the door and the light from the moon fell into the dark room and across Harris' many things, fell down the path and there in the edge of the gloom sat Shelly in the big black sofa chair.

Shelly's head cut into the chair back, ratcheted on neck tendons. Teeth bared at the ceiling, legs naked and spread, she was masturbating as though to do so were to pull something large and angular from herself. The room was dark but it seemed to Louella the shadow of a man stood above her mother, peering down at the stiff fingers working so hard. She understood that he was saying sweet, kind things and these things were making a wide warm sea in which Shelly floated. Harris looked up then, and spread an open hand to her, he beckoned Louella in.

When she shut the door, it was as though there had been nothing to see. She stood in the dim kitchen. Shelly's truck was parked there in the drive still and the rain pummeled the porch

roof and all of the oceans and all the land. She was not frightened until she was alone in her room and then she was more frightened than she could remember ever being. She found she did not trust herself to know what was real. Sleep came down on her again, hard and fast, without dreams.

**

A dog had washed up on the cove beach. Roy and Louella stood on the wharf, watching it from far away. The dog had a red collar but nobody had been down to the sand to check it. The smell was different than that of the dead fish that sometimes washed up. “For the birds,” people said, and the high tide. It was the end of a warm fishing day.

She walked halfway to her car, watching the rustling gulls eat the dog. Then Roy called and she turned. He was standing in the road. He had walked some of the way behind her with a bucket in his hand and she knew there were fat hens in there. “Have you been calling?”

“Ginny wants to meet the new girl I’ve been spending all my time with,” he said, when she walked back to him.

She did not mean to but she looked away, she watched the largest of the crows. “We’ve met,” she said.

“I think she knows that,” Roy said. Then he drove her in his truck the tenth of a mile up the road to Lavender house, the ring and the twig swaying from his rearview. The birds digested the dog and shat it out like everything else onto the roofs and rocks and vessels of that island.

Water boiled on Ginny’s stove. Roy and Louella stood very close in a small tight mudroom and took their boots off but they always stood close for the *Ginny* was a forty-foot Novi. Louella studied his socked toe knuckles. The room smelled of road dust and the engine block under plywood, dryer sheets.

The whole kitchen steamed like fabric beneath irons. Sunburn crossed Ginny's silver face. She had smart eyes. They found Louella's before they found her husband's, they asked something. From their kitchen, like the Goodes', the Lavenders had a wide view of the harbor. Down below in the springy twilight, the mint-hulled *Ginny* waited with all the other patient boats. Roy told Ginny quietly of the day. The catch was slower.

But it was nearly June, wasn't it. And things were made to change with the seasons and if they didn't change it would be due to a problem hidden beneath the surface and that problem would not last forever and would leave in its place an emptiness. "The cyclicality of it," Ginny said to Louella who stood in that kitchen's corner like a rootbound sapling, "makes me feel like it is an okay time to be on earth after all. Sit down."

"She hasn't eaten a lobster," said Roy. The Lavenders spoke softly as if, Louella thought, they would rather Louella were not there.

Ginny looked under the bucket lid. "Girls," she said to the four down there. She plucked out two by their tails and moved to the stove and lifted the pot lid. The lobster raised banded claws, heavy in sudden air. Into the boiling pot Ginny placed those two, and then a third, and shoved them down with a spoon when they tried to climb very fast back out. Once, when only the first people lived on that coast, lobster after storms could clog the beaches, thick as wrack, some large as a human child, it was said.

The people stood a moment and listened to the three bodies baking. The shells hissed and their many legs tried for a little while to escape but the water in the pot was hot enough to boil the skin from a hand, let alone kill a water bug. The core of the lobster's bodies was the last thing to heat and then it heated and the three went quiet. Roy offered Louella a beer.

"Well, go on, then," said Ginny.

Across the street where the Goode house stood, a screen door slammed and bounced only once. Roy shoved his fingers in his beard. “This one works like the best kind,” he told Ginny. In the pot, seawater boiled just inside the shells, and the quiet three finally died. “Girl doesn’t quit.”

“Women have to work very hard don’t they?” Ginny said. Her steady eye in the calm face like a gull’s.

Louella said, “Yes they do, ma’am.”

And Roy said, “Oh no now.”

“That’s alright,” said Ginny.

The lobster came out of the pot changed. Red and limp in their limbs and hot as rocks. They drained fleshy water, racked in the table center. Ginny had made potatoes too and the platters on the table all steamed like the table had been mortared and here was the smoke of the aftermath lifting up. Butter on a saucer with the wax wrapper unfolded. The three sat.

“Where are you from, Ginny,” Louella asked. It felt adult.

Ginny coughed. “Here,” she said. “A long time, here.”

They snapped the hens apart at their midriffs. Tails came out of shells in a sweet lump. Louella watched Ginny and did as she did. Their eyestalks still stood tall. The shell was tougher than it had been in life, and hot enough to brand a hide, but the claw meat came away with a flood. Small metal picks to pluck her white meat, to dip it in cow’s butter. Of the picks, Ginny said, “My mother’s. And I think her mother’s.” They ate, sucking. Ginny dipped meat in butter. “You know,” she said, “He started coming over when he could toddle.” She looked up at Louella.

“Who’s that,” said Louella.

“Sewall,” said Ginny. “When he could toddle, he toddled to me. He showed up on my porch any time. Lost a tooth? He’d come show me.” Ginny spoke with force and grace about a

boy who had gotten older. “Already strong then, that child. Already a thinker. I don’t think most children that young hope for things but he did, Louella. I did what I could as a woman who was not his mother.” Roy tidied his cutlery, his drinking glass. He did not look up at either woman.

Ginny had been fifty-three when Sewall was born. She had never been a mother and had never wanted to be a mother but did Louella know how what was buried down will one day float on the surface as if it has always been? Roy cleared his throat. Ginny’s finger worked meat from a crusher. “He and I would watch the cove in bad weather for Roy to come home. He sat in my lap.” She chewed the meat a moment. “I have never met a child like him. Could look you in the eye better than some adults. But then,” Ginny said, smiling, “I have no children of my own. Children’s faces are a mystery to everyone. Most of all the child.”

Louella peeled the hen’s meat from her tail. Her meat was good and tender. Tight divots where her flesh cooked against her shell bulged as bark around wire. She knifed butter. Roy put an antenna to his mouth and sucked. Louella found an antenna, and sucked, but there was no meat.

“It was when he was five or six he started asking when he could stern. Big questions out of a little mouth. Sewall’d say that he could band a claw good as anybody. In his child’s voice he would say these things. Clear by then he wasn’t there for toast and a lap. Not anymore.”

Roy made a noise deeper now inside his chest. He studied the lobster’s brilliant shell.

“He loved his sister quite a bit,” Ginny said.

“I know that pretty well,” Louella said finally. “Loved her deep and good.”

Ginny set down her hands, the metal picks between her fingers and stared hard and long at Louella. “He did, Louella. He did and he did for the sixteen years of her life of which you have been here not six months.” They each ate some hot meat then, all at once, three hands to

mouths. “I imagine he’ll want to fish sometime again,” Ginny said and her voice was back to a fine, gentle thing. “I imagine he’ll really want to and Roy will take him. What will you do then?

White meat steamed, sweet enough to cry about. Boiled she-lobsters were broken all around the table. Red lip-sucked antenna and emptied claws and wide rears. Green tomalley sat tossed in a waste bowl, though Ginny had said some folks ate it on toast. The fourth lobster waited alone in a paper bag in the dark fridge, could live in air like that for a long time.

Roy said to Ginny, “Louella’s a good sternman.”

Ginny spooned white thin fat from a tail. “I’ve heard,” she said. The spoon scraped the shell. The sink started burping and Ginny rose to run water down it. When she sat down she waved a hand and said, “But you’re so young, sixteen. You don’t even know what there will be for you.” A heavy rain then broke on that island. It had been drumming the ocean skin for hundreds of miles, just at the edge of twilight spreading over the water, and now it had reached the land. They all paused and looked at the door as if the rain might have a body with knuckles that could knock. “Well then,” Ginny said.

Roy got up and put on decaf. “That man Frank,” he said from the counter, “That man Frank. That man Frank, Louella, is trying to buy two lobsters a weekend. Said he liked to know the people that made his food. What d’you make of that.” The way Roy said this was a series of questions but he had not said anything but that a man was hoping to buy something caught from a man who did the catching. The Lavender’s had a metal roof and it was loud as the Abrahamses' when the rain fell on it. They all had raised their voices.

“Sure,” called Louella. “Sure. That man Frank,” she said, “is a friend of the family. I barely know him at all.”

Roy sat back down with loose fists resting on the table. The coffee pot pumped. She could not understand what was on his face except the strain to unravel something uncertain and unspoken. She looked to Ginny but Ginny was sucking at a thin red leg and her face was a bullseye of wrinkle. Roy said, "Well he hadn't said that he knew you but I said I didn't often sell direct like that. Tell him to come back if you'd like." His fists did not move, he was as still as when he had watched the whale's spouting far off.

"The man can buy from the co-op," Ginny said, putting the leg aside. She wiped her lip. "People like that only want a story to tell. Car like that he's not looking for a deal. Don't eat that," Ginny said to Louella. She was rough but not unkind. "It's not meat."

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

When the butter and body and sea were cleaned from the plates, it seemed there was nothing left to say. Kitchen air welled, pushed Louella out into the warm wet yard. Roy and Ginny stood in their doorway. Their silhouettes wavered in the misty thick rain. He held her waist, their shadows cast down across the walk by the kitchen's yellow light. In sixteen years, before she died, Ginny asked Louella what she thought of a man who thought women were purses for men's ideas, dirt for seeds, and Louella by then would know more of what made a man kind and know that not even Roy Lavender was kind all his life. There was no purity, for there was change, thank the wide heavens. Her wallet and keys were still in her pocket. She paused at the yard edge and raised a hand at the house, but the old Lavenders had disappeared from their door. On a bright yellow wall, Ginny's pots hung in a row. She turned in the street towards her car.

She was angry like a frightened dog is angry, knowing deep inside what the bigger animal can do. Then the anger left and she was tired down into her veins. There was no telling how long that man Frank would follow. Her boots clomped. She was wet through by the time she passed the Goode house. She let the weight of her turn and carry her back down the Cove Road.

Her thoughts beat around in her head, rivers thumped down temples, carried seasalt and sweat onto the tongue. Near her purple car, out of the dark and rain, came a wide, warm hand.

It caught her by the elbow bone and stopped her midtracks. Before she understood it, the strange wet limbs had her in half a hug, that other hand clutching at her stomach, heat of a mouth that has misunderstood grief for something more profound, and she thought, This is how I die then, like the stories that lined everything all her life had taught her to expect. In that thundering rain, she put her head back and howled. Women everywhere heard it and knew. Then the man got his teeth around the howl and bit it in two, the rain filled their mouths. She twisted and then she had the head by the hair, she had her knee in the groin and her claw in the eye, and then his nose broke under her heavy palm, she thought, warm mammal blood gush, and then her knuckles rubbed Sewall Goode's big spine. Briefly like gulls caught in life, they beat against each other. He was barefoot and shirtless and feeling in her hands like he had not eaten what he should be lately. All air and fear and skin and bone.

When they parted, the rain fell down between them and she remembered how good it had felt, in that dream, to beat him all those years. She had not remembered how very good until now. She understood how a person can continue to hurt another. For there is no better feeling, she thought then, than making a person fear.

But it was not the fear of the moment her own body hated most but the fear that the child the body believes lingers inside will not someday be born in the way that is hoped it will be born,

no matter if the mind hopes it at all. There was no fear like the angry fear she felt at a man's hand, for their hand carries a seed. The seed hopes eagerly to force a change into the future. It is not man or woman or body at all, but the seed and what it sought made bodiless. Nothing but the minerals held by the parasite of the future and the past. Sewall's body had been fevered and fragile, she would have hurt him badly if she could. But he looked up and met her eye and wept with his hands in his groin, the rain washing them both, and she saw that nothing had happened, she had not hurt him at all.

In the fisherman's lot, many gulls perched on the lot railing and the roof of her car. Her car was covered in white shit now washing away and down on the beach the tide had taken the dog back. She drove past Sewall like he was only a specter in the rain, where he stood just touching his eye.

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She would have fished until she died an old Abrahamse woman but the globe of water was a delicate thing and when it changed, there were no more lobster in that part of the world. This one year of her young life was kept in pieces of stories that she told to herself when it seemed that the doing of things became too difficult to manage. She had managed before.

There was no rain at all once she got off the Holly Island Road. It fell behind her in a wall that cut the water from the land. The bigger stars shone. She drove the long way home on Maton Bay Road. She drove as fast as that slow car could go, the engine whooped and grated, her wipers smeared bird shit. At the quiet hunk of plane she stopped. She had never before come upon the plane from this side. The crushed nose had been carted away and the big machine was now a long white tube. Honking geese flapped north across the moon. Seemed like the plane said something about failure but she was not sure if it was the failure of the people of the town in

which it had crashed or the failure of the people who had crashed it. She left her car in the east bound lane with the door open. Night crossed from the south side of the bog up into the road, through the car and down into the east.

Inside the plane, her headlights lit up plastic caution tape and somebody's frightened eyes. The eyes belonged to a deer and were uncolored as the sun's surface. They blinked and did not blink open again. Then they did, and hung in the dark as if they might understand something about headlights if they looked long enough. Louella climbed up over metal folds towards those low down, oracular eyes. They watched her come. Louella cast a long shadow across the plane's red seats and the deer and then she stepped aside and the light shone down into the dark and she saw this was a birth.

Wind seemed to move the deer's body but her head was calm on top of it. This was a carnal sort of intimacy. From the doe's vulva sagged a wet skull, limbs and scrawny neck, stretching the motherskin wide. The musk of fuel, plastic and torn metal and now also the woody good stink of a furred animal, the adrenaline and warm mucus that belongs to any birth.

The mother's still head eyed Louella and then that wind again shook the body below and the fawn was pulled somewhat back inside. Louella leaned against a red seatback to watch this weird thing play out, saw fatigue like a season in that body. She felt a certain bold camaraderie with this doe. The doe shifted bent legs as if to stand but did not. The doe did not feel that camaraderie and if she did not run, perhaps it was because there was only one way to run and a girl stood in it or perhaps because how could a mother when the child is not yet living and not yet dead. She pushed again now with urgent, inevitable violence, her ears flattened and her eyes blinked once but that was all the young woman watching could see. What had been pulled in by the previous exertion came out further by a knee and neck's vertebrae. Through the north facing

windows of the plane Louella saw a small orange fire. The deer heaved again and expelled the shoulders of her fawn and then the worst of it was done and the impossibility of birth was overcome by the force of it. The fawn slipped free. Leg bones, bloody tree of lung, kidney, occipital veins, mother's memory, wet fur and ear and eyelash, beating heart. The doe turned to her fawn and cleaned her of the fluid and membrane that had so far separated and bound them. The fawn found she had legs to move.

The sound of this licking and chewing was abrasive to Louella, too sensual, it was a terrible sound. She pushed off the seat. She could not catch her breath. The firelight in the ten north windows wavered and bulged as though real. She had been hurt and made hurt and she had taken her body and changed it. She wished that she could take back the memories from the old man that made him feel that he had lived as fully as he believed. Down the road from the east came a roaring truck engine. The fawn trembled and flapped her ears wetly, she had muscle enough to shift her neck. The doe heard the engine first and her ears cocked that way. Her fawn felt this motherchange, they bent back towards each other.

Louella's own purple car still sat with lights blaring and the engine running. The truck swept into the open bog stretch and braked hard enough to squeal tires and add a new scent to that muddled place. The three in the plane waited for whatever man was coming now. But then the truck carried on, headlights and then tail lights flashed by the three windows. The engine rumbled in the metal of the tube and then was gone. Louella followed it out of the plane. The fawn would grow and the doe too.

**

Harris' black chair sat ripped on the porch and a small fire burned near the bog edge. Shelly came running, bending, stooping with an armful of possessions thin enough to burn. The small bonfire lit the white house in which Louella was growing up.

Perhaps she should keep on driving. There was enough living here to fill any gaps she left. She had a slow car and a wad of cash and because she was young it seemed the world was a blanket of water a person could dive down into to pull up money. Behind her, a fresh life had just been born in the waste of a machine. She turned her purple car in. The headlights caught her mother and Shelly froze, white naked mother knees sticking out of shorts.

Louella wished often she could sever what she knew from what she was. That she could cut that bloody need that tied people together. It would be tidier that way. She knew the wrinkles of those knees like any child who has grown up hugging the legs of a mother.

The little fire was built on pine bough and spring-dried bog grass, rimmed by rock and clam shell in the gravel. Into it, Shelly fed Harris' paper goods, his kept cardboard and blender manuals, the posters of beautiful men in gold lamé suits, the desirous shifting sand in the dunes with their naked feet, the neatly folded paper napkins, the pizza boxes that smelled like pizza and treated lumber when they burned. It was near midnight but they were women of the fisheries. When there was fish, there was work. The work could fill a day and flood the night, and the reverb of it shook the edges of things. It was near midnight but there was too much hurt to sleep yet. In the plane the fawn suckled and knew joy.

Louella sat in her car. It seemed everything that had happened was in the hollow between waves and she was herself now entirely the hollow. She could burn, she thought. She was only so

much salted skin, dry bone, pumping organs, heavy brain and working muscle. Like printed money, all that could char easy.

Shelly squinted once at her daughter and wadded the newspaper so that it might catch air. Papers flew up as carbonous soot into the forest where they would fall like the soft wings of moths. Goldenrod bloomed at the edges of trees. Everywhere, Harris' hardy daffodils pushed green spears through leaf litter. That he had been some type of gardener they would see when the yard was a sweet yellow carpet. Louella rose and shut the car door and came near the fire but stopped short of the light. Shelly had a glow about her like the need for love was something that made energy.

Shelly called, "I bet it's that you're hungry." And in the way she called it, Louella heard that Shelly meant, I don't know quite all that has happened. But if you tell me, it will hurt me.

"It's that I'm hungry," Louella called.

"There's pork roast," Shelly said, and laughed a little panic at herself. "There's potatoes baked, they're cold but I can heat them, I can fry them, a little butter. New bread, what kind we used to get, that brown bread, there's grapes if you go on in." Her voice rising up and tossed over the fire, it was a net flung poorly.

If Louella ran, she would go south on backroads to where the ocean was warm all year and the fish were bright and strange. Into the fire, Shelly fed the sheaf of papers on which the story of Harris' life was kept.

The paper burned too fast to save, but Louella crossed into the light of its sudden glare and tried. The burning might have been a lure for an animal Shelly thought would otherwise return to ferality and leap away, into the forest. Louella grappled in the fire. She caught the edge of the paper and flung it. She had not known she believed it was the manual of the life she did

not want to live until now. The pages spread across the old grass in one bright arc, and burned in rectangles there. Shelly fed in more.

Louella said, "What is it that you're doing right now." She crouched at the fire's edge.

"But what would saving it do?" dead Harris called from the house.

Shelly, something fierce on her face, fed more. Louella stuck her hands in. The fire burned her sleeve. She beat her palms against her chest. "Damn you," she said to her mother and to the house and its acreage like here was where time had spilled and anger could reverse the accidents of it. But she was not angry. She wished she could be but she was not just then. She felt that she had reached the end of a long exertion and was sick with gladness to be here, in this place she had somehow overwintered, with this woman she did love. On the ground, every small thing noticed the fire's heat and shocking light. White moths sought moonlight but the moon was suddenly too close. It led them nowhere and only charred them. Earthworms dug down towards cooler soil. In that light, the Abrahamses' heads held the calm, large eyes of something much older or younger than a person ever could be. The way they watched each other now seemed to suggest that in the broken spring evening of that year, they shared a knowledge that made all their memories for one booming flash irrelevant. If this was so, it was neither good nor bad. It was not so. They were only each thinking hard for words neither owned.

Like the arms of a clock their shadows tipped back one way into the bog and one way towards the little white mortgaged home. There was little difference at all between them except one woman stood closer to the fire and the shadow she made leaped longer. On the far side of their home, the box of the house threw a dim shadow of its own.

Louella listened for more cars coming but there were only birds resting in trees. She bent and squatted, down onto her haunches in her fishing boots. The fibrous salty meat of a pork roast

floated over the midnight porch. Fog flew around them and ate up sound in its many small mouths. She was warm enough and they were moneyed enough and would be for some time. A pile of belongings not their own sat dampening in the grass. Louella pointed out to the dark road and said, “A deer had a baby in the plane just now. I saw it.”

Shelly turned that way. She glared through night and metal, cheek working like she was chewing words or gum flesh. “I saw a car go by when you were stopped there,” she said.

That was all they said. Together, the Abrahamse women hauled and burned what they could. There was a lot to burn and they could not burn it all. They humped Harris’ thinner junk from his room and broke his chairs back into wood and if there had ever been other words to say, they had been lost deep into the mess of another woman’s childhood. The chairs spat varnish and old nails. Standing with warm thighs, the Abrahamse women ate tender pork roast off paper plates then burned the plates and hucked their metal forks twenty feet across the yard onto their porch. The fire stretched wider and outgrew its stone circle and still the rain hovered far away at the rough edge of land and water. The Abrahamses labored all the rest of that night, for neither one could say yet to the other, Wait now, mother. Rest now, daughter. Woman, stop.

The End

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