Flight

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Statement of Originality

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Synopsis

Flight reveals the ghosts left behind in the lives of seemingly disconnected people after the 'dawning' of the nuclear age. In 1975, Darcy Rain returns to New Mexico because her father is ill. While she waits for her father to die, she finds herself attempting to reconstruct the disintegration of her family by writing a series of letters that will probably never be sent. Through telling her parents' unreliable story, she re-visits the secrets that threatened to destroy her family after World War II.

The story begins in 1944 near Alamogordo, New Mexico where the first atomic bomb was tested. The government's confiscation of local ranch land sends Ida Drea's family into crisis and she runs away from her oppressive father, her sick mother, and a repeated nightmare that she doesn't understand. On the road, she meets Johnny Rain, a young man on his way to military training. As they travel through the deserts and mountains of New Mexico, they tell their stories and begin an uncertain journey together that will connect them for the rest of their lives.

The novel follows them together and apart during the last years of the war. When Johnny witnesses and contributes to the destruction of Japan from the tail end of an airplane, he begins his own private battle of guilt and shame. In the bomb-devastated ruins of Tokyo, he finds refuge in a Japanese woman who has fled Nagasaki. Ida, torn between obligations to her family and the possibility of a different future, witnesses and bears the physical burden of the testing of the first atomic bomb. She seeks refuge with Johnny's family.

When they reunite at the end of the war, both Johnny and Ida are changed, each with secrets they'd rather keep hidden. As America turns toward the outwardly cheerful

1950s, they find themselves in a hastily constructed marriage that begins to collapse when their pasts explode into the present like small silent bombs.

Note: I have used American spelling and punctuation in this novel due to its setting and for the purpose of possible publication in the United States. A selected list of works consulted is included with the critical essay that accompanies this thesis.

. . . the histories of families cannot be separated from the histories of nations. To divide them is part of our denial.

Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones*

One can never be exactly sure of both the position and velocity of a particle; the more accurately one knows the one, the less accurately one can know the other.

Stephen Hawking on the Uncertainty Principle
A Brief History of Time

Los Alamos, New Mexico
July 16, 1975

That cold autumn afternoon when I found the scattered pieces of your letter, I could almost hear the scrape of my mother's chair as she left the room. I'll never forget the airmail envelope with its strange foreign stamps, your precise handwriting on thin blue paper. By then, of course, I already knew how silence bleeds into a family that can't face up to the truth. How it swallows the sun and the stars and almost any kind of happiness that might have been possible.

Still, all these years later, it surprises me to think that on the other side of the world, you might have been imagining another story where my mother and I were the missing pieces. Although I don't know where you are or who you've become, for what it's worth, I've decided to try to put it down on paper. I want to try to understand the silence of the past, perhaps in the hope that I will find some sort of peace as I wait for my father to die. I write for both of us but even as I begin, I wonder if you were to tell it, how you would begin, what you would put in and what you would leave out. I wonder if your story, like mine, would be full of half-truths and interruptions because somewhere along the way you figured out that's all we really have.

1944

Gravity

1

Ida Drea doesn't give a damn about the gathering dust or the gash of blue sky looking like it's about to swallow the tops of the mesas. She stands in the middle of the road like it's the most natural thing in the world for a girl to be alone in the desert, her whole body swaying against the deepening rusty earth. She doesn't bother to push away the tangle of dark hair blowing across her face, caught up as she is in the slant and swing of her own leaving.

The slap of a truck's tires coming up over the hill tenses her body alert. She hears the engine kick back crankily as the driver slows down and pulls around into the dirt on the side of the road. Through her hair, she can see him squinting at her through the dirty windshield. And still she doesn't move.

"You're gonna get yourself killed," he yells from the open window. He's wearing an old straw cowboy hat and looks like the Mexican who helps her dad out on the fruit harvest.

But it isn't him; the stranger is younger and better looking. She stays put as he hits the inside of the door with his palm and it squeaks open.

The cowboy gets out, brushes off his jeans, tips his hat and grins. "And you gringos call us loco," he says.

She pulls the hair out of her eyes and hopes that he can't see that she is only seventeen, can't sense her uncertainty.

"Where you headed?" He takes off his hat, wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

She frowns, considering whether to answer him. For all she knows he could be one of those awful men her mother's always warning her about. A murderer or rapist just waiting to pounce. She decides to lie. "North." The truth is, she doesn't know where she's going. That's why she's been standing in the middle of the road. She only knows that she has to get away from Rosebud and out of the Rio Rosa valley, and if she can, out of the state of New Mexico.

"I'm headed that way. I could maybe give you a lift," he says, "but you're pointed the wrong way. You'll end up in Texas." He looks back toward where he has come from.

It's true. She looks down at the road, embarrassed. When she looks up again, a smile moves across the man's brown face and she almost expects him to laugh at her. She waits for it but the smile turns into a big friendly grin. She lets out a little sigh of relief then shrugs her shoulders and picks up her old suitcase. "I guess I'll take that ride," she says. Before he has a chance to open the truck door, she grabs the handle and climbs in.

Once they're on their way, she stares hard at the road as it rises up then slips beneath them. She feels jittery inside like she's waiting to confess something she'd rather not to the sour old priest at St. Mark's. She reaches for the leather pouch hanging from her

neck and silently offers up a plea for a safe journey. *In the name of all who have come before me, bless this road, bless this driver, bless me on this journey. Protect me from all harm and deliver me safely to . . .* The pickup bucks at a pothole and she nearly lands in the cowboy's lap.

He laughs a short dry laugh as she slides back to her side of the truck. "We call this snuff road." His hand on the steering wheel is almost black from the sun.

Ida stays quiet and stares at her own pinkish, sunburned fist holding onto the edge of the open window as if she might jump out at any moment.

"Yep. Snuff road . . . just as soon as you finish one dip you go back for another." He slaps the dashboard and hoots a loud cowboy laugh. When she frowns, he stops mid-hoot, leveling his eyes across the wheel. "Whooee! This sure is gonna be a hot one," he says as the truck's worn tires suck on the tar already bubbling up in the morning heat.

She thinks of the cows waiting patiently for her, their udders full. *Irresponsible.* She can hear her father's accusing voice and it makes her blush with shame. He would say she wasn't raised that way. You always carried your load, worked hard, got respect, if nothing else. That was the Irish way or, at least, her father's way, at least until lately. But she can't let herself think about that. Not now. Not yet.

It's Tuesday. She wants to remember this day for the rest of her life. The day she cut herself loose. It had taken a long time trying to figure out what she should say in the note she would leave for her brother. But, the more she thought about it, the harder it seemed. Finally, she had simply written, "I'm sorry." There was nothing more to say. How could she explain why she had to go? That she thought if she left, somehow her bad dreams would go away, that maybe her father would be kinder to Tommy.

Now, finally on her way, she reviews her sleepless night. How she had pulled the covers up tight around her chin and held her breath just as she had for years, waiting for the sound of her father's pickup shimmying over the bumpy dirt drive, the sound of the truck door slamming, his boots on the gravel, then the steps, and, finally, the staggering shuffle to the kitchen door. She halfway expected him to come in and give her a whipping. But he never came. Would never come again.

In the dark she had waited for a long time, listening to the shifts and moans of the nighttime house, waiting for her mother's labored breathing across the hall and the sound of the sheets adjusting as she tried to get comfortable. When she did fall into an uneasy sleep, she woke with a start at the sound of her own heavy breath. Then, like some trapped bird, finally free, her hands released the covers and for a moment her body seemed to spring from the bed and soar out through the wall into the black night. This sensation of flight was so strong that when body and mind finally came together, she was surprised to find that she was still in her bed. It was at this moment that she knew her decision to leave was right. That this was the purest notion she had ever had.

But now that it's really happening, now that she's on the road with a stranger, heading toward nothing in particular, she suddenly turns, looks through the truck's dirty rear window toward the direction of the ranch as if it might pull her like a magnet right back into the tight, hard corners of her family. They are heading into Rio Rosa. Heading away from Rosebud just like she planned. The same old scrub dusted piñon pines dot the land. She swallows hard, forcing the sob back to the place it's been hiding since she left. *Grow up,* she tells herself.

She sneaks another look at the man next to her. Although he's young, his face is cowhide tough, hard-handsome like her father's, like Tommy's, from long days of work and

sun. Just like the hands and faces of the other men in the valley, the color and texture of the land, red-brown, rough and lean. When she thinks of all the old cowboys who've helped her dad out, who've teased her with their rough, dry humor, a surprising ache rises in her chest.

"My name's Johnny Rain," the stranger is saying. "You have a name?"

She thinks about making up something just to try it out, something exotic like a movie actress might have. But she is still too caught up in what she has left behind and settles for the truth instead. "Ida," she says, knowing it sounds like an apology.

"Where you come from?"

"Rosebud." She keeps her eyes down, as if there is some shame in this admission, and turns slightly in her seat, pointing back toward the direction where he found her. "You know, that old ranch back in the hills south of town."

He lifts his hat slightly and wipes his hand across his forehead. "You mean that old homestead out by Four-mile? I heard Irish gypsies took it."

She's silent for a minute then whispers toward the open window, "We just call it Rosebud."

As they ease into town and onto the dirt road that runs through the middle of it, she pushes herself down in the seat, lifting her eyes to the edge of the window to get one last look. The small adobe houses cast rectangular shadows on the road in the morning light. They've always seemed the same to her, flat square muddy things, built more for service than for beauty. A few mangy dogs leap toward the truck baring their teeth, then retreat back to the safety of their tiny yards.

"Somebody looking for you?"

"No," she says too quickly. She thinks about the note sitting under the saltshaker on the table. Tommy would come in soon for breakfast. Her dad would still be sleeping. He wouldn't rise till Tommy had done most of the morning chores. And her mama? Yes, she would miss her daughter's hands. Hands to wash, to clean, to wipe, to cook, to feed, to sooth. Ida has come to believe that she is no more than this to her mother. Just a pair of hands.

Gradually, she moves back up in the seat as they come to the outskirts of town. She turns again to look back, maybe hoping to get one last look at what might have been her fate. But the only thing she sees now is the road disappearing behind her.

"Won't they be worried?" the cowboy asks.

But she doesn't want to think about her brother left behind, the only one who would really worry. She has told herself that he will be going too. He's been talking about joining the army for months. It's just a matter of time. And if he has to go, he will arrange for Mrs. Montoya to care for their mother. She tells herself this, knowing he will never leave, knowing she has destroyed that possibility for him. She looks out the window again and decides not to answer the cowboy.

As they move onto the main road, she knows he is watching her small hands pressing and re-pressing the red fabric of her dress against her thighs. It's her one good dress but it seems completely wrong in the dirty pickup truck. She would have been better off in the over-alls she wears for chores. She leans her head back and lets the smell of the hot tar and clean, dry air into her nostrils. Tries to keep her hands in her lap.

Outside of the town, the road climbs abruptly out of the valley snaking toward the mountains. Ida's heard her father say that this section is impassable in the winter but she's

never been up it before, even in good weather. In fact, she hasn't been much of anywhere except Alamogordo to buy supplies.

"See that mountain over there?" The cowboy points to a snow-topped peak in the distance jutting into the sky. "Hard to believe it just shoots up like that with all that desert to the west of here. Twelve thousand feet."

The road has begun to bend more severely and it seems like it will just drop off into the canyon below with each new curve. Her stomach dips and she holds her breath, imagining the truck shooting off over the edge, plunging like some wingless awkward bird into the chasm. But it keeps climbing.

They stop at a gas station and while an old man in greasy coveralls tops up the tank, Ida wanders inside and eyes Johnny Rain through the dirty glass. He stands, opening and closing a pocketknife, in the shade of the station's canopy. He has promised her a ride to the Colorado border if she wants one but she doesn't want to get mixed up with some Mexican cowboy.

She bangs the palm of her hand against the red pop cooler and pulls a creme soda through the metal tracks. When she comes back outside, the cowboy grins at her and she is suddenly ashamed that she doesn't trust him. He's given her a ride away from her troubles. She looks away but he's still there smiling at her. Smiling that maddening handsome play of teeth and lips and squint. And, for the first time, it occurs to her that she is free to think and say what she wants. She doesn't need to parrot the hard held opinions of her family anymore. The soda pop hits her throat like she imagines whiskey might and she gulps it down.

The cowboy's still looking at her so she looks back. "What you starin' at?"

"A pretty girl," he says, still grinning.

"Well, put your eyes back in your head." She tosses the pop bottle into the weeds next to the station and climbs back into the truck. "Where you from?" she asks as she slams the door.

The cowboy has climbed in too and is wiping the inside of the window with his handkerchief. "Which part of me?"

"As far as I can see, there's only one of you." She warms to the banter. It reminds her of the way Tommy talks to her.

"Part Injun, part mick, part spic." He tells her this solemnly, waiting for her to laugh but she doesn't.

She frowns into the hot sun through the dusty windshield. She doesn't get what he's saying. The only time she's heard the word 'mick' is when her dad talked about how bad the Irish have been treated. How people spat that word at him from the minute he arrived, no matter where he went or how far he ran. She had come to understand it was his reason for the meanness that took hold of him and cut through his family like a cyclone. *Wreckage*. The word passes through, prickling the skin under her damp hair.

Johnny keeps talking. "My old man thought he was a pioneer. Him and his two sisters worked their way across the border into a new life. He used to laugh at the idea of moving to 'New' Mexico since it used to be part of Mexico. But the move gave him hope, I guess. He said when they hit the valley, they knew they was home. He said it was like God had opened his hand and laid out the future. Pitiful as it seems, he thought it was the richest place he ever seen. Fruit trees, pecan trees...no town to speak of but plenty of work if you was willing to work cheap."

Ida thinks maybe running away helps you get far enough from your fear to realize some sort of hope. Or maybe he isn't saying this at all. Maybe she's hearing her own story instead of his. "What border?" she asks.

He laughs. "You ain't been nowhere, girl! Just south of here's a whole other country. He came from Juarez. In some places around there, the Rio Grande is more like a drainage ditch than a river. He used to say he floated over here on a tortilla."

She thinks about how she doesn't know much of anything about the place where her family finally parked its wagon and stayed. The place Johnny's father and her own father made into a life, the thirsty land that seemed to offer nothing but hard work. She thinks about the valley behind them with its pecan groves and fruit orchards scattered haphazardly across the barely visible boundaries of the ranches. Near the scars of the arroyos, tangled old cottonwoods and weeping willows created an illusion of a green that only those who had to make a living from the land would notice. She won't miss it, she decides.

But then she remembers the wild roses exploding all over the valley in the spring, pushing up through the hard ground, stubborn until the first freeze. Heat, drought, wind—nothing seems to faze them. Every yard in Rio Rosa filled with them all summer long. She will miss the roses.

"Must've been one of the few months there wasn't a drought," she says, finally. She needs to hate where she has come from. It will keep her going, heading for the hard, cracked land between places.

"Yeh. Or he was suffering from sun-stroke and thought he saw one of them watcha call-its."

"Mirage?" she says without even thinking about it. Tommy had told her about mirages, the ghostly promises of the desert.

"Yeh, cause he sure couldn't have been lookin' at the crusty old land around Rio Rosa. Anyway, it don't matter, he didn't stay around long. I only know about him through what my ma told me and my aunts."

"Where were you born?"

Johnny takes a long drag on his cigarette and flicks the ashes out the open window. "Espanola. But my mother's people are from up near Red Mesa. That's where I was headed when I seen you."

The road's beginning to flatten out and Ida leans back on the bad springs of the pick-up's seat thinking about the Indians who came into town sometimes but no one talked about exactly where they lived. Some of the old men hung around the general store. Her dad said they were all drunkards, good-for-nothings. She always wondered why it was okay for him to say the same things about them that were used against the Irish but she would never have questioned him. No one questioned Daragh Drea.

The cowboy cups a matchbook in one hand, then bends the match, lighting it without removing it from the book, all one smooth motion. The smoke stays quietly within him for a moment, then softly drifts out through his nose and mouth. The cab of the truck feels suddenly warmer and Ida shifts nervously in her seat, pressing the hem of her dress flat against her legs again. She tries not to touch the little glass bird dangling from a string tied to the rearview mirror.

When they pull into a roadhouse for coffee, Ida stretches and yawns. Before she can grab the handle, Johnny is out of the truck opening her door. No one has ever done this

for her and, before she has a chance to think about it, she snaps, "I can open it myself." Still, she can't stop the leap in her heart as the cowboy grins and bows dramatically, the straw hat in his hand sweeping toward the roadhouse.

Ida walks ahead of him and pushes the grimy door open. She has never been in a restaurant before but she eases into the nearest booth and Johnny slides in across from her, still grinning directly at her. He barely glances up when the waitress arrives with her order pad.

"Two strong coffees. Black," he says.

Ida shoots him a look both defiant and surprised. She doesn't want anyone making decisions for her from now on and besides, she doesn't even drink coffee. But then she thinks it might make her seem older. "I'll have cream and sugar," she says, then quickly studies the gummy-looking varnish on the tabletop.

"Honey," the waitress says, "ain't you heard there's a war on? No sugar today. Rations ran out two days ago."

"Just cream then."

"That we can do. Lots of cows in these parts but not enough cowboys if you ask me."

Johnny looks quickly down at the menu. "I'm havin' me some chili and just hope that it'll have a little kick. It ain't really good unless it raises a sweat on your upper lip."

She looks at his face again and feels that earlier tenderness in her chest. "I'll have the same, please."

After the waitress slides two steaming bowls in front of them and then puts down another bowl full of green and red chilies between them, Johnny asks Ida what she would

think about spending the night at his aunt's place. He tells her it's not far away and that he has promised her a visit.

"What about Colorado?" she asks with the heat of the chili expanding and igniting in the back of her mouth, then flaming into her throat. She reaches for water.

"Not a good idea," Johnny says. "Water only makes it worse."

"Whew!" She wipes her mouth on her arm.

"Here." He hands her a napkin to wipe her eyes as he piles more hot peppers into his bowl. "We can head for Colorado in the morning. It's a long drive."

When her nose stops running and her eyes clear up, she nods and digs in, sopping up the hot soup with a tortilla just to show him. "Yeh, I guess you're right. I'm not in a hurry. I don't have set plans at the end of the road yet anyway."

"So, what's your whole name?"

"Ida Drea. " She shrugs, not wanting to talk about her family. "Where did Johnny Rain come from?"

But he doesn't answer, only asks another question. "What kinda name is Drea?"

"Irish."

He winks at her and continues eating and talking at the same time. "Them Irish sure get around. My old man was half Irish. A bunch of them settled down around the Mexican border. Rain's my aunt's name. My ma gave it to me, said she wanted to forget him. So, did your folks come from Ireland?

"Grandparents on both sides but my dad was born on the way over. He always hated that. Can't claim any place as home."

The waitress stands impatiently with their check but Johnny shakes his head and asks her if she's in a big toot. Then he asks for pie.

"Cherry or apple," she says flatly, shifting her weight to one hip and looking beyond them out the window to a truck that's just pulled in.

"Cherry," Ida says, feeling her freedom in this small decision. She thinks only briefly about the fifty dollars she has taken from the milk money; it will have to last for awhile. But this feels like a celebration, a new beginning.

"Any pecan?" Johnny asks.

"Told you. Sugar shortage. Pecan takes too much."

" Cherry then." He raises his eyebrows and rolls his eyes.

As the waitress turns back toward the kitchen, Ida asks, "Don't you have to be somewhere sometime?"

"Not for a few days, anyway," he says. "I used to travel these roads a lot takin' livestock to sales for ranchers in the southern part of the state. Picked watermelons down in Texas too and then I'd bring them up here to sell." He looks out the window like he is searching for something, then says, "I delivered a couple of bulls in El Paso and sold my trailer. That was my last trip down there before I get shipped out."

The waitress returns with the pie. "That be all now?" The check is on the table before they can answer.

Ida follows Johnny's eyes to the waitress as she hikes up her hip, flirting with an old rancher at the next table.

When he looks back at her, he asks, "So, why're you high-tailing it out of New Mexico?"

"You in the army?" She is still thinking about Johnny shipping out.

"Airforce." He looks down and pulls a toothpick from his pocket, sticks it in the corner of his mouth.

"Where will you go . . . I mean, where are you stationed?"

"Denver for now, then training who-knows-where. Then somewhere in the Pacific. So what about you? What you got planned?"

She feels the blood move up her neck and into her face, wanting to know about him, not talk about herself. What can she really tell him anyway? That she's just a girl who wants life to be different? That would be true but the other things—her father's anger when he realizes she's gone, the empty sadness of her brother's eyes, the poison glare of her mother—how can she explain these things?

"I've been thinking to help out with the war, maybe work in one of those factories." It sounds grown-up and planned. She watches him to see if he can tell she's lying. She thinks of her mother's venom and her father's belt and the old fear presses at her. She tells herself it's sort of true. She's daydreamed about working for the war effort, tying her hair up in a headscarf and wearing trousers like the women she's seen in the magazines.

"Hey, maybe you could work in Albuquerque," he says.

She frowns. It's not far enough away.

"Or Denver."

She smiles then. He's the first person besides Tommy who's ever taken her seriously. "Of course, it might all be over pretty soon," she says, trying out this new Ida, a young woman who knows about the world, knows where she's going.

"Maybe so." Johnny stands up and pushes her money back toward her. "At least I've got a job for now. One thing about war...it sets people to work. You should be able to get somethin' in Denver. Not many guys left to do factory work. I hear they've even set women to making airplanes."

They take a rough dirt road through the tiny towns that snake around the flat base of the rising mountains to the west. Pretty soon, she gives in and falls asleep, her head bobbing up and down as the truck pitches and lurches. The cowboy reaches for her and pulls her to his side where her head can rest against him. She doesn't resist this comfort in the battered blue pickup gliding like a streak of sky along the rusted edges of the road.

2

Charlotte Rain is sitting on the porch in an old yellow chair. As Johnny and Ida get out of the truck and walk toward the house, the old woman squints and sniffs. "I knew it was you, Johnny. You smell like a horse. You got somebody with you?"

He grins and leaps to the porch, lifting her from the chair by the shoulders, guiding her toward Ida who stands on the red dirt in front of the house. "This is my Aunt Charlotte." He gently takes Ida's small hand and puts it in the older woman's. "This here's Ida. She hitched a ride with me near Rio Rosa."

As Charlotte steps forward, Ida can feel her bony fingers searching, kneading her own. They feel papery and knotted like her mama's hands and she silently sends out a little prayer for her mother. *Holy Mary, mother of* God, *take care of her.* But she isn't certain whether it's genuine concern or guilt that shapes the plea.

"I'm not gonna bite you. I just don't see too good. Come and sit with me." Charlotte nods toward the small wooden slab jutting off the cube of a house. There is only

the one old wooden chair so Johnny hops on the porch and disappears behind the screen door, returns with two kitchen chairs that look like the one on the porch.

They've caught Charlotte braiding her hair and when she sits down again, she pulls the thick silver rope of it over her shoulder and continues weaving the strands together. When she's done, she fishes a piece of bright orange cloth from a pocket and ties the braid at the end. Johnny slides his boot along the dirt on the porch and coughs, then looks down at the pattern he has made with his toe, a perfect circle. As he opens and closes his pocketknife, Ida shifts nervously in her red dress on the hard chair watching Johnny, watching Charlotte. The silence seems to go on and on.

Finally, Johnny says, "Looks like you haven't had much rain since I left."

"Too damn dry if you ask me." She motions toward the woodpile just off the porch. "Get me some wood and I'll make you some food."

When they go inside, the house's soft coolness reminds Ida of a cave. The unpainted adobe walls are thicker than the ones at Rosebud and bits of hay stick out from the rough brown bricks. Only two small windows are cut into the walls, one looking out toward the porch, the other offering a small shaft of fading light to a wooden table in the center of the room. The only other furniture is an old black cook stove in the corner and some fruit crates stacked up near it to store food, but the dirt floors somehow manage to seem clean. Something about its smallness and its order reminds her of her grandma Kelly's wagon when she came to visit that last time. Ida was only five or six when she climbed up into the crowded but orderly world of a woman who was used to traveling light. She had sewn bright scarves onto the canvas tarp that covered the wagon and the rough planks of the floor were covered in a worn but well swept rag rug. Food and cooking utensils were stored in tea crates painted red. They had sat munching shortbread on a big

wooden trunk that served both as a closet and as a sofa and it seemed like a cozy little parlor to Ida. Her grandmother had leaned over and whispered, "I'm a tough old bird. It's been a hard life but I'll never lose my place again. It's right here under me."

Charlotte leans over the wood stove in one corner while Johnny brings the chairs in from the porch. As she prepares the food, they talk about people they know, about firewood, and fishing. About the familiar things relatives know.

Ida sits quietly at the table, looking at her hands in the dim yellowish light; she has folded them as if she is about to pray. Something about the houses and belongings of old women requires reverence, she thinks. Around Grandma Kelly, she always felt like whispering. But it had been years since that day in the wagon. They hadn't seen anyone on her mother's side of the family since then. Her father made sure of that. He hated the gypsies.

Finally, when they sit down to the fried bread and beans Charlotte has prepared, Ida says softly, "This is good."

"Mmm," Charlotte says, her mouth already full. And no more is said for the rest of the meal. Ida can't remember ever having eaten a meal in such silence. From this stranger's table she can suddenly see her family clearly, the four of them, each carrying on the way they always have. Her father cursing the fences, the weather, the crops, her mother or Tommy. Her mother clanking pots in the background, coughing, and wheezing, snorting and hawking at the stifling air of the kitchen. And Tommy, trying to break the tension, carrying on his usual chatter about sheep and cattle prices or tractor parts. For a moment she searches for herself in this scene. Where is she? Then she sees the small girl, shoulders sunk, head down, willing the meal to be over.

As she watches Johnny and Charlotte pass bread and lift forks to their mouths without a word, she realizes that the absence of sound is almost more frightening than its presence. She can hear it roaring up around her, feel it closing in. She isn't ready for it. On the road with Johnny, she has been able to avoid it, between the conversation and the sounds of the truck. Even when she drifts into sleep, there is always the hum of the tires and the billowy sound of the air rushing by through the open windows. But at this table all sound has stopped. She listens again and watches the aunt and nephew enjoying each other and their simple food in their comfortable silence. She feels like she is eavesdropping.

When the meal is over, Charlotte rises and feels her way to the other side of the room and strikes a match as she removes the glass chimney from a kerosene lantern. "I suppose you're sittin' here in the dark. I don't light the lamp for myself," she says. "I can't see much light no more."

Until the light filters out into the room, Ida hasn't noticed the dark. She stands up and begins to clear the table but is swept out of the way by Charlotte who knows by touch exactly where everything belongs. She moves quietly around the small table and then into the corner of the room where the cook stove sits and then she seems to disappear into the shadows.

Johnny and Ida move out to the porch where a sharp thin moon hangs in the darkening sky. "You know," he says, "you're kinda pretty when you ain't frownin'."

She suddenly feels like laughing, realizing that she doesn't know this about herself at all. All those times she had looked in the mirror imagining that someday she would be free of the tight clutches of her family, she had hoped that somehow someone might look at her and say such a thing. But she never believed it was possible. *Pretty* doesn't seem to go with what she feels inside, all tangled nerves and frayed angry thoughts so near the

surface that she thinks surely other people can see right through her skin to the very ugly core of her.

"You know, I can't make out whether you're just shy or you think I smell bad."

She looks across the fading line of the mesas beneath the sky. They too seem to be disappearing but the dark feels comforting to her somehow, something she can count on at the end of the day. Something she has always looked forward to. "I . . .it just takes me some time to sort out what I want to say. I haven't had anyone but my brother to talk to."

"No girl friends?"

"Not really. My dad's pretty strict and I had a lot of work to do. Mama's sick most of the time. She has bad asthma."

"Is that why you left?"

She can't say anymore. Already she has said too much. She can feel him looking at her but still can't meet his eyes.

When she doesn't answer, he gazes up at the sky and says, "I like nights like this before the moon gets fuller. Reminds me there's a future."

Ida looks out at the sky too. She doesn't really want to think about the future yet. She isn't far enough from Rosebud to feel that there is anything real beyond what she has left behind.

When Johnny leans toward her and pulls a strand of hair away from her face, she holds her breath, thinking he might kiss her. Instead, he looks into her eyes until she has to turn away. "You'll be okay," he says, then takes her hand and leads her to the back of the house to a small room where another lamp has been lit.

A strip of red and orange cloth serves as a door and she recognizes it as the same fabric Charlotte used to tie her hair. In one corner is a pallet of neatly folded blankets. A

bucket of water sits on top of another wooden fruit crate. She thinks about her small room at home with its old oak dresser and crocheted doilies; her grandmother's cherished china washbowl with the chain of shamrocks and roses looping over its pearly pink curves. She tries not to think about how she'd covered the thin, whitewashed walls of her room in pictures of movie stars from the magazines Tommy brought to her when he'd been in town. "But where will you sleep?" she asks. "Where's Charlotte sleep?"

"I like to sleep outside and she's got a place in the other room, probably asleep already." He looks around. "It ain't much, but it's home. Get some sleep." He steps back into the darkening house and then he is gone.

After she blows out the kerosene lamp, she lies awake in the shadows, watching them disappear one by one, black into black. She closes her eyes, crosses herself, and asks, once again, for forgiveness for leaving her family. When she opens her eyes again and peers into the dark, she thinks she sees small movements in the corners of the room. The strips of cloth in the doorway seem to flutter. But when her eyes adjust and she sits up to look closer, everything is still. The mournful call of a coyote breaks the quiet and she shivers and chastises herself for being frightened. *You're a woman now. Grow up*, she whispers, adding a postscript to her prayer: *and, Dear God, protect me from harm as I make my way in the world. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.*

When she can't fight sleep any longer and her eyes finally close, she hears her mother coughing. She sits up again, expecting to see Mary Drea standing above her. Frozen in that place between dream and waking, she listens until she hears it again. And then, she is wide awake, staring into the darkness, until she comes to understand that it is Charlotte, not her mother, coughing in the next room. She is a long way from home in a stranger's house.

When she finally sleeps, she dreams of Johnny waving and smiling to her from some high place and she runs as fast as she can toward him. As she moves nearer, his mouth becomes her mother's and it spills out her name *Ida . . .Ida . . .* over and over again. But Ida's body begins to disappear with each forward surge. Her hands evaporate as they reach toward the drowning voice of her mother and when she looks down at her feet, they are gone. She looks out across the land and sees the horses, the dobbin and the brood-mare following the huge plow horse. The wind rises up over the mesas and her mother's voice seems suddenly filled with rain.

Just after dawn, she wanders out to the porch and finds Johnny tying up his bedroll. He smiles when he sees her and she smiles back. But they don't speak as she sits down on the top step and watches him as he snuffs out the last embers of the campfire he has built the night before.

Finally, he comes and sits next to her on the step and Charlotte brings them tortillas and coffee and they eat with the smell of the campfire and the cool, dry air in their nostrils. The coffee is hot and black and Ida drinks it slowly, holding the cup with both hands. Something about the warmth of it fills her with the same old longing that has been with her for years. When she looks at Johnny, he looks back and she is sure he can see it.

When they are ready to leave, Charlotte takes Ida's hands in hers again. "You come back to see me when you can," she says, leaning toward her and kissing her lightly on the cheek. Then she reaches out for Johnny and he steps forward and puts his arm around her. "She's a good one, like Marie," Charlotte says as they walk arm in arm to the truck. He springs the old door open with a hard thump and she puts her hand on his

shoulder. "It's not your war, Johnny," she says. But he doesn't say anything. Just kisses the top of Charlotte's head and turns away as he climbs into the cab of the truck.

Ida waves good-bye and then they are heading back toward the main road, red dust swirling up around them.

3

Beneath the sprung seats, the tires beat out a rhythm almost matching Ida's heartbeat: sure and predictable one moment, then leaping at some unseen buckle in the road, then returning back to a regular humming spin. The mesas begin to flatten out into the landscape and the road becomes straighter as they move north. The smell of sagebrush slips through the windows and makes itself at home.

"What did Charlotte mean about the war?" she asks.

"She thinks I shouldn't be fightin' a white man's battle. Can't say I blame her. I think she's right but I'm doing this more for myself than out of loyalty to the government. I just hope I can do it without gettin' killed."

Until this moment the war had seemed distant, like her father's radio programs. Something happening somewhere else to people she would never know, would never see. She thinks of her father, red-faced and angry. She thinks of the words he had said at supper the night before she left. *Not my land. The God damned sons of bitches ain't takin'*

my land. Just like Ireland all over again. I'll show the bastards! He had torn up the paper the government man delivered and crammed it into the cook stove.

She watches a tumbleweed cartwheel across the road, lets the secret slip. "They're taking people's land. They want Rosebud."

"War's always about land. Who has it. Who wants it. They should try bein' an Indian for a few centuries."

She scowls. She has already said too much. Now it's here between them like an unwanted guest.

"Hey, nobody's going to kick your old man off his land. First of all, he's anglo and second, we're going to win this thing."

"No, I don't mean the Japs. It's the government. They said we have to give up the ranch until the war's over. They've already pushed out ranchers all over around Rio Rosa. My dad . . . t's his whole life." As she tries to explain, she sees for the first time what her father has been facing. "He worked for years at trying to make that awful patch of land his." She fingers the little leather pouch hanging from the shoelace tied around her neck, the only connection she has to another patch of land she's never seen. "My dad used to tell us about how his folks got starved off their land. Ireland. That's why they came here. To start over."

"So what's the government want with it?"

"Target practice. That's what dad said anyway. They're making the bombing range bigger."

Johnny frowns. "They already have most of the desert already. Ranchers I know say they hear explosions all the time. "

"All I know is he said they want to lease it and then give it back after the war. Offered land on the eastern side of the state but he doesn't want to go. How's he supposed to move his livestock?" Mentioning her father sends a queasy wad of fear from her stomach into her throat. She waits for Johnny to say something, to offer advice, but he doesn't.

They drive in silence for a long time and she remembers her dream of the night before. Johnny waving to her from somewhere far away, her mother calling in the distance, the wail of a woman with no hope. Finally, Ida says, "Maybe the war's a blessing for a girl like me. I can work someplace, help out, learn a skill. Ranching never appealed to me much anyway."

He touches the brim of his hat, pulls it down a bit. "I guess that's why I joined up myself. It's easy to get tired of where you come from." At a filling station, Johnny gives the door a shove with his shoulder as Ida tries to straighten her hair and her wrinkled dress. She needs to wash up but the station only has one pump and a fruit stand with nothing but cantaloupes. No place even to wash her hands.

She walks over to a woman stacking melons and thumps one, then picks it up and smells it. "Want one?" she says, turning back to Johnny who's wiping his hands on a greasy rag after checking the oil.

"Sure, we can drive up the road a ways and take a break." He walks over to the stand, lifts her hands, still holding the melon, to his face. "Mmm. Smells sweet."

After she gives the woman a nickel and they are back in the truck and on the road again, Johnny nods toward the long stretch of cactus and scrub in front of them. "It's up here somewhere. There's a little spring and some flat rocks to sit on. We can have a picnic."

Ida looks out at the opening dry land, unable to imagine a more barren place but she smiles anyway and tries to pretend that she's looking for some particular spot. Suddenly, Johnny cuts the truck to the left and they veer off into a meadow of yellow wildflowers and prairie grass. And then she sees the jutting outline of the huge red boulders ahead looking as if they have dropped from the sky onto this particular piece of treeless, lonely earth. Flat layers of heavy rusted stone fan out, overlapping each other like a giant open hand.

They get out of the truck and walk over the tops of the outcrops that form a ledge above the ground. "Listen," Johnny whispers.

And she hears the soft trickle of the spring just below them. Without seeing it, she knows it will be cool and clean. She's already scrambling down the rocks to get to the water where the spring has formed a clear pool just under the ledge. She thinks of the well water in Rio Rosa, so full of gypsum that white bits of it float in the iced tea. "Oh" is the only sound that escapes.

"I thought you'd like it," Johnny calls from the edge of the rocks and then he too climbs down to the shaded alcove where the spring begins.

Ida kneels down, cups her hands and drinks from them. The wet coolness of it drips down her chin and under the neckline of her dress. "I'd like to just jump in but it seems so untouched . . ."

Johnny squats down beside her and lets the water fill the cup of his hands. "It'll clean itself," he points to a bubbling spot between two rocks. "That seems to be the source and the stream runs on out of here. There's the chance, though, that some lizard downstream might get some of your leftover dirt." He nods out toward the empty landscape, smiling. There's a road on the other side but nobody uses it anymore. Land's

been over-grazed around here. Used to be able to drive right up to it. "Go ahead," he says, "I won't peek. I'll go back to the truck and get a blanket and we can crack open that melon."

When she hears his footsteps above her, she pulls her dress over her head and unties the string around her neck. The clean cold water immediately wraps itself around her. She closes her eyes and lets her body sink and the heat of the day and the worries of the night slip away, out toward the edge of the horizon.

Later, with the cool softness of the water still drying under her damp dress, she looks at Johnny sitting shirtless next to her with his old cowboy hat pulled down over his eyes. He has a matchstick between his teeth that he switches from side to side with his tongue. For some reason, she wants to trust him. Needs to. And before she has a chance to think about it, she opens her mouth and the past spills out.

"I have these strange dreams . . ."

Johnny lifts his hat with one finger and squints up at her.

She lets out a short sigh and goes on. "Once, when I was little, I dreamed of boys jumping from tall buildings. They looked like insects and seemed surprised to find themselves falling like that, without wings. I remember their yellow eyes pleading for me to do something as they fell. But I couldn't do anything." She stops for a second and wipes the sweet cantaloupe juice from her mouth.

"Right after that, my dad came back from Alamogordo and told us about the stock market crash and the rich men in big cities who had jumped out of buildings. I didn't even know what the stock market was and the strange thing was, I had never seen a building taller than the feed store and it's only two stories. But I knew exactly what he was talking about. I could picture those men dropping, scared that there was no way out, no wings to save them. Until that day, I had never heard of Wall Street, I swear on a stack of Bibles.

Foxtail grass and barbed wire fences, sure, but no cities. It was the first of a bunch of what my Mama called my *seeing* dreams."

She stops talking as the past settles over her. Watches that frightened little girl again, running from the table where she has been shelling peas. Running straight out of the house. Running to hide where she always does, behind the chicken coop. There, she lets the full weight of her terror take hold. Sobbing and rocking, her knees wrapped up in her arms like a little bundle, she closes her eyes tight and prays for all she's worth.

Her mother finds her like that and squats down next to her. *What you doin' out here, cowering like a beat dog?*

I made 'em jump, Mama, I know I did. I dreamed it, only they wasn't men, they was just boys. . .with yellow eyes. She wipes away snot with the hem of her apron. *But I didn't mean to, honest.*

Her mother makes a sound like a clucking chicken. *It's a curse. Just like your gran; she could see like that too.* She makes the sign of the cross and looks heavenward. *The meanings went off with her and they ain't comin' back. You don't need to be study'n on no dreams. Here now, keep this and you'll be safe enough."* From her neck, she lifts a string with a small deerskin pouch attached to it. *Your gran carried it across the sea for luck.* She places the string over Ida's head. *Now stop your cryin', understand? If you see somethin' in your dreams, just keep your mouth shut about it, you hear me? Or it's on your head.*

When she looks up, Johnny is watching her, waiting.

"You okay?" he asks. "Yeh, just thinking back. The dreams. They seem like warnings. The trouble is, I don't always know what they mean until after."

"After what?"

"Things happen," she says. "Then it all falls in place. My Granny Kelly was the same but she's long gone. My mama gave me this to keep me safe." She holds the pouch away from her chest.

"What is it?"

"A caul. My gran brought it across the sea. It made the journey five times and no one died. Her gran saved it from her first baby."

Johnny touches the bag, brushes his fingertips across the soft white bowl of her throat but doesn't ask her to open it.

For a moment, she stops breathing. Waits. But he settles back again and sticks a matchstick between his teeth. "Anyway," she says, feeling that same jittery tremor move from her throat down into her heart, "when my mama was expecting my baby brother, just before he was born I dreamed of a boy with no eyes. Just scarred slits where his eyeballs should've been. It scared me so much that I woke up screaming. I remember rubbing my own eyes trying to erase it. I didn't tell anyone. When my baby brother, Pat, was born healthy, I forgot about it until he started to walk; pretty soon he just started bumping into things. First, the washtub in the kitchen where Mama bathed us kids, then into a rocking chair, and finally, one day, he ran into a wall. He'd always look real surprised and let out a little laugh before he started to cry."

She looks out at the empty, blue sky remembering how she watched her brother in horror, feeling as if she had taken him by the hand and led him to these obstacles. As his world got darker and darker, she tried to protect him by carefully explaining everything she saw as if she could somehow bring back his sight through her own eyes. She let him sleep in her bed because she was afraid he'd wake and be frightened and she kept a constant eye on him during the day.

"And then, one night I dreamed of a herd of huge white horses runnin' through muddy water. They seemed frantic and I could see their muscles all pushed out with the strain and the splatters of red mud on their flanks. I didn't know what it meant and I was afraid to tell anyone.

"Anyway, the next day my dad and Tommy were headin' out to buy a horse in the valley. Pat begged to go but I didn't want him to. Dad said I was treating him like a baby and yanked his hand out of mine. I knew something terrible would happen. When the rain started I was in the orchard."

She drifts back, watching herself run as fast as she can to the bluff that looks out over the valley. From there, she can see the storm sweeping wildly toward the south where her father and brothers have headed. She searches the gathering gray clouds hoping that by some miracle the wagon's lamps will appear at the edge of the property at the end of the dirt road,

"The rain rushed up at me so hard I couldn't see anything," she whispers. "I remember it felt like being slapped." She closes her eyes. She is staggering back to the house in the sticky mud, the rain screaming at her every step.

Johnny reaches to touch her and she tenses.

"It's okay. I don't want to scare you," he says.

"I'm not scared of you," she says, "just the dreams." As she says it, she knows it's true. She shrugs her shoulders. "Mama told me to shut up about them. You're the first person I've ever told, except for her."

He waits a little, then says, "Let's get another drink of water and then we should get back on the road. There'll be plenty of time for rememberin'. Leavin' home does that, I guess."

"No, I want to tell you. I want you to know why I left." She draws a long breath. "The horse kicked Pat to death." The words come out naked and ugly as secrets kept too long often do.

Ida looks at Johnny as if he might not believe her. "Daddy shot it right then and there. Later, after Mama told him I had dreamt it, he stopped talking to me. That was nine years ago."

They sit there silent in the sun until Johnny finally says, "It wasn't your fault. You couldn't have stopped it."

When he holds his hand out to her, she wants to tell him everything.

"Here," he says. It's the little glass bird that was hanging from the rear-view mirror.

She picks it up and holds it in the palm of her own hand as if it might fly away. When she smiles, he leans toward her, touches her hair, her neck, her lips and she can smell the melon juice still sticky and wet on his fingers. The red dress moves up her thigh.

July 20, 1975

Now that I've written it down, I can believe it really happened that way. That she turned to him and told him everything. That she found him trustworthy. I can believe that he was a good and honest man then. But I am less certain about her. Was she brave? Was she strong? Was she as innocent as I imagine? No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to pin her down.

My Aunt Silver used to tell me that when people give us precious things, they're trying to give clues about who they really are, just in case someone decides to take the time to notice. It's an act of hope or maybe a chance to be known. But it never seems to me like people pay that much attention. Once the clue is offered and ignored, dust and silence set in, trying to cover up what is never said.

I've noticed, though, that a secret never wants to be quiet. The noise that bangs around its borders makes you know it's there and when things get bad enough, it can cause a real ruckus. Like one summer when I was a kid and a secret fell out of a pocket and called back a memory my parents had tried to forget.

Daddy had just landed a new job and we were getting ready to move. Mama was on a cleaning rampage. She couldn't wait to get away from Rio Rosa, so she didn't care about the heat as it settled flat and dry over the cracked arroyos, threatening to set off a fire in the pile of scrap wood and last winter's leaves that had gathered on the porch. I remember that dry smell. Even the house itself smelled brittle and hot. But she just ignored it. When the sweat beaded up on her forehead and dripped into her eyes, she wiped it away with the back of her arm and kept going.

She got up earlier than usual that morning, slamming cupboards, sweeping, and bumping her way into the day. By the time the sun

pushed all the way up through the horizon, every sheet and towel in the house had been soaked in bleach. I've never seen anyone attack dirty clothes the way she did. She used her mama's old wash stick, a sawed off broom handle that had become smooth and white in the service of clean clothes. She jabbed, prodded and thrashed soil and stains into sanitary submission with it. It was meant to keep her hands out of the hot water but she plunged them in anyway and they turned red and sore as she rubbed out the invisible germs that her family carried. The hidden filth that no amount of soap powder or bleach seemed to destroy.

Before my dad even had a cup of coffee, Mama ordered him to take down the screens and wash the storm windows and I can still hear the tense pitch of her voice filling the house. She knew that if she made enough noise, I'd eventually stumble into the kitchen, rubbing my eyes, grumpy before the day even started.

My job was to hang the laundry and help dust, scour, mop and disinfect anything else that looked like it might be harboring germs. But as long as I stayed out of her way and she didn't yell at me, I didn't mind; it gave me a chance to watch. Now that I think about it, I was always watching, trying to figure out what went wrong between them.

I always started the cleaning with my mother's collection of tiny glass and porcelain birds. When she taught me how to dust, she told me her first one was a present from Daddy. I remember asking her which one but she just gave me the dust cloth and started sweeping. For some reason, I always dusted the blue one first. It had delicate wings, forever spread in flight and I decided that it must have been the one he gave her. I tried to be careful with it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. A lot happened before that.

4

The cowboy's hands on the steering wheel remind her of Tommy's, calloused and wide from hard work. She blushes when she thinks of Johnny's hands touching her skin there on that rock under the big, blue sky and she blurts out nervously, "You probably thought I was crazy standing there in the road."

He waits, gives her a chance to go on, but instead she just looks out the window. It's late in the day and they are nearing Santa Fe. "I thought I was seein' things," he says finally. "Driving down that lonely stretch of road and suddenly there's a beautiful girl. I know it sounds crazy but you reminded me of my mother. She left home when she met my old man. From what Charlotte tells me, he dragged her away kickin' and screamin'. She was only sixteen, wanted to marry him but wanted to stay near her people. Her family hated him for takin' her away. Charlotte finally told her, 'Marie, if you leave, just keep goin' and never come back.' So she left and they ended up in Espanola. She went back to Charlotte's to have me but then left again because he came after her and threatened to kill her if she

didn't go with him. She use to tell me the soul's your home and you carry it with you wherever you go. I think she had to believe that to get by."

He lets go of the steering wheel and guides the truck with his knee as he whacks a pack of cigarettes against the palm of his hand. Then he takes the wheel again in his left hand as if he never let it go. Longing trickles through her as she considers those hands, those fingers, wanting them to hold her life steady and calm like they hold the wheel of the truck. She watches as he pulls the little red string at the top of the pack and spits it out the window. He shakes the box till the tip of a cigarette appears, then lifts it to his mouth and tucks it under his lip.

When he offers her one, Ida blushes again as if she has witnessed something she isn't supposed to see. She shakes her head and looks down at her hands. They have somehow twisted the hem of her dress into a wrinkled mess.

"My old man yelled at her all the time in Spanish and she never understood a word he said. Refused to learn the words. Protected herself. She talked to me but never to him. When they had to talk, they used some kind of English-Indian-Spanish mumbo jumbo. It's a wonder they understood each other at all. But I suppose that's true of most marriages. My old man learned what he knew about bein' a man from his old man. Irish sonofoabitch is what he told Charlotte. No offense—hey, I'm his grandson—anyway, he was named John and so was my dad. Don't know why my mother went and named me after them. Anyway, he took her away from her family with a little kid and a lot of shame. She did the best she could but he kept taking off back across the border."

Ida studies his right cheekbone as he inhales. High and square, almost too old for his years. "What happened to them?"

"He came back off and on. Smashed her face against a cast iron skillet when I was only four. I only remember her then with teeth missing or bandaged hands, or black eyes. I remember her eyes the most. Angry black and the skin around them black too. You couldn't look into them. Funny thing is . . .I can't remember him much at all."

"Did he leave?"

"No. She did. She finally picked me up under one arm and headed toward the road. She was expecting another kid but she walked out and bet her life on whatever stranger might happen along. Anyway, it was a better bet than staying with my old man."

"How old were you when she left?"

"Oh, maybe seven or eight but I remember it like it was yesterday. The way she looked, her long black hair blowing across her face...kinda like you looked yesterday, only it was winter. I remember cold puffs of air coming from our mouths as we stomped our feet and flapped our arms to keep warm. Dead of winter, both wearing blankets. No coats. She sang little songs to me. Told me they were songs her mother had sung. We howled every time a car passed us."

He turns to look at her again. "I don't know why I'm tellin' you all this. It's just that you standing there on the road . . ."He takes a long drag on his cigarette and flicks ashes out the window. "I remember she threw back her head and laughed when I hopped around on one foot. I never saw her laugh before that. So I kept hoppin' so she wouldn't stop.' But it got darker and colder and I heard her pray under her breath. She knew my dad would be on the road soon from work. Her eyes got darker and darker and I could feel the sadness creep in. Even at that age I wanted to take care of her. But the lights comin' down the road scared me so much I started to cry. I remember she shook me hard to get me to shut up.

When I finally looked up, a car had stopped and we were on our way to freedom." He tosses the cigarette out the window.

Ida waits, not wanting to pry. Finally, he looks over at her again. "He eventually caught up with us. We crossed over into Texas and he tracked us down. Yep . . ." He is almost whispering now. "The son-of-a-bitch caught up with us."

"What happened?"

"Can't say for sure. The last thing I remember is him yankin' her by the hair and draggin' her out of the room we were stayin' in. I followed them to his truck but he acted like I wasn't even there. He shoved her in and slammed the door and that's the last time I ever saw her . . .or him. My Uncle Raymond came down to Texas to get me. I still don't know how he found me."

"What about the baby?" She wants to touch him, to somehow ease his pain, but he is looking straight ahead at the road now.

"I don't know."

She puts her hand on Johnny's knee. "I come from a long line of runners, myself. Maybe it gets in the blood some way. That's how my family got here all the way across the ocean. Both sides of my family. Strange, it took coming all the way out here for them to meet up.

"My dad used to say sometimes a person's gotta just up and leave before they drown in whatever mess they've gotten used to. He always bragged about how he took her away from the mess she was in but if that's saving somebody, I'd rather wager on myself. She just sorta wore out and gave up." She opens her hand and looks at the glass bird, then takes the pouch from around her neck and puts the bird inside with the caul.

"You okay?" He reaches over and pats her hand lightly.

The edges of her lips pull in and she almost smiles but instead, gulps air into her lungs and lets go. "Your dad sounds a lot like mine." She looks out the window.

He pulls the brim of his hat down a bit, then reaches across the seat and pulls her to his side. "Maybe if you just talk it through it'll come clear."

Ida keeps her face turned to the window. The sun is about to go down, an enormous orange ball sinking away from the blue sky into the red clay mesas. As the sage smell escapes back out to where it came from, the cab of the truck darkens. She takes another breath to hold back her tears but all of it—the heat, her tears, the road as it puts more and more distance between her and what she's left behind—remind her that she is still just an ordinary girl with no home. A girl who doesn't know where she's going. Her mother's questions beat inside her head. *Who do you think you are? Who do you think you are? You ain't nothin' special and don't get to thinkin' you are. You ain't.*

Johnny tugs lightly on Ida's hair. She wakes to find her head on his lap and him looking down at her, smiling. Through her hair, she squints. "Where are we?" She sits up and rubs her eyes and tries to smile. A few feet from the truck, a pink tepee blinks on and off under a sign that says, "Wigwam Motel".

"Santa Fe. What do you think about staying here tonight? I'm bushed."

She sits up and looks out the window at a squatty flat-topped motel in front of them, plastered to look like adobe and painted bright white with turquoise trim. It only has four or five rooms.

"I can just sleep here in the truck. You go ahead," she says. She hadn't really thought about where she would sleep or what it would cost but now, as she says this, she knows she will be afraid to sleep in the truck alone.

Johnny shakes his head. "No, you ain't sleepin' here. I'll spring for the room."

Before she can say anything else, he is out the door and walking to the small house with the "Manager" shingle. He comes back in a few minutes holding up a key and points to the last door, number four.

He opens her door and holds out his hand. In the pinkish light of the motel's sign she watches herself reaching for him and her white skin against his dark, strong hand sends a bolt of heat through her as their fingers touch. And, although she is still sitting in the truck, her body is rushing toward him and she knows she won't be able to stop if she takes a step.

July 24, 1975

I like to think of them like that, tangled together, safe in the moment. But sometimes I can't help wondering if tying a knot just because you found some pretty string along the way is any better than spinning it out into a straight line with separate ends.

When I was seven or eight I asked how I got the skinny thread of a scar that strays off the curve of my shoulder but Mama just dabbed some bath powder on it and said you could barely see it. She said it was an accident. She said that I was always in the way. After that, I couldn't shake the feeling that I couldn't trust her. I knew there was more to it than that.

By the time we were getting ready to leave Rio Rosa, I had almost forgotten it. It was just one of a number of childhood scars gathered from playing too hard or the general clumsiness of a girl in a hurry. But I keep coming back to that summer day. The cleaning day. My father on the other side of the living room window, bending to a pail of water, a clean rag in his hand. He was handsome and tan in his white t-shirt and khaki work pants. He always seemed to have a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth but when I stuck out my tongue and crossed my eyes, he grinned, tossed the cigarette to the ground, and pulled a monkey face to make me smile.

We heard the metal bucket drop in the doorway and I remember how we both turned to see Mama standing there frowning at us. Her hair was tied up in a red scarf and she was wearing one of Daddy's old shirts over a pair of jeans rolled up at the leg. Even then, she still looked pretty and I searched my dad's face to see if he thought so too, but he just turned away rubbing like crazy at the window.

Later, I remember, I took the laundry basket outside and tried to make a game of hanging the sheets, lifting them into the air until the

breeze caught them underneath and they became billowy sails floating coolly over my head. When they were all hung, I sat in the shade of the cottonwood tree and watched them flutter white and clean in the hot wind. I knew they would smell of sun and dust when I took them off the line later.

When the screen door slammed, I jumped. Mama was standing on the back porch with Daddy's old army trunk at her feet and she ordered me to help her with it. I remember saluting her like my dad did sometimes when he was kidding around. I even glanced toward the window to see if he was watching but he had disappeared to the other side of the house with his ladder and bucket.

She put her hand on her hip and said, "Well? Get a move on! You're slow as molasses in winter, Darcy Louise. Here. Take this end and I'll take the other."

We struggled under the weight of the metal trunk, dragging it down the back porch steps onto the scruffy grass under the clothesline. Every year, it was my job to resurrect the old wool clothes from their coffin of mothballs and cedar. I didn't mind this part of my mother's cleaning ritual because it seemed to me that somewhere folded into the layers of old clothes were the answers to all my questions.

There, under the blankets and sweaters was my mother's blue, gabardine wedding suit. And other pleasures too: my father's uniform, a pair of chopsticks in their own ebony case, and a real pearl wrapped in a piece of yellow silk. At the bottom of the trunk, a Japanese tea set was cushioned in yards of creamy white parachute silk. The cups, fragile little bowls without handles, seemed strange and exotic to me.

As I touched these things, I thought of my parents, young lovers torn apart by the terrible war. In my imagination my mother was always standing at a railway station in her new suit, hair neatly rolled under, lips carefully drawn in red. She'd be waving wistfully at the carriages filled with GIs, the steam and haunting whistle of the train swirling about her as she lifted a linen handkerchief to her eyes. And he would be there

too, the fresh-faced soldier in his pressed uniform, waving from the crowded window, saying goodbye to his new wife. In the gray fog of the station platform of my imagination, the young Ida remained forever in grief as the train took her lover away.

Mama never liked me daydreaming. When I looked back toward the house, she was watching me from the porch. Before she could say anything, I gave one of the blankets an extra hard whack with the broom and the line snapped, trailing the wedding suit in the dirt. I grabbed at it but it was too late; the whole line had collapsed. That's when I saw the pocketknife that must have fallen out of some hidden place in my dad's uniform.

Before I could get a good look at it, though, Mama was standing over me shaking her head. Without saying a word, she leaned down and held out her hand. But I turned my back on her to get a better look and saw that the bone handle had foreign writing on it like what was on the teacups. I opened and closed the blade and turned it over in my hand. I knew he must've got it in the war from the look on my mother's face. By then, she hated everything he brought back.

I remember it felt compact and solid and slowly, as I moved it from hand to hand, feeling its smooth balanced weight, I remembered another summer day. A group of young men drinking, laughing, playing horseshoe. Women shucking corn and chattering about gooseberry pie and the low level of the irrigation ditch. The stench of damp feathers rising heavily from the steel tubs of boiling water where Mama plucks and cleans the hens. I am standing behind a tree watching Daddy tossing a pocketknife off his elbows, his shoulders, the toe of his boot. Rolling the blade smoothly off his body like some kind of silver liquid, flipping it neatly into the air so that it lands tip-down in the red dirt near Mama's bare feet. I watch her bend over, pick it up and blow off the dust.

1945

Naked Singularity

5

In the dark, Ida touches her lips, her breasts, her thighs, as if to confirm that they belong to her. To reassure herself that this bruised and swollen body was once capable of passion, she touches the gash on her cheek and tries to remember how it felt to lie damp in Johnny's arms with the smell of sage and saddle leather rising up from his skin. She needs to believe that he will come back, that they will make a life together. There will be a house and lots of children. He will be a good, gentle father. She whispers the possibility: *Mrs. Johnny Rain.*

But the truth is that Johnny left almost as quickly as he came into her life. From the beginning, she knew he'd have to go and he did. One day, he just pulled his brand new soldier's hat down over his eyes and waved good-bye and that was that. Ida had looked around at all the parting lovers as the train pulled away and realized, for the first time, that she was alone in a big city.

For a while, she worked as a parachute packer and she tried to believe that what she did mattered, that one day, some soldier would have to jump out of a plane and depend on her. Sometimes she dreamed of Johnny free falling through the air in a parachute that wouldn't open and she'd wake breathless and sweaty with his terrified eyes still in her memory. She hated herself for being scared, for being homesick, for wanting more than she had ever hoped for. She hated living in a crowded boarding house with a bunch of other girls just like her, waiting for letters, waiting for bad news, waiting for the war to be over.

Johnny did write as he moved from base to base for training, but his letters seemed flat and tired. Any mention of love was brief and awkward. After a while, she began to think about all her plans for independence and how they got caught up in what Johnny was doing, where he was headed. And she knew she was just biding time, waiting for someone else to tell her what to do next just like her father always had.

She never really fit with the other girls who seemed to have some special hidden knowledge about men, about sex, about the world. It didn't take long for them to figure out that she was both baffled and embarrassed by their frankness and this would send them into fits of winking and nudging and teasing. They called her a babe in the woods and a goody goody and she'd laugh along with them, holding back her tears until she was safely in her bed with the lights out. Then, she'd cry like a little girl whose heart has been broken. Early in the mornings, she'd vomit until she felt all the hurt was gone and she'd leave before any of the other girls had opened their eyes.

One day, she heard two girls laughing as they arranged packed items to go into care packages for the GIs. "Most of those guys need more than a comb and toothbrush, if you know what I mean," one girl said, winking at the other. "Especially if they don't want no slanty-eyed babies."

Ida tried to laugh but the words seemed to rush at her and the girls' laughter came tumbling like stones toward the decision she had already made. Without any warning, she stood up suddenly and screamed, "Shut up! Just shut up!" Then she ran out of the house into the street and she kept running until she got a pain in her side and could barely breath. When her breath returned, she walked the streets of Denver until it got dark and when she came back to the boarding house, she packed her clothes for the lonely journey back to Rosebud.

The next day, she was on a bus headed home and as she watched the flat hard faces of the city's buildings retreat into the gray line of highway, she couldn't say she was sorry to leave. The passengers thinned out as they got further from Denver and she settled back, trying not to think about what she faced at the other end of her journey.

Across the aisle, a handsome sailor holding a bouquet of wilted daisies tipped his hat to her and she smiled up at him, forgetting for a moment the way she had learned to hold herself in the city. There was something romantic about him in his pressed white uniform holding a bunch of flowers and, for a moment, she imagined the bouquet was meant for her. But when he leaned across the aisle, he didn't offer flowers, just cinnamon gum. She had blushed when she realized the sailor's trouser leg was folded neatly and pinned at the knee, his crutches propped against the window.

"It's a shame about your daisies," she had offered in return.

"Yes, it is," he said, "and it's a shame some dames just don't appreciate romance."

The bitterness under his words mixed with the smell of cinnamon gum and, as she tried to sleep, her stomach kept flipping and turning, pushing up toward her ribs, making its way to her sad heart. In her dreams, the feeling grew and grew into a large, screaming child

with only one leg. When she woke up with a start, the bus was empty and the sailor was gone.

The driver told her it was the last stop for his bus and she would have to wait three hours for the next one. Until this moment, she hadn't thought about being alone in another strange place. In her imagination she had thought she would just get on the bus and move quietly back home. When the driver set her suitcase down on the pavement and held his hand out to her to help her out of the bus, she burst into tears.

As she dabbed at her eyes with her soggy hanky, she noticed the sailor leaning on his crutches against the doorframe of the bus stop. He was lighting a cigarette the same way that Johnny did, carefully cupping his hands around the match, a private adult place of light and smoke. He looked up, squinted and tossed the contents of the moment out to her in a soft gray haze. Her breath stopped and she had to will herself to stay put, to stop her feet from taking the few short steps to his side where she would take his hand and follow him quietly into the new day.

Instead, she had tugged at the hem of her dress, straightened her hair and walked past him into the dim light of the building. She sat primly with her knees together as her mother taught her and offered up a little prayer for the bus to come soon.

The thin woman behind the ticket counter had scratched her wad of gray hair with a pencil she took from behind her ear and tried to console her. "It'll be okay, darlin'. That bus'll be here before you know it. You wanna Coca Cola?"

Ida had wondered if the woman had seen a lot of crying girls sitting in the bus station. She imagined so with all the men leaving. She had turned back toward the doorway then to look for the sailor but he was gone, the daisies scattered on the floor.

Later, when she was standing at the leaning mailbox that marked the gravel side road to Rosebud, she thought about trying to catch the bus before it got away. She would laugh and tell the driver she had made a mistake, had been given the wrong address. But the bus was already gone and the road was empty.

She hadn't told anyone she was coming home and when the house came into view, she saw that the truck wasn't there and neither was the plow horse. If she cut and ran, no one would know that she'd ever been there, but she didn't have anywhere else to go. She took a big breath and climbed the back steps willing herself to put her hand on the screen door handle. The hinges moaned familiar and low like a wounded animal.

Newspapers were scattered on the floor and stacks of dirty dishes, pots, and uneaten food filled the kitchen counter and table. The kitchen's cook stove was cold and the house was dead still. Her mother was probably sleeping.

It was both the same and terribly strange, this house she had lived in most of her life. In the small parlor, the sofa was still covered in a red, crocheted throw that her grandmother made. A small, oval hand-hooked rug with a scattering of faded red and purple flowers half-covered the cracking gray linoleum and gave the room some color. These details always seemed like a sign to Ida that her mother hoped for something better, something more. There wasn't a trace of her father in this room. He chose to sit on the back stoop where he could chew his tobacco or smoke his pipe away from the worrisome cleanliness of the parlor where the windows' yellowed shades were partially hidden by lace curtains.

Ida usually filled a Mason jar with wild flowers and set them on the side table next to the sofa but had stopped it when her father had thrown the jar at Tommy after he forgot

to close the cattle gate. After that, the house filled with the stifling, musty smell of her mother's asthma medicine.

She didn't know what she expected to find when she opened the bedroom door but she knew to whisper. "Mama?" she said. But there was no answer. Her mother was sleeping. She took a deep breath and strode across the darkened room to the window. As she drew the shade, the sun sifted through the curtains scattering lacey patterns of light across the star pattern quilt covering her mother's small body. Before Pat died they had made that quilt together out of scraps of old dresses and tablecloths, a cheerful mixture of pinks, yellows, and blues. She and her mother had guided his small hands as he stitched and hummed happily hour after hour. Their mother had told them to keep this activity a secret from their father who would have called his son a sissy if he knew.

There were newspapers scattered on the floor next to the bed where food had fallen. The smell of the chamber pot mingled with the putrid smell of sickness. She picked up the used handkerchiefs scattered on the bed and floor. When she looked more closely at her mother, Ida saw tea stains and bits of dried food spattered on the quilt.

"Mama? " The urgency of her voice startled her.

Her mother's eyes opened but her head didn't move. As Ida brushed at the crumbs and tucked the quilt under her mother's chin, her hands trembled. "Mama...I'm back." She leaned to kiss her mother's forehead. "Do you want some tea?"

Suddenly, as if called back from the dead, Mary Drea sat straight up. "Look at me! Look at the face of your mother and never forget it. Just left me here to die! It's your sin sends me to my grave. Honor thy mother and thy father! Hmpff! You...you...you're no better than a piss ant out there in the road!" She spat into a wadded up hanky she

clutched in her fist and looked toward the Bible on the side table as if it might speak in agreement. Then came the familiar rattling cough.

Ida had stood still and let the shame come. She had known all along that it would be there. She waited for her mother to stop coughing and poured the foul-smelling tonic, made by the local doctor, into the sticky spoon she found on the side table next to the Bible and her mother's rosary beads. These were the only things that seemed to have managed to escape the chaos of neglect.

She had plenty of practice at holding her mother's head and cajoling her to take her medicine; she'd been doing it since she was eight. But this time, a bony hand reached up and knocked the spoon away. As the dark goo of the tonic bled an ugly streak across the quilt, Mary's head fell back to the pillow.

As if she had never left, Ida picked up the spoon that landed in a sticky smudge beyond the newspapers on the floor, took it to the kitchen, made a fire in the stove, coaxed water from the rusting pump, put the kettle on, and washed the spoon and a cup and saucer. Amongst the dirty dishes, she found the tea tin open and almost empty but she managed to make a weak pot. She found a jar of honey in the back of the cupboard and spooned a thick blob into the cup just like she always did.

When she returned to the bedroom and put the tray on the side table, her mother turned her head toward the wall. The familiar battle of wills had begun once again and Ida knew who would win.

The rest of the day was spent boiling water to wash the pile of sheets, towels, hankies and nightgowns that had gathered in a corner of the bedroom. When they were hung outside, she started on the dishes. At sunset, she made soup out of salt pork, onions

and the beans she discovered soaking in a dirty pot. Still, the men had not appeared. So, with the stove warming the kitchen, she dropped into her mother's rocking chair and waited.

It was almost dark when she opened her eyes and, for a moment, she felt lost in the way that all dreamers do in that place between where they've been and where they are. When she remembered she was back home, her senses kicked in and she found herself listening just as she always had. And then she heard the heavy fall of boots on the back steps.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Her brother moved toward her, lifting her up out of the chair, pulling her into an awkward hug. Then, just as quickly, he held her at arm's length, trying to get a look at her. "We thought you was gone for good."

But, before she could say anything, her father came pounding up the steps, shaking the dust off his old felt cowboy hat. Tommy's hands tightened on her shoulders, then dropped away. But Daragh Drea didn't speak, just walked right past her to the pump for a glass of water as if she wasn't there, just as he had for years.

Tommy pulled her out to the back stoop and whispered, "He's worse than before you left. There's no reasoning with him, so I'd lay low for awhile till he gets used to the idea of you bein' back." He gave her hand the gentle squeeze that was their signal, their only protection against the tirades of their father.

Ida whispered back, "I thought you were signing up."

"Flat feet." He looked past her out toward the shadowed barn. "Or somethin' like that." He turned away before she had a chance to see the disappointment in his eyes.

While she served up the soup, her father walked solemnly to the wooden cabinet above the basin and pulled out his razor strap and placed it on the table next to him. They ate in silence. The strap next to his plate was a ritual throughout their childhood but they

never knew what brought on his anger. Sometimes the strap wouldn't appear for months and then suddenly, there it was and they knew exactly what would follow. Daragh Drea would rise and stroke the leather as if he was about to take it in hand and as they began to whimper, he'd growl, "Shut up or I'll give you something to cry about!" He knew that for children the threat was more of a deterrent than the use of real force as long as they believed he would use it if need be.

It was always the same. As dinner ended, it would begin. The barrage of words that did more damage than any beating flew from their father's tongue and into their hearts. Tommy was a pansy, a limp-wristed little girl, a sad excuse for a boy, a disappointment to all Irish men, a useless, dumb little shit who would never amount to anything. By the time his father finished, Tommy would have sunk into a corner weeping. And, while Daragh Drea never laid a hand on Ida, the strap was a reminder of the kind of humiliation that he could dish out. Through the years, she had seen the damage this ritual did to her brother and sometimes she almost believed that she too carried his scars, that if she lifted her sleeves or bared her back, the red wounds of the strap would be there as proof.

Her father wasn't a large man but he was strong. In fact, he stood only five feet eight in his boots. His strength came from tough Irish stock and years of hard work laying railroad ties across the Midwest from Ohio to Kansas and then more years at the plow and harness, digging for a living on the unforgiving land. He was black Irish in look with a solid jaw and handsome dark eyes. But it was his hands that his children would remember; short-fingered and wide, they seemed like living tools at the ends of his arms. Tommy and Ida had seen those hands lift the weight of a loaded wagon. Neighboring ranchers still talked of the time when a horse would not take the bit and Irish, as they called him, pulled his hand into a fist, stepped back two paces and socked the creature between the eyes. From then

on, he had no trouble with the animal and it became known that if you wanted a horse broken, Daragh Drea was the man to see.

Like his father before him, he didn't always think before he let the full force of his temper loose on anyone who crossed him. The neighbors called this stubborn, brute temper the Drea furies and even larger men than he watched their step in his presence.

He was not prone to self-examination. Instead, after he had cursed, hit and humiliated anyone stupid enough to get in his way, he would take a tug from the whiskey bottle he kept in the barn and then go to confession. Church and confession were, to him, like washing his hands after doing dirty work. He came away cleansed with no trace of his sins under his nails. And that was the end of it until the next time.

So, that late afternoon of Ida's return as their father's anger surged up through his veins, Tommy and Ida could feel it. They exchanged a look when the strap came out. And, just as they had always done as children, stayed silent and waited. When the meal was over and Ida got up to do the dishes, Tommy rose to help but their father stood and picked up the strap. Ida froze, not quite believing he would really use it. But in one quick motion he pushed Tommy aside and sliced the strap across her face. Tommy lunged at him but just as quickly, his father landed a stone fist into his jaw.

When Daragh Drea was finished with his fatherly duty, he left his daughter cowering on the floor and his son slumped against the door, glaring and silent with his fists clenched, his tongue thick, his lip bloody and swollen. Their mother had not risen for the occasion.

Now, lying in the dark, she knows the gash on her cheek is nothing compared to her brother's injuries over the years. She thinks about Tommy slapped down like some old mongrel dog and she cries the tears he is not allowed.

When she finally sleeps, she dreams of Johnny again, calling to her from far away and suddenly she has wings that carry her toward his voice. She can see the mountains below her, the ribbons of rivers laced through the valleys. But, as she swoops lower, the water turns to sand and the voice calling her isn't Johnny's anymore; it's her brother's.

6

The next morning, she rises early and prepares coffee and warm biscuits for Tommy but when she takes a tray to him on the side porch where he sleeps, he's already out doing chores. Her father, she knows, will be sleeping off his hangover in the barn.

Mary Drea is stooped over the stove, hawking up phlegm, when Ida returns to the kitchen. As she spits into the hot coals, a loud hiss rises like a warning.

"What are you doing, Mama? I thought you couldn't get up." Ida waits for a response and when her mother doesn't answer, she pulls a chair to the side of the stove and guides her into it, wraps a shawl around her shoulders and puts the tray of biscuits and coffee on the table near her. It's simply easier to resume the old charade of dutiful daughter caring for her sick mother. Years ago, the doctor had told her that while her mother had asthma, her health was generally sound and that her long periods of bed-ridden suffering were not caused by any real physical illness. The coughing, he said, was due to not exercising her lungs. He gave her the tonic to clear the catarrh, winked and left.

While her mother slurps Tommy's coffee, Ida washes apples she has scavenged from the remaining stock in the root cellar. They are soft and pulpy but they'll have to do. She chooses one and slides the paring knife round and round until the peel curls like a corkscrew, landing in one piece in the scrap bowl.

As she peels and slices, dropping the apples into a bowl of water, Ida can feel her mother watching her. Eyes following her fingers lifting the fruit, turning the knife just so, just the way she had been taught. A daughter's hands doing the things the mother's hands had once done.

Mary Drea sniffs. "Put lemon in that water or them apples'll turn brown."

"We don't have any lemon, Mama."

Then, out of the blue, she leans forward and says, "Don't you go settin' your heart on him comin' back. He won't and you'll be a sorry little fool."

Ida's hands stop moving. She hasn't told her mother about Johnny.

"You think you know all about it, don't you? Men. They're only after one thing and when they get it, they hightail it so fast you can't see the back of em'."

Ida wipes her hands on her apron and takes the flour jar off the shelf. She spreads the pastry cloth on the table and then begins sifting flour into a bowl, sifting through her mother's life.

The injustices of Mary Drea's past have settled and fermented in her body until she sometimes seems more bile than flesh. She remembers every transgression, real or imagined, of every member of her family. She had told Ida that she was once a strong, handsome woman who had dressed in beautiful, bright colors. Silks and satins. A fortuneteller sitting on the seat of the wagon with her father. As they worked their way through the southwest selling fabric, pots and trinkets to the sad dirt farmers scattered

across Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, she'd smile and flirt her way into the houses of lonely wives and harried mothers. She'd pretend to read palms and women would come to her with their dreams and questions. She knew about their longing; it was much like her own. It was easy to tell them what they wanted to hear and, in some way, she thought it gave them hope. She usually rode away with a bit of cash and a full stomach.

Before Pat died, she sometimes told Ida stories about that gypsy life, how they never stayed in one place for long because her brothers always got into some sort of trouble. Daragh Drea, she said, was her salvation. The boys she met along the way decided she was past marrying age and gradually her brothers went their own ways. At thirty she was stuck as the caretaker of her oldest brother's six children and his ailing wife. She had prayed to God that she would somehow find a way to escape this duty and one day, there he was. Not God, but the handsome man nicknamed Irish.

On his way to New Mexico, he had traded her brother a mule for a wagon axle. It took two days to repair the wagon and before it was all over he had charmed the brother and Mary into coming with him to look over some land in Southern New Mexico. She saw the door for escape blow open and she wasn't about to close it. He made no bones about hating the Irish gypsies. They were superstitious heathens as far as he was concerned and bad for the reputation of hard-working Irish like himself, but this girl was beautiful and strong, if a bit road-worn. He saw her as simply misguided. She would make a good wife. When he finally had her alone next to him, he said, "You don't have to be nobody's lackey no more, Mary Kelly. I'd be proud to have you be my wife."

That day, she had ridden off in a falling apart wagon with a stranger and never looked back. Her brother's family moved to east Texas and Daragh Drea bought an old homestead and two hundred acres in the fallow land of southern New Mexico. She

reminded Ida that, for her, it was not a question of love but a matter of survival, a roof over her head. Neither the betrayal of the land, nor her husband's bad temper, was enough to move her back to the road. And even if she had wanted to, she didn't know where she'd find the rest of her brothers who had continued traveling across the west. So, she stayed and tended the wild roses that had tangled themselves around the broken down fences. It was easier taking care of one stubborn man and a bunch of thorny vines than tending to her brother's family. But, while her husband insisted upon rescuing her from a fate of wandering from place to place with only a wagon tarp for a roof, she never really forgave him for bringing her to this place. She found little solace in Daragh Drea.

She was almost past child-bearing age when the children came along, and she fell into the dark bitterness she swallowed over and over again until she could barely breathe.

She tried to love them but every time she stroked her son's sweet round head, her husband would lash out that she was turning him soft, making him girlish. So she stopped touching him and turned to her daughter. She tried to teach her the old ways but then she'd close her eyes searching for a history that was only scraps. Gradually, she'd sink into one of her black moods, reminding Ida over and over again of the betrayals of both men and the land.

But, after little Pat was born, something changed for her mother. His birth seemed to cheer her. The pregnancy was easy compared to the other two and the labor took only an hour. She couldn't believe it when the cranky country doctor handed her the beautiful child. He had thick black lashes, glowing milky skin and his head was covered in dark, wavy hair. She called him Angel Boy, but only when her husband wasn't around.

Now, as Ida looks at her mother's tired body, she knows, as she has for a long time, why it's easier to be an invalid than to get up and live a life. What did her mother really have? The loneliness and bad temper of a bull-headed man? The meekness of her remaining son? And now, the betrayal of her only daughter. Angel Boy is dead and her mother knows—has always known—it was Ida's fault.

And now there is Johnny. Sin is sin to Mary Drea and Ida knows that her mother won't forgive her if she tells her the truth.

"What's his name?" Her mother coughs and spits into the stove.

Ida looks up surprised.

"Well...don't he have a name?"

"Johnny."

"Don't he have a last name?"

"Rain."

"What kinda name is that?"

She shrugs and pats the pie dough into two balls and rolls one out on the cloth then goes back to the stove to stir the hot, bubbling fruit.

Her mother glares at her." It sure ain't Irish. Is he Catholic at least?"

She wants to tell her everything, sit down with a cup of tea and laugh at the mistakes she made on her journey, tell her how handsome and kind the young cowboy was, tell her he will be back, that he loves her too. But she isn't sure if she believes any of it herself.

Mary Drea motions vaguely toward the pie filling. "You have to add just enough lemon and sugar to fool the mouth into want'n the bitter and the sweet at the same time. You put in too much sugar."

"I followed your recipe, Mama, just like I always do, just like you wrote it down." Ida removes the pot from the stove and gently places the thin circle of dough on the pie tin.

"Just cause he says so, don't mean you gotta jump." She wheezes and begins to cough again.

Ida wants to ask if she means Johnny or her father when, suddenly her mother is standing, moving toward her. Almost gently, she takes Ida's face in her hands. "That's a bad welt. Put some salve on it," she says, then shuffles to the cupboard and takes out an old tin box which she shoves onto the table. "It's in there."

Ida turns her back and pours the filling into the pie plate, then rolls out the top crust, folding it so she can cut a pretty leaf design into both sides. Carefully, she fits the crust over the apples and flutes the edges with her fingers, then trims off the extra dough with the knife.

When her mother rises to return to her room, coughing so hard she can't speak, Ida makes no move to help her but concentrates instead on sprinkling cinnamon and sugar over the top of the pie as she considers her next escape.

7

The next day, they wait until their father is out shoeing horses, then run like crazy to the truck and gun it down the long dirt drive to the road. Charlotte's is the only place Ida can think of to go. She wants to leave while the red gash is still on her cheek and her brother's bruises are still visible. She wants to remember her father's angry fists and her mother's nasty tongue. If the pain goes away too fast, she knows she might not have the courage to leave again. It's the momentum of her rage that propels her flight.

They follow the same path that Johnny took that day he picked her up. Although it's only been three months, to Ida, it seems like years have passed since then. Now, the road only has one purpose. Leaving is no longer an act of rebellion or an adventure as she had imagined it that day Johnny Rain had tipped his hat and changed her forever.

She and Tommy don't speak of what has happened. They don't have to say anything; the danger is there between them. It's always been this way. This silence after Daragh Drea's storms. But they both know something changed when he turned his rage on

Ida. Before, their father's savage dance was almost predictable. They knew his steps as well as their own. The drinking; the accusations; and finally, the fists or the boots dredging up the unspeakable past. But this time, Tommy was not the target; the strap was for Ida as it was probably always meant to be. True to the punishment he had decided upon for his daughter when Pat had died, Daragh Drea did not speak to her as he let the full weight of his grief take hold. Tommy's wounds were, for the first time, defensive as he tried to stop the attack on his sister.

Late that afternoon, when they finally pull into Charlotte's place, Ida looks at her brother solemnly and says she's worried about him. "He'll be rip-roaring mad," she says. But Tommy reassures as he always has, tells her he'll be okay and besides, he's decided to join the war effort if they lose the ranch, maybe become an airplane mechanic or something.

"What about Mama?" she asks, knowing that somebody's got to take care of their mother and that it will fall to Tommy.

"We'll manage" is all he says.

When he gets out of the truck, Ida checks his face to see what's under his words but she can't tell because he's already looking toward Charlotte who stands squinting from the porch.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Charlotte. It's Ida."

"Who's that man?"

"My brother, Tommy. He brought me."

She sniffs the dusty air like she did that first day Johnny brought Ida to meet her, then steps down from the porch and holds out her arms and Ida flies into them.

When they finally let go of each other, Charlotte touches the mark on Ida's cheek and asks, "You here to stay?"

She starts to answer but is interrupted by the sound of Tommy starting the truck. Before she has a chance to call his name, he is gone without so much as a tap on the shoulder.

That night she dreams of antelopes. She's been walking all night through unfamiliar territory, a pine thicket that gets heavier and darker with each step. When she finally drops to her knees exhausted, she can feel their large black eyes on her, although she can barely make out their shadowed bodies in the dim forest light. She can hear them pawing the earth as they move closer and she curls her body into a ball, waiting for the first stab of an antler. When they are so close, she can feel their breath upon her, she looks up. What she sees is so unexpected, she thinks she must be dead. The creatures are lying in a circle around her and, in an instant, she knows she is safe.

Lucy shows up the next morning. A short round woman with red-brown skin and a well-used smile with two front teeth missing, one on the bottom and one on the top, but in different places. She is Charlotte's sister but unlike her in almost every way. She likes to talk and laughs more than anyone Ida has ever known. "You look just like Marie," she says, eyeing Ida from head to toe, "except, you're a lot whiter than she was." She puts her hands on her big stomach and chuckles. "She was a real beauty. I can see why Johnny brought you home. Course, Charlotte here, can't see you too good." She points to her own eyes and rolls them toward the sky. "But she can see you in her head and she can feel you. Feel who you are."

Lucy's husband, Raymond, is a quiet presence behind her. Skinny and brown, his face creased with sun, he laughs with the women. Ida likes them both instantly and begins to understand that they are Charlotte's link to daily news and gossip. "You hear about the weather?" Lucy asks Charlotte and they sit down to have a chat on the old yellow chairs while Raymond produces a bright new blanket and a small blue table from the back of his old sedan. These, he says, are for her and he takes them into the house.

Lucy looks up and sees Ida leaning in the doorway and says, "Stop holding up the place and come over here and sit down. We ain't gonna bite. Now tell me all about our Johnny. How did he snag a beauty like you?"

Before she knows it, she is telling them about that day on the road and the trip to Denver. Ida's story, the one she has told herself over and over again to keep herself moving, is of a girl bravely leaving home to find her own way. But now, with the eager faces of these women waiting for news of their kin, the story quickly swings past her reasons for leaving and begins with a new shape, a new plot. It is instead, the story of a soldier rescuing a lost girl. The beginning of a romance. The story of *their* Johnny and *his* Ida. She watches their faces and they are pleased.

As the days go by, Lucy arrives with baskets of wildflowers and dried sage, bags of fruit, bars of homemade soap, jars of lard, fruit pies, ropes of chilies. Raymond chops and carries heavy loads of firewood and brings buckets of water from the well and fixes anything that needs fixing. Charlotte has insisted that Ida sleep in the small room where she first stayed and the three women re-arrange the little house so that Charlotte's pallet becomes a place to sit during the day. The new blanket and table go in Ida's room.

They do the things Charlotte has always done. They tend the small garden behind the house, carry wood, make bread, pound laundry on the rocks near the meager stream

that runs through the red arroyo at the back of the house. They say little, but through the handling of food, wood, cloth, they speak to each other. For Ida, it's a different kind of silence from her father's threatening muteness; it's a silence of good will.

The first word from Johnny comes from Lucy. She and Raymond have picked up the mail from the post office and now she stands in front of Charlotte and Ida offering the post card like some sacred object. Palm trees sway in Ida's hand and her heart lurches as she reads the messy sprawl of Johnny's writing. She scans the words for some sign that he's been thinking of her but it's not for her; it's addressed to Charlotte.

"Well?" Charlotte says.

Ida swallows her tears and tries to summarize. "It says he's been in California somewhere and he misses you and he doesn't know where he'll be stationed."

"That boy's seen the ocean," Raymond pronounces.

Ida hands the postcard back to Lucy and watches the two women touch it as if they might be touching Johnny himself. She bites her lip to keep from crying. Lucy looks up from the card, sees Ida's face and laughs. "I know Johnny. He would've written to you but he don't know where you are." She hands the card back to her. "Here, you keep this."

Palm trees and beach. In the corner in pink script it says, "Greetings." She tries to imagine Johnny standing near the tree looking out over the sea so far away from home. She reads his words over and over again. Even if they aren't meant for her, they're part of him. Suddenly, she feels panicked. He didn't give a return address because Charlotte can't write. In Denver, he had told her he would send her his next address after he finished training but she left before he was done. How would he ever know where she was? She

puts the card in her apron pocket and, for the rest of the day, looks at it every chance she gets.

The day after the card arrives, Ida wakes up before dawn so sick she can barely make it to the door before she vomits. Charlotte, stirring the fire, turns her ear toward the doorway where Ida stands holding herself against the wall. "Marie?" she says.

"No," Ida whispers, "it's me, Ida."

The old woman moves quietly to Ida's side and helps her out to the porch. She brings her a damp cloth and a dipper of cold water then sits down beside her.

"Your baby wants to let you know he's there."

Ida doesn't understand at first and looks at Charlotte questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"Your baby. It makes you sick at first to get your attention. It wants you to feed it right."

"I don't have a baby. I . . .I can't be. We only...we..." Ida begins to cry into the cloth she has been holding to her cheek as if she didn't already know, as if she hadn't already felt some new and frightening thing inside her.

"Johnny must take after his dad. Only once for Marie too and there he was, kicking and fighting to get on out into the world. She was awful sick at first." There is no judgment in her voice, only fact. "You should stand up and walk some. Then have some bread." She puts her hand on Ida's stomach and holds it there. Ida feels the warmth of it through her nightgown.

"It's a girl," Charlotte says without explanation and then stands up and goes back into the house.

Sitting on the porch until the sun comes up, Ida cries until she can't cry anymore. She thinks about her father pointing the barrel of his shotgun at Johnny, her mother sneering and coughing. Then, worst of all, she thinks that Johnny might not come back, might not want her, after all. She prays and prays but she's not sure what for.

The next day, Lucy arrives with a fat flour sack with Ida's name on the front. "This came to the post office," she says. "Clayton said some boy brought it." She hasn't asked the girl anything about her family because Charlotte has forbidden her to. But her curiosity about the sack overcomes her. "Who could've left it?"

"Probably my brother," Ida says, imagining Tommy secretly gathering the letters and sneaking away to drive all the way to Red Mesa to get them to her. She takes the sack and peers in. There are letters and postcards for almost every day Johnny's been gone and, at the sight of his handwriting, she's overcome with longing. Not so much for Johnny, though the thought of him still brings the blood to her face, but more for some powerful feeling that seems much larger than a man. She closes her eyes and imagines the places where he has been. Palm trees dance in sea air and beaches stretch white, clean and perfect into a blue horizon. As she hurries out the door, she hears Lucy and Charlotte chuckle. Back against an old cottonwood, she sorts through the cards and letters, putting them in order by postmark. They are all addressed to the boarding house in Denver and then re-addressed to Rosebud.

His writing loops nervously, full of misspelled words and awkward looking letters. And whole lines have been blacked out. In the first letter he tells her all about his trip to Florida and some special training. The next tells her more about his commanding officer and the other airmen and getting up while it's still dark. He writes about bad food, about scratchy wool blankets, about how tired he is, about cramming his head so full of

information he thinks it might explode. They are letters of complaint and homesickness, each one signed "Yours Truly, Johnny." They are not love letters.

In the next to last letter, written on thin, white paper he writes only: "Why haven't you written?" and signs it simply "Johnny." The postmark is from Walla Walla, Washington.

Ida holds them in her lap. A slow, quiet breath moves up through her chest and out her mouth into the air. She doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. She goes back through them, reads each word again but there is no hint of the heated tenderness they shared the last time they were together. She tries not to think about that melting of skin and heart each time they touched.

July 29, 1975

Sometimes I think I can actually remember what she went through while he was gone, can see her discovering the small soft shape of me in her belly. She was just seventeen without any kind of roadmap that might have pointed to other possibilities. All she had was a hard family at one end and a big lonely city at the other. Maybe Johnny was just the place in between. It was lucky she found Charlotte along the way.

I want to believe that he loved her but all I really know is that he was on his way to war and she was on the run. I found one of her letters once, folded into a small square under a picture of me in my dad's wallet. I don't know how it escaped my mother's need to destroy everything that reminded her of those years. Lucy told me that after the war he brought back every letter Ida ever wrote to him but they're gone now, probably burned along with most of his letters to her.

Maybe he kept that one as a reminder that his life was changing, that he had a decision to make. Sometimes I imagine him alone in some barracks, taking it out, reading and re-reading it, lighting a cigarette, trying to figure out how all the pieces would fit together, trying to convince himself to do the right thing. Maybe he thought about her writing it, a scared girl with no place to turn. Or maybe he was excited by the prospect of a beautiful young woman waiting for him at home with a new baby. Charlotte told me lots of people met and parted during the war and that I was lucky since they gradually made their way back to each other. A lot didn't.

Anyway, I don't know what came before or after that letter he carried around. All I know is that she told him she was expecting a baby. I remember thinking it sounded more like a neighbor telling

someone the local news, than a woman telling her lover some intimate secret. It didn't sound desperate or anything, just matter-of-fact like saying, "We're expecting some bad weather." or "We're expecting company over for supper." There was no mention of love. I'd remember if there was.

8

Raymond's old car clanks down the road on a cool October evening. After Ida told Lucy what she wanted to do, he just showed up, rolled down the window and said, "I heard you need a ride." She had protested, knowing it would take all his gas ration. She told him she'd make it up to him but all he said was, "I was savin' them up anyway for somethin' important. This seems to be what I was waitin' for."

So, they travel in comfortable silence covering the same path that she and Johnny did. In the twilight, the road looks different, the landscape sculpted by shadows but under them, she recognizes the same sagebrush and sand hills. She is comforted by the thought that this is a place she has seen before, that it's still here despite all that has changed. Tomorrow, in the daylight, this patch of barren land will still look like it did before, when she was running away, full of doubts. The future seemed too big and frightening then to think about in any specific way. But now, moving toward something more certain—a plan, a

place, a man waiting at the other end for her—she feels her life taking a shape. She doesn't ask if she has chosen it. She can't. Too much is at stake.

It's late when they reach Rosebud and Raymond stops the car at the gate and turns off the engine and lights. "You be alright?" he asks.

"I won't be long," she says as she closes the car door and leans toward the open window.

"No hurry. Take your time. I'll be here."

The old cattle dog sleeping on the steps perks up and runs up the drive to greet her, wagging his tail, licking her hands, circling her. When she reaches the stoop, Tommy calls out from the side porch, "Who's there?"

Just as he leans down to light the lantern sitting on the floor, Ida rushes to his cot and whispers. "Shhh. It's me. Don't light it. He might wake up."

Tommy rubs his eyes. "Geez...you scared me! What are you doin' here?"

"I need your help."

"Huh?"

"Keep your voice down. He'll wake up."

"Not likely. He's on another bender. Started two days ago. He's sleeping if off now." Tommy pulls his knees up to his chest and leans back against the wall and Ida sits down on the foot end of the cot.

Ida looks over her shoulder as if her father might be standing there but the words she has been practicing in her head lurch and spill over her fear. "I need to borrow some money...just enough to get me a train ticket. Johnny's asked me to marry him before he goes overseas. He was going to send it but there's only one train a week going that way

and the money won't get here in time. I'll pay you back, promise." She leans forward so that she can see his face, the surprised arch of his heavy eyebrows.

"Pretty sudden," he says.

"Yeh. . . just. . . I didn't expect. . . I mean. . . didn't think it could happen so fast." She wants to tell him everything but here in the dark with her mother just inside, the same old shame she had tried to leave behind takes over. Her excitement about her grown-up plans shatter like a broken plate. She pictures herself picking up the pieces, apologizing. Staying.

"You okay?"

"Sure. . . I. . . I. . ." But, before she has a chance to blurt it out, Tommy interrupts.

"I don't reckon Ma ever explained much about all that stuff between men and women," he says.

He knows. And for that she is grateful; she won't have to confess after all. She lets out a small breath of relief.

"Where's Johnny stationed?"

"Walla Walla, Washington."

"Where the hell is that?"

"Up North. Near Canada, I think."

"This what you want?"

Ida doesn't answer. *Want* has not been a consideration. *Need* would be the word.

Tommy reaches over and pats her arm. "The thing I've always admired about you is your will. You're so danged stubborn, I think you could do anything you set your mind to. Funny, you probably get it from the old man. He'll probably stay here until hell freezes over or the government shoots us all."

"Are they still taking the ranch?"

"They say they'll lease it and give it back after the war but now the notices seem like threats. He ain't budgin', though and I can't make him. I just keep waitin' for a bunch of soldiers to come in and drag us all off."

"Tommy, I'm sorry. . . for. . . " As she touches his face, her hand shakes. "He wouldn't have hurt you if I hadn't come home."

"Ah, he ain't able to hit this side of a danged barn lately. Drunk most of the time. And anyway, I've been makin' my own plans."

She doesn't let herself ask the question. If she does, she won't go. She'll be drawn back into the whole awful mess of her family again.

Her brother looks past her out toward the barn and says, "Ah, who am I kiddin'? My damned flat feet made sure I couldn't join up and anyway, the old man ain't in any shape to take care of Ma."

So there it is, plain as day—the consequence of her selfishness—her brother's sad future sealed. She looks toward the barn then, too, and thinks of her father waking from his stupor. She opens her mouth to say the words that will save Tommy but a flutter of movement in her belly stops her. *The baby.* Caught in the web of her family again, she had almost forgotten its little reminders that it's there inside her, depending on her.

"It's not just me anymore, Tommy." She places her hand over the place where the flutter has turned into a soft push.

"I know," he says. Then, trying to be cheerful, he adds, "I'll be an uncle!"

"Look, here's the address of the base." She puts a fold of paper into his hand. "I don't know if I'll be there after he leaves or if I'll have to come back to Charlotte's. I haven't even talked to him since he left. I got a telegram two days ago and I sent him one this

morning. It seems awful strange going off like this to marry him. But I think it's the right thing. "

Tommy reaches under the bed and pulls out a cigar box and hands it to her. "Here. Take this. It's got about a hundred bucks in it. Been saving up my profit from the hog sales. I was gonna buy more stock but I don't have much use for it now anyway. We need to sell, not buy."

Ida takes the box, holding it in both hands as if it might break. So simple: the asking, the giving, the receiving. And yet, she had been terrified by the prospect because she knew she was asking for so much more than money. "Thanks, Tommy. I promise I'll pay you back." She can feel him fidgeting just like he did when he was a kid.

As she stands up, he asks her how she got there and if she needs a ride. The practical questions that break tension.

She tells him that Raymond is waiting at the gate to take her on to Albuquerque. "They're good folks," she adds as she touches his shoulder, glad she can't see his face clearly, "and so are you. I'll never forget this..." She is about to turn to go, ready to take the steps that will change her life forever but the question comes out anyway. "How's Mama?"

"The same except she's gettin' around better now that you ain't here to wait on her."

"I'm sorry I left you with..." She looks back over her shoulder again.

"She's asleep. I've been slippin' a drop of whiskey into her tea at night. She seems to sleep better.

As she opens the screen door, she promises she'll write once she knows where she'll be.

"Go," he says. "And Sis—don't take no crap from nobody."

With the sky and trees and land whipping past the windows of the train, Ida thinks of Johnny as he was in those brief days before he left Denver. She imagines his arms around her, the sun and dust smell of his skin. She's decided not to think about the silent weeks after he left. She needs the momentum of passion to move her along with the train past the speeding landscape beyond the windows. Past the stricken expression on her mother's face, past the cold glare of her father, past the regret she imagines in her brother's eyes—the faces she has not allowed them.

She looks down at her hands. These hands that will soon be touching the body of a man. It is as if they belong to someone else, as if she is a different girl headed for the state of Washington in a blue felt hat and red lipstick. She smiles when she thinks of the hat. Lucy gave it to her as she was leaving and, after she sent the telegraph at the post office, Mrs. Lucas, who had raised her eyebrows at each dictated word, took her hand and placed a smooth gold lipstick tube into it. "Here, honey. Something for your wedding day," she said.

Wedding Day. She thinks about these words and feels the same gash of fear in her stomach as when she read Johnny's telegraph. *Marry me*, it said. That was all. The rest of the words were travel instructions.

When she read it, her head filled with questions and they still haven't gone away. What if he didn't really love her? What if he just pitied her? What if he took one look at her fat belly and never touched her again? Worse still, what if she doesn't really love him? What if she doesn't even know what love is? And what about the wedding? Not even a nice dress to her name and no one from the family will be there. No priest, probably. Will it be a real marriage then?

Drifting through the changing landscape, she realizes that once you leave what's familiar, time and place seem like strangers and everything you thought you could count on disappears.

Dozens of GIs and their girls tumble into the car, cramming themselves into every corner of the train, laughing, drinking, singing as they cling to whatever moments of happiness they can scrape together before the men go off to war.

Some women stand on the platform trying to smile bravely, waving frantically as the train pulls away. A pregnant woman stands at the back of the others, large tears spilling down her cheeks. She lifts her small hand and waves half-heartedly. Ida tries to follow her gaze and sees a sunburned GI send a last, weak wave in the direction of her sad face. As he turns from the window, she can see that he isn't sad at all, his eyebrows raised in mischievous arches, his eyes rolling back toward the window, making fun of the girl on the platform. His buddies give him knowing looks and he pats the bottom of a pretty young woman bent over in the aisle as she straightens her stocking.

Once the train is on its way again, Ida notices two lovers across the aisle. *Not parted yet,* she thinks. The woman's skirt has already been pushed above her garters as she sprawls awkwardly back in the seat. Ida watches for a moment as the soldier moves his hand up her leg. Then, she looks away quickly as a chorus of men's voices sings, "God Bless America" while they gather and make a curtain around the couple.

Ida feels a shift in her belly; it's the baby moving for the first time. She looks straight ahead and covers her stomach with her coat, closes her eyes and lets the swaying clack of the train rock her to sleep.

9

As she steps from the train, she sees him standing on the platform in a neatly pressed uniform looking boyish and nervous. His thick dark hair is cut close to his ears and he looks much younger than she remembered. Before this moment, when she thought of him, he was always in his cowboy hat and dirty jeans. Cocky and confident like he'd been the day she met him.

As she walks toward him, she can tell that he's trying not to look at her stomach but even if he did, he wouldn't see much since she has folded her coat over her arm and carries it in front of her. She manages a smile and waves. When they reach each other, Johnny steps forward and pecks her on the cheek while all around them lovers run to each other, folding each other in long, passionate kisses.

"You made it!" he says a little too loudly.

"Yes." She looks down at her feet.

"Where's your bag?"

She points to the small case, the same one she had the day he stopped for her on the road. "I didn't bring much."

He picks it up and guides her by the elbow toward the exit and then they are on a busy city street. "Want a cup of coffee or something?" Without waiting for an answer he leads her toward a diner across from the station.

"Listen," he says as he stirs his coffee, "I'm sorry . . . I mean about how long it took me to figure this all out. Things just seemed to happen so fast with training and all and I got moved around so much I didn't know where I was half the time." He lights a cigarette, cupping the match in his hand the same way he did in the truck. He takes a long drag and she watches the smoke pull up through his nostrils before he exhales over his shoulder.

She doesn't say anything.

"You're not gonna make this easy are you?"

She looks directly at him and he has to look back. Their eyes stay connected for a nervous moment and then move instinctively away to cups and saucers, the cigarette pack on the table, the small pot of coffee between their two cups.

"It's just that . . . " he starts again.

She reaches across the table and touches his face then pulls her hand back to hold on to the cup. "Do you love me, Johnny?"

Before he can say anything, she adds, "I won't do this to ease your conscience. . . I won't."

"But I do love you," he says.

If Ida detects his hesitation, she doesn't show it and when he touches her hand, she smiles. She knows he wants to believe in love. She is a good girl, a pretty girl. A girl who will have his baby.

"So, this is the little lady." A handsome blonde man in an air force uniform just like Johnny's suddenly appears at their table. "Well, aren't you going to introduce me?"

"Where did you come from, you son of a gun?" Johnny stands and shakes the man's hand. They grin like kids. He motions for his friend to sit down. "This is Lansing. . . Frank, this is Ida."

Ida holds out her hand but instead of shaking it, Lansing bends forward and kisses it. "Always pleased to meet a beautiful woman."

Ida blushes and looks away, then back at Johnny who seems to be suddenly more comfortable. He smiles at her and orders more coffee.

"So, welcome to Washington." Lansing raises his cup to make a toast and Ida lifts hers uncertainly.

"We started training together and we've been following each other around the country ever since," Johnny says.

"Yeh, well somebody's got to keep him out of trouble." Lansing grins at Johnny again and slaps him on the shoulder. "So. . . it's all set then? You kids are getting hitched." He raises his cup again. "And may I be the first to congratulate you."

Ida looks nervously at Johnny but he is smiling and tapping his cup to his friend's so she lifts hers too.

"I suppose he's already told you about Silver's place. It's small but I think you'll be comfortable there."

Johnny winks at her. "We didn't get that far yet."

"This guy's hopeless when it comes to organizing things. Silver's my girl. She has a small place where you can stay. There aren't any hotel rooms or boarding houses available. Everything's booked with all the guys shipping out and all the weddings. Anyway,

she's working right now but she'll be home in an hour. Look, I can tell you kids have lots to talk about so I'll take off but as soon as you get settled, we'll all get together for a real toast." He takes a couple of swigs of coffee, leans forward once more to kiss Ida's hand and then he is gone.

"He comes on strong but once you get to know him, he's a good guy," Johnny says. "Hey, look...I was going to tell you about Silver's. We can both stay there, at least until my leave's up. I wish this could be more fancy, wish I could afford a big hotel but Silver's all excited about helpin' with the wedding. It'll be nice. I promise." Johnny reaches across the table and touches Ida's arm but before she can respond, he stands up and looks around nervously. "Hey, chin up. We're gonna be okay. Now, let's get out of here."

Out on the street, a soft rain hits their faces and as they wait to cross the street, he says, "I'm real glad you're here, Ida."

Her heart pings toward a start. She takes his arm and they head toward Silver's as if they have never been parted.

A big woman in a red scarf and cover-alls opens the door and holds out her arms. "You must be Ida! Welcome darlin' to my humble abode. Come in out of the rain and get those wet things off. She motions for Johnny to help Ida take off her coat and she takes the small suitcase to another room. "Ya'll must be starvin'. I am too. I just finished my shift. Sit down." She nods toward the sofa. "I need to get out of these things. Not my best hostess outfit, as you can see." She looks down at the dirty coveralls and raises her eyebrows. "I won't be a minute."

The room is a jumble of bright colors: a purple throw tossed carelessly over a sofa full of blue and green pillows; a fat armchair covered in a different shade of purple; and the floor covered with a yellow throw rug. They sit on the couch and Johnny puts his arm

around Ida. She feels herself flinch but doesn't move away. "She works in an airplane hanger if you can believe it," he is saying.

Silver comes back into the room barefoot, wearing fresh red lipstick and a pink robe. She pulls her hair up into a chaotic twist on top of her head and fastens it with the hairpins she's holding between her teeth. Silver bracelets dangle from her arms as she touches her hair. Her earrings look like miniature Mexican hats topped with brightly colored tropical fruit. "You like?" She looks around the apartment. "Frankie hates it. Thinks it's too girly. But I tell him it's mine and I'll do what I damned well please." She laughs a big healthy laugh. "You kids like spaghetti?"

Ida tells her she loves it although she's never had it before and moves closer to Johnny. But, as he leans forward to kiss her forehead, she stands up. "Can I help you with anything?" she asks Silver. Her tone is too cheerful, she knows, but something has come over her. The colors of the room float through her vision as she drifts toward the tiny kitchen.

"No, hon, this'll be real simple. My last boyfriend taught me how to make this. He was in Italy and lost his heart to some senorita before he got shot down. Lost some valuable body parts, if you know what I mean." She winks largely and clanks pots and pans while she talks. "You've had a long trip, kiddo, just make yourself at home." She leans past Ida and hollers for Johnny to make himself useful. "You know where the beer is," she says, pointing to the icebox.

Johnny stands and salutes her and Ida makes her way back to the couch to get out of the way.

"Not exactly fresh from the garden," Silver says, dumping a can of tomatoes into a pot, "but, hell, there's a war on. A girl's gotta make do. This'll be ready in a jif' and Frankie'll

be here in no time. Oh, I almost forgot...your room's the one on the left. It's dinky and I'm afraid it's only a Murphy bed but I've put clean sheets and towels out. Why don't you go get freshened up."

While Johnny opens bottles of beer, Ida wanders into the bedroom. The only furniture in the room is a small dresser and the bed, which is already pulled down and made up. It fills the entire room. Her suitcase has been placed on the end of the bed next to Johnny's duffel bag.

"At least it's private." Johnny is suddenly standing in the doorway. "She borrowed the dresser from a neighbor and took the stuff she usually keeps in here over there. We helped her move it." He sits down on the bed and pats it for her to join him. "Thanks for being a sport."

She takes a hesitant step from where she is standing to the bed and sits down. *A sport?* These words seem odd coming out of Johnny's mouth. Someone else's words. Someone who plays tennis or golf. People in radio dramas or picture shows.

"You all right?"

"Yeh, just a little tired, that's all."

He takes her hand, pulls her closer and leans toward a kiss but she turns away.

"Hey, I know this all must seem a little strange to you but it'll be okay, I promise. The way I figure it, you're here and I'm here and that's more of a chance than some get. You wouldn't believe some of the stories I've heard. Guys knocking girls up back home and then shipping out without a word. Girls cheating on their husbands the second they ship out. Who needs the Japs to make a mess of things?" He pecks her on the cheek. "You're my girl, Ida. Still stubborn as hell. I like that. Keeps me in line."

Her hand has become sweaty in his and she wiggles it free.

"Dinner's on!" Silver's voice breaks the moment and they stand up at the same time.

"Ah...young love." Lansing has arrived and tips his beer bottle toward them and bows deeply, sweeping his arm in the direction of the small kitchen table. "Chef Silver has prepared a feast of spaghetti and Chianti. May I seat the lady?" He pulls a chair from the table and gestures for Ida to sit. "And you, you rascal, are on your own." He slaps Johnny on the back.

"Maybe after the war you can take up your real calling." Johnny grins.

"What's that?"

"Italian waiter."

The men laugh and Silver rolls her eyes back at Ida. She has changed into a pretty blue dress that shows off her figure and both men watch her as she lights the candles.

Ida looks down at her own round stomach and the wrinkled fabric of her plain cotton skirt.

"You look wonderful, honey. Travel wrinkles will come out." Silver hands a bottle covered in straw to Frank. "I only wish I had your cheekbones. I'd kill for cheekbones like that." Silver winks at her.

Frank opens the bottle. "The only wine to have with spaghetti. Chianti. Even if the Italians are on the wrong side." He pours it into juice glasses. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

Johnny smiles, raising his glass. "To my bride!"

Everyone clinks glasses and drinks but Ida starts to cough. She looks down shyly, "I've only had wine at communion."

Lansing doesn't miss a beat and lifts his glass once more. "To innocence." Everyone but Ida laughs and clinks glasses again.

She can't decide if they are making fun of her so, just to show them, she gulps down the rest of her wine and puts the glass down, empty. "I guess I was thirsty," she says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

There is a moment of silence and suddenly they all laugh again. This time, Ida sees that it is good-natured, a way to include her, and she laughs too.

When Silver asks her about the train trip, she blushes. How can she tell them what she had seen, men and women desperate for each other in the face of war. The woman's skirt above her garters, the soldiers gathered around. She searches for words and settles on the first half of the trip. She talks about how crowded it was and about the huge woman who had squeezed her into a corner for hours, snoring and talking in her sleep. They eat their spaghetti, talk about the weather, the war, the cost of everything from butter to chocolate and they laugh and drink more Chianti. And gradually, Ida feels her fear lifting. For the first time in her life, she feels like an adult.

Silver tells her she is from North Carolina and her real name is Emily. "It never fit as you can imagine," she says. "My brothers always said I was lucky as a silver dollar so when my hair turned gray when I was twenty, they started calling me Silver and it stuck."

Johnny raises his glass. "To friends!"

"To friends!" They all say.

He turns to Ida. "The bad news is we only got three days' leave. That means the wedding is tomorrow. The good news is almost everything's organized thanks to Silver and Frank." He takes a large swig from his glass.

Silver starts taking dishes off the table. "It seems like the war has speeded up everything. I know this must seem fast to you."

When Johnny and Lansing step outside for a smoke, Silver puts her hand on Ida's shoulder. "He really does love you, you know. He couldn't wait for you to get here. He wanted everything to be just right. I only wish Frankie was more like him but then he'd have to divorce his wife and I'd have to marry the bastard."

"He's married?" Ida can't believe what she's hearing.

"Oh, he is...for the moment. One of them Yankee family arrangements. Their daddies know each other and everyone wants to keep the money in the right places. I'm just a temporary diversion until he flies out over the wild blue yonder. But enough about us...we're going shopping first thing tomorrow. We've got to get flowers and more candles. And do you have a dress?"

Ida shakes her head.

"Well, I know a great little shop that may have just the thing."

Ida stands dizzily tipsy in the doorway of the bathroom. Before, when she splashed water on her face and quickly washed her hands, she hadn't taken it in. But now, she can't take her eyes off it. There's a real enamel tub and a sink to match. Clean white towels hang on a stainless steel rack with a big oval-shaped mirror above it. The toilet has a pretty pink chenille cover and there is a small bouquet of pansies sitting on a little bench next to the tub along with a jar of pink bubble bath. At home, baths were taken once a week; she had to boil water and pour it into the big copper tub they kept on the porch. She did it, not only for herself, but for her mother, father, and brother. As children, she, Tommy and Pat shared the same tub and the water was always tepid and gray by the time it was her turn. The rest of the time they washed up with a basin of water and a bar of hard soap. They still used a pump in the kitchen and they still had an outhouse.

She opens the jar of bubble bath. The smell of roses drifts up and she sprinkles it lightly into the tub, careful not to use too much. She steps into the perfect white bubbles and steamy hot water and lets it cover her, imagining expensive hotels with room service like she's read about in magazines. She stretches out and lets the bubbles and water and heat soak through her. And then she remembers that night in the motel with Johnny and her body tingles.

When she comes out of the bathroom, she stands in the doorway with her hair in a towel. She's changed to a yellow flannel nightgown, the only thing she could think to put on since she doesn't have a bathrobe.

He is there sitting on the bed and she watches his Adam's apple move up, then down as he looks at her. She wants to run to him but something in her stops.

"Thanks for all of this...your friends are very nice," she says, "but, you know, I could've taken care of myself...I *can* take care of myself." She is trying to move away from his pity, if that is what the lump in his throat and the look on his face mean. But, as she speaks, she isn't at all sure her words are true. Not at all sure she can take care of herself.

She takes a step back. He stands up. He is looking at her as if he's never seen her before. She takes another step. He moves toward her. She waits but only for an instant because he is suddenly there in front of her, lifting the towel from her head.

She starts pulling at the tangles in her hair but he takes her hands in his and holds them to his lips.

"You. . .you. . .can't just take up where we left off. . .everything's changed now. I've changed," she whispers.

"Shhh," he says as his hand slides across the curve of her belly.

10

The boys are gone in search of champagne and candles and Ida finds herself under Silver's perfumed wing. Silver who knows exactly where to go and what to do. She lives right downtown so they can walk the two blocks to the dress shop. Silver who offers up beauty advice spiced with hints at events that will magically happen the moment the knot is tied. "You'll need a lacy little nightie," she says. Ida tries to tell her that she has very little money but Silver waves her objections away. "I've got the lingerie and Jeannie owes me a favor; she knows we're coming. Just think of this as a wedding present."

"Do you think it's possible to start your life all over?" Ida blurts this question out to the tall, beautiful stranger who has taken her by the arm like a sister and is now ushering her into the dress shop.

Silver stops in the doorway and looks at her. "Of course. That's what women do, isn't it? Look at me. I'm just an old southern gal. One day I just took a look at myself and tried to work out how to keep food on the table somewhere as far away from the crap of a

small town as possible. Once I told myself I could go anywhere...well, it just seems like things fell in place. I got a job, a place to live that's all my own and, occasionally, a good lookin' soldier to share a meal and my bed." She lifts her hand and pushes Ida's hair away from her eyes. "You? Well, Johnny told me he met you on the run. I won't ask from what. We're all runnin' from somethin' or other. And you got the prize, Sugar. You got a man who loves you." She gives Ida's hand a little squeeze. "I've got a feeling we're going to be good friends. Now, let's find you somethin' delicious to wear."

A fat gray cat steps from the shop window and curls itself against Ida's leg. She reaches down and pats it: one, two, three. *A husband, a baby, a friend.* She counts these additions to her life like money in the bank.

A thin woman with a silky voice whisks her into the shop that smells of lilac. "You must be the bride. . .come in, come in. . .we don't have much time." The windows are draped with lace but only a few dresses hang on the racks. This doesn't matter to Ida; she has never been in a dress shop before. Her mother always made her sturdy cotton dresses from the few bolts of cloth offered at the only store in Rio Rosa. When she was eight or nine and her mother took sick, Ida started making her own clothes and later her mother's too.

"Business is slow...can't get the fabric," Jeannie explains as she helps Ida out of her coat. "But look what I have for you." From behind a curtain she brings out a beautiful light blue suit. "It's gabardine, fully lined. We should be able to alter it to fit you. I made it for some rich lady but she never came back for it. Never gave a second thought to me like it was just off the rack." She pulls at the tape measure draped around her neck and begins measuring Ida. "She was a couple of sizes bigger than you so we'll just have to take it in some."

Ida touches the jacket. It's richly woven with covered buttons. She has never owned anything like it. "But I couldn't possibly. . .I don't have, I. . ."

Jeannie looks at Silver and Silver puts her finger to her lips. "We're startin' a new life, remember? Not another word."

"This color's made for you. I'd much rather see you in it than that rich dame anyway." The seamstress holds the suit jacket to Ida's face. "It matches your eyes."

Before she knows it, Ida is out of her clothes and into the suit with Jeannie pinning and Silver making comments like, "snazzy" and "classy."

As they leave the store, Jeannie smiles and kisses her on the cheek. "Don't forget to pick it up at one. Good luck, hon."

And then they are off in search of flowers at a small shop near Silver's apartment. Ida chooses a simple pink rose to carry and Silver picks a white one for herself. On the way out, she whispers to the clerk and they giggle. Then, she shuffles Ida back to the apartment and says she has other things to do and that she'll pick up the suit. "Take another bath, pamper yourself. You only get married once. . .I hope!" she calls as she leaves.

The suit fits perfectly and its lining makes a swishing sound against her slip each time she moves. The professional cut of the skirt covers her belly and as she looks around at the other women, she feels for the first time that she is part of something, that she might find a way to belong. She touches her hair, newly rolled under in a pageboy that Silver set and combed out for her. As the line at the courthouse limps forward, she rubs her teeth with her finger like she has seen Silver do to make sure there is no lipstick on them.

"Got the jitters?" Silver, suddenly at her side in a bright red dress with an armful of bracelets, takes her hand. "You'll do just fine, honey. Millions of others have gone before

you. It's your duty, dontcha know?" She laughs her big full laugh. "If you ever get tired of old Johnny boy, just give me a call." She winks and gives Ida's hand a squeeze. "Don't worry about a thing, Sugar. Frankie should be bringing the groom and the flowers any minute."

Then, there they are, the two young airmen, grinning, making their way through the crowd. Johnny gives her a nervous nod and hands her the pink rose. He reminds her of a stallion after her father broke it.

August 2, 1975

Silver gave me the picture taken outside the courthouse on their wedding day. It's the only one I have of them together. Mama's touching a flower pinned in her hair and Dad's holding a rose, about to hand it to her. Their faces are blurry but I can see them as clearly as if I were there laughing nervously with the other young women and GIs making small talk as they wait to move forward in the line for fast marriages.

Although the women look sophisticated with their high heels and movie star hair-dos, most are no more than eighteen or nineteen, clutching the arms of young men who look unusually clean and handsome in their new uniforms. As they look hopefully into the faces of their future husbands, they want to believe these are the men who will replace their fathers and make the world a safer place for their own children.

I can almost feel the bravado that fills the air. These are the men who will march on to ships, climb into airplanes, and enter the sea and the sky, the unknown canvas of the war in the Pacific. Many of them are only just past boyhood, but they know that if they cock their hats just so, light their cigarettes like they've seen the others do, and are quick enough with the banter that is quickly becoming the trademark of confidence for American GIs, maybe the girls won't notice the fear underneath it all.

Later, after the kisses and champagne, after the furtive love-making, after the men are gone, some new wives will find themselves small rooms near the factories where they will help build airplanes and tanks and their ideas about their own strength will change forever. Others will return to their childhood homes to wait for news of victory or death.

But at this moment, my mother probably isn't thinking about any of this. She is worried about the gardenia that Silver secretly arranged and presented to her at breakfast. The one bobby-pinned behind her ear. She's wondering if it will hold. She's never seen a gardenia before, doesn't know how fragile the petals are, doesn't realize that the moment you touch them, they will turn brown.

I picture the next frame when she leans down and smoothes her stockings. She can't get over how they feel. She has never owned silk stockings, only sturdy wool ones which she dutifully darns each time a new hole appears. But these...these are real silk with a proper seam up the calf. They had miraculously appeared in a lacy box next to her coffee that morning. Lansing had winked at her when she held them up and Johnny had laughed when she said she told him she was about to draw a line down the backs of her legs to give the illusion of a stocking seam like the girls at the boarding house did.

As the line moves forward, she gives Lansing a peck on the cheek and says, "That's for the stockings." And then she says a little prayer of thanks and makes the sign of the cross.

I know this is true because Silver watched her do it. And I know it's true because somewhere in my memory is that part of her—innocent, excited, grateful.

11

The map is spread out on the table so they can mark the places mentioned in the radio broadcast with thumbtacks. She traces her fingertips over the slender comma shape of the main island of Japan, the unfamiliar cities and towns she's never heard of. Osaka, Tokyo, Sasebo, Nagasaki. Below Japan, tiny islands float in a vast sea of blue. Okinawa, Formosa.

"Would ya look at that," Raymond whistles. "I'll bet he's in the thick of it."

Ida touches the odd shapes of these places as if she will somehow be able to feel where Johnny is. "I thought it would be bigger." This is the first time she has seen a map of the world. "Look at China and Russia. I didn't know they were so close to each other."

Charlotte, who has been sitting silently, stands up. "This world," she says, "isn't ours to win. Those lines people fight over are only there because some men put them there. But can you see them? Would you know where New Mexico ends and Colorado begins if you didn't have that map? Lines on a paper made by people do not make us so different from ones on the other side as the line makers want us to think." She blows out the lamp leaving Raymond and Ida in the dark.

Alone in her room, Ida pulls the covers over her large belly and holds her hands there, feeling the push of her baby's limbs against the inside of her skin. If she is honest, the thought of a tiny living thing moving around just beneath her touch, attached to her own body, sharing her blood, terrifies her. She has grown big and awkward and she can't get comfortable. She turns and turns, wondering if the baby wakes each time she does.

When sleep becomes impossible, she lights a lamp and goes to the kitchen table, puts her hand on the map and moves it randomly across the blue space of the ocean until it rests on Japan. For a moment, she tries to imagine where he might be among the small dots under her finger and whispers the strange word, *Hiroshima,* trying out the odd syllables, pronouncing the vowels hard, as she was taught in primary school. It comes out: Hy-ro-shy-ma. An ugly sound. The sound of a place that might take her husband's life. She puts her head down on the table wishing for some kind of sign that Johnny is okay.

In her dream, islands melt into each other, the dots on the map connect and Japan turns into the shape of a fist. A loud pounding sound throbs up from the shape and her head snaps up from the table.

Tommy is standing over her, his voice shaky and panicked. "They've . . .they've . . ." His voice breaks.

For a moment, she isn't sure if she's dreaming or awake. "What's wrong? What are you doing here?" She starts to light the lamp but realizes the room is filling with early morning sun. Charlotte is already hovering over the stove.

"Dad's tearin' around like a wild animal, threatenin' to burn the place down."

Ida stands heavily, her hand bracing her back. "What happened?"

"The government. They've already moved Cashman's and Rony Jack's. They're movin' through the valley, takin' every bit of land they can get their hands on near the bomb

range. He knew this was coming but he just ignored it. They came out with a couple of soldiers yesterday. Two weeks. That's all we got. He's acting like a crazy man. When I left he told me to never come back!"

"Oh, God...Where will he go? What about Mama?" Ida sits back down.

Tommy paces several steps across the small room and then back again, looks up and spits his next words directly at her. "It's gettin' late for you to be worried about that now, don't you think?"

Now she sees his bruised eye. She looks down, tries to pull a chair out for him but he knocks it over. It's finally come, the anger and resentment she knew must be there. Shame bubbles up from the place she's managed to hide it, splashes through her veins.

Tommy ignores the chair, narrows his path to a tight little space between the door and her. "They just kept sayin' it's our patriotic duty to get out. But what if they keep it? We could never replace the ranch after all we've put into it."

Charlotte rights the chair and tells Tommy to sit down then she steps back to the stove and mutters, "Government word...hmphh."

"I tried to tell him I'd help him. That we'd find some other way . . ." He sits down finally, hunched and silent. In the yellow light, he looks at the map where someone has circled some place in the middle of the ocean.

"Is that where Johnny is?"

Ida stares at it as if she's never seen it before. "I don't know. His letters don't say." She touches the circled place, reads the foreign word in its center.

"Look," Tommy says, "I know you've got your own worries, but I need your help."

Charlotte's hand on her shoulder. "Your mother needs you now."

She looks at her brother and then at Charlotte. Under the tight skin of her belly, her baby turns.

12

Smeared white footprints snake from the kitchen doorway on to the stoop, and down the wooden steps and Tommy follows them out to the dirt. "I'll see where he's got to," he says.

Ida opens the screen door. Slashes of white paint cover the walls and ceiling and drip from the blue sugar bowl and the tin saltshaker on to the flowered oilcloth covering the kitchen table. Her mother's blue crockery piled in the old enamel dishpan is spattered in white.

"Mama?" she whispers, all the while moving like a small child through the house, trying not to be seen or heard. There is the woodstove, cold and silent with the damp dishrags and towels drying above it. Her mother's rocking chair with the old green afghan draped across the back still sits next to the stove. She stops and listens for her mother's cough, the sound that's replaced her voice over the years. Until this moment, Ida had not

been conscious that it was a reminder that Mary Drea was still there in her life, an angry soul to be reckoned with. She had spent her childhood listening for it. *Mama needs her medicine, Mama needs her pillow fluffed, Mama needs a sponge bath, Mama needs...* Even in this time of crisis, she realizes she hasn't forgiven her mother for taking her childhood.

She takes a breath and pushes the bedroom door open. All the shades are drawn and the room droops in semi-darkness but she moves instinctively to the lamp next to the bed and pulls the little brass chain. In the dim light, she gasps when she sees the sheets and blankets piled in a heap at the foot of the bed as if her mother has risen and fled.

And suddenly, Ida finds herself running back through the parlor to the kitchen and to the back porch again. As the screen door squeaks and slams shut, she looks more closely at the smeared painted footsteps and realizes that there are two sets. And then she is running to the only place the steps could lead. The heavy awkwardness of her body slows her but she makes it to the barn before she looks down at her heaving chest and the great mound of her unborn child beneath her breasts.

As she catches her breath, she sees that the barn door has been pulled open; when she steps in, the smell of gasoline hits her. A few feet in front of her Tommy's kneeling, holding their mother in his arms. When he looks up, his face sags with sorrow. A question moves silently across his lips and Ida understands. Their father is to blame but where is he?

Ida steps closer. An empty bourbon bottle lays at the base of the ladder leading to the hayloft. She hears the soft swoosh of hay above and, when she looks up, she sees him standing at the edge of the loft, holding another bottle. "Why she havva follow me? She don't unnerstand ...kep on harpin' on me ta paint the goddamned kishen . . ." He loses his

footing and falls face down in the hay, the bottle clanking down the ladder to the barn floor, its whiskey smell lost in the gasoline fumes.

"What did you do to her?" Her voice comes out cold and even.

He raises his head, pulls himself up to his knees, weaving dangerously toward the ladder and slurs, "She hadda go 'n chase affer me . . .she, she wouldna leggo of me . . ."

Then, from behind her, Tommy screams, "You sonofabitch !"

Ida whirls around.

"She's dead . . .you killed her." Tommy's standing now, fists clenched, moving toward the ladder.

A groan comes from the loft. "No...no...she just wouldna shud up. Jus kep at me...come arunnin' out here...wheezin' and a coughin'...I tole her go on back now...she don't listen...why paint the kishen when the goddam govermen' is takin' the whole damn place?"

"It don't matter if you lifted a finger to her . . .you might as well have struck her down with your own damned hand just like you do me." Tommy wipes his tears on his shoulder, then spits on the ground. "I'm gonna kill you, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Stop it!" Ida catches his raised arm and pulls hard at it with all her strength just like when they arm-wrestled as kids. She hollers to her father, "Give me the matches. Throw them down to me!"

When the hay shifts above them, she can feel Tommy's muscle clench under her fingers. The matchbox hits the gas-drenched hay next to her. An empty gas can comes after it, nearly hitting Ida and she lets go of her grip on her brother's arm. He wrenches free and kicks the can out of the barn then screams, "You damned bastard! I'll kill you!" But by the time he runs up the ladder, the old man has passed out.

They don't speak of it after that; they just do what has to be done. Tommy digs the grave. Ida bathes her mother for the last time, thinking how strange it is to touch her small, brittle limbs. For years she had washed her mother, always waiting for the tightening of muscles that signaled the list of complaints that would spew out of her like bile. Mary Drea often used bath time as an opportunity to tell her daughter just how bad her life was. Her husband ignored her, her own family abandoned her, her son was useless, her daughter was likely to become a whore if she so much as looked at a man. The only person who stood innocent and blameless was her dead son, Patrick, the sweetest, dearest boy, an angel sent from God. The rest of them—her husband and remaining children—were, as she never failed to remind them, going to hell for his death.

Holding her mother's small hands in her own, Ida says a silent prayer but it isn't for her mother. Instead, she asks for forgiveness at her own relief. She knows she's praying as much to Mary Drea as to God as she takes the leather pouch that hangs from her own neck, removes the caul and places it in her mother's hands, then covers her in the linen wedding sheet sent from Ireland. The one she was saving for Ida's real wedding. "Safe journey, Mama," Ida, the bad daughter, the sinful daughter whispers.

Later, the priest, a tall, lean man with a red face drawn into hard thin lines, whisks past her as if she isn't there. She knows he holds a grudge. She hasn't been to mass in over a year and he's probably heard of her hurried marriage. A marriage he would never acknowledge. Still, he is there to do his best to send Mary Drea to her maker. So, Ida closes her eyes and holds Tommy's hand as the jumble of Latin words drifts past her, disconnected from the poverty of her mother's life and its last desperate moments.

When the priest has gone, their father, who has slept through the day, wobbles out to the gravesite with the nicks and cuts from his shaky attempt at a shave still showing on his face. He keeps his head down as his children say their last silent good-byes to Mary Drea, the woman he hated and loved for her old Irish ways. The woman who reminded him every day of his own failed dreams. He takes the government papers from his pocket and tosses them into the grave and Tommy shovels.

13

Mrs. Lucas crosses her large bosom and looks heavenward when Ida and Tommy come into the general store. "Sorry to hear about your mother. My sister told me. She cleans for Father Michael, you know. How's your dad holding up?"

Ida keeps her eyes down as she hands the woman her ration book. "He's okay, I guess."

"Well, she was sick a long time, bless her soul."

"Yes," Ida says.

"And look at you! When's the baby due?" But she doesn't give Ida a chance to reply. "It must be awful for your dad, losing his wife and his land at the same time. All them ranchers in the area are in the same fix...I mean about the land. Did you hear about Rony Jack? He's takin' his stock to his brother's place. God knows how he'll get it there. Ain't no young men around to help out," she says eyeing Tommy as if he might somehow be a

traitor. "Everybody's moving over to the eastern part of the state. Government gave some of them acre for acre but I don't know how they'll do it...move their herds all that way. And what about their houses? Wendell Martinez came in this morning. Said they've already started selling off stock. Everybody's real scared." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "They're scouring every little dirt patch around here to try to stay." She crosses herself again. "The Donovans are doubling up with her family in Roswell."

Tommy looks at Ida. It's the first they've heard of an offer of land in exchange for their own. But they both know their father won't move and a small parcel of land in Rio Rosa won't feed their livestock. There'll be no turning to neighbors as they once had to help build a barn or bring in stray stock in a storm. Everyone will be in the same boat. They'll be on their own.

As they turn to go, they hear Mrs. Montoya whispering to her next customer about how the poor Drea family lost their mama and now it looks like they'll lose their ranch all at the same time.

Before they get back in the truck Ida feels a tremor that starts from her chest send a quivering weakness through her arms and legs and she has to sit down before she falls. The old men in front of the store spit out their last chews of tobacco and move in unison to give her a seat. And suddenly she is sobbing. The loud, choking grief she's been holding back wells up and when the dam of it breaks, she can't stop it. She weeps for her mother, for her father, for her brother, for herself. She weeps for Johnny, for her unborn child. She cries and cries even as Tommy helps her up and ushers her back to the truck. She cries all the way back to Rosebud with her brother silent and dry-eyed next to her. When he tries to comfort her, she wants none of it. She needs these tears. She needs to feel the full, awful weight of her life. She cries until she thinks there's nothing left inside of her.

At the gate, as Tommy stops the truck, she turns her puffy, red face toward him. "What are we going to tell him?" She pictures the fat black steers lying in bony heaps along some mountain pass. *Had she dreamed this?* "We have to take him away from here."

Tommy frowns.

"I know, he's stubborn. But he can't stay here. He knows it. That's why we have to. . . "

Tommy grabs the steering wheel and pushes his head against his hands. "I hate him." It comes out tight and cold.

"I know, I know, but we have to do something. He was going to burn the barn down for God's sake! He's not able to make any decisions."

"I don't care about the God damned barn. He killed her."

Ida stops, waiting for his usual rampage about his father but it doesn't come. Instead, he turns to her and asks the question that's been tossing around in her own head. "Why? Why 'd *she* have to die? Why not him?"

Ida shakes her head. "I don't know. . . they were in it together, you know. Playing off each other. In a way, I think she wanted to die. She made herself sick so he'd pay attention."

"Don't blame what *he* did on her!" His voice trembles into the old, recognizable pitch.

"I'm not, Tommy, but don't you remember the doctor said she was fine? Only mild asthma. Remember?"

"Then why was she in bed all the time, so sick she couldn't raise her head? You think she was lying?"

"She just gave up. That's all. There was no reason to get up. To cook and wash and clean for a man who stopped loving her a long time ago. In a way, dying was the only way she could get back at him."

"Shut up! Just shut up! You just don't wanna feel bad for leaving...you left her...you left me with him!"

His blame shatters her like she knew it would. Heavy, unmovable, crushing. She wants to hold him, to say she didn't mean it, that if she had to do it all over again, she wouldn't have left. But she knows it isn't true and so does he.

Outside the house, Tommy turns the ignition off and they both look toward the kitchen door. Expecting what? To see their father standing there? To see their mother beside him, some small moment from their childhood forever captured in their memories?

But the stoop is empty. A dying old hollyhock droops next to the railing. They both listen but the only sound is the rattle of the cottonwoods across the arroyo. The smudged white footprints are still on the steps.

Tommy opens the kitchen door and holds it for Ida. Paint is still spattered all over, the ceiling still slashed with jagged gashes of it. They had decided that cleaning and painting a house that they were about to lose was a waste of time but now they both wince as they walk quickly past the mess, the living reminder of their mother's last moments.

The house is silent. They listen again. Still nothing.

Ida moves past the stove and toward her bedroom where her father has taken up residence. Since his wife's death, he has refused to go into the room they shared. She stands at the doorway and tries to coax him out. "Come on, Dad, you need to eat something. Come out and I'll fix you lunch."

She can feel Tommy tense behind her. "Dad? Come on now," he says gruffly.

He is sitting in her chair, the one she used to read in on hot summer nights, the one she mooned in when she looked at her movie magazines. Her girlhood chair. The chair she will never sit in again.

The shotgun has fallen to the floor. For one frantic moment her eyes sweep the room. The window next to the dresser is shattered. Bottles and knickknacks lie strewn about the floor and glass crunches under her feet as she moves closer. The room smells of gunpowder but there's no blood anywhere. She takes another step. Behind her, she hears Tommy say, "Dad?"

Her father's head hangs down between his legs. Her breath catches.

At first it's just a slight movement and then larger more emphatic *no's* as he shakes his head from side to side. There is a moaning sound and then he looks up. "I can't even do this right . . .I can't even kill my own goddamned self. The danged thing flipped back." He nods toward the broken window.

Then she notices the length of twine attached to the rifle's trigger. She follows the rope to its end with her eyes. It's attached to the latch of the window behind him so he could reach it and pull the trigger with the twine from where he sits.

Tommy strides across the room. "Dad . . ."

Daragh Drea opens his eyes and looks hard at his son. "And you . . .you good-for nothin'..." His left hand comes up and he grabs Tommy by the hair, pulls his head close to his own and spits in his son's face. His right hand is balled up and ready, the whiskey on his breath filling the air between them. "If the truth be told, it was you who killed your mama, not me...all yer talk of leavin'. She counted them damned rosary beads . . .she . . ."

Tommy closes his eyes and Ida freezes. For a moment he is eight or ten, just a boy. She watches his muscles tighten, preparing for the blow. As she has so many times before, she moves without a sound, but this time, not to escape.

"Let go of him!" With the shotgun against her shoulder, she closes one eye and focuses the other on her father through the sight, her finger shaking on the trigger. Frozen in their own terrible intimacy, neither Tommy, nor her father noticed her as she picked up the gun and cocked it.

Daragh Drea doesn't move.

"I said let him go!"

"Or you'll do what? Kill your old man? Ha!" He spits again and pulls Tommy's hair even harder. "Yer brother always was a weakling. Never held up his end. Ya might as well have been borned a girl!" He spits into Tommy's face, then turns to Ida. "Get outta here. This is between your sissy brother 'n me."

"I mean it . . .let him go or I'll shoot." Ida's face quivers and a bead of sweat drops on the barrel of the gun. She feels it running down her forehead into her open eye. She blinks and adjusts the rifle on her shoulder, then re-focuses.

"Ida . . .it's okay. Go on now." Tommy tries to turn his head toward her.

Their father is almost smiling. He likes a good row. "Ya don't have the balls of a bird," he taunts. "A sad excuse for a man."

Another drop of sweat moves from Ida's forehead, trickling along her cheek down her neck into the well of her collarbone. She lifts her shoulder to wipe it away and squeezes the trigger.

August 4, 1975

Did she really mean to kill him? I suppose I'll never know. Those moments when we must decide to act or withdraw back to the safety of the past are never really clear. The trigger was pulled. Her finger was on it. These are the facts. And too, there is Uncle Tommy's re-telling of the event, a story only told when my mother is not around. It starts with the paint on the doorstep, moves outside to the barn, bends down with him as he holds his dying mother in his arms, moves on to the drunken cruelty of his father standing in the hayloft. It skips over time and lands in the bedroom with his father daring Ida to kill him.

It is the bravery of his pregnant sister standing with a shotgun pointed at their father that receives the most emphasis in the re-telling. He remembers the sweat running down her cheek. He recalls the rise of her shoulder as she wipes it away. And he wants to believe she saved his life. Or maybe he's just grateful she did what he had wished he could.

14

When she sees Charlotte, beautiful and brown in her bright orange blouse, with Lucy smiling beside her, Ida explodes into their arms, crying like a little girl. They hold her with their big bellies pressed together and Charlotte whispers, "Shhh. . .mmm. . . shhh. . . mmm. . ." then leads her, no questions asked, into the house.

From the doorway, Ida looks back at her brother kicking at the dirt in front of the truck, his shoulders hunched, his head down. "Come on in, Tommy," she calls, but as the screen door slams, she sees him kick the side of the truck so hard that it almost knocks him to the ground.

As Ida settles down on the pallet, an elbow or maybe a foot pushes up from her womb, pressing itself tightly against her over-stretched skin. She places her hands protectively over the spot where she thinks the baby's head might be. "You're safe now," she whispers, uncertain whether she means the baby or herself. She touches the place where the last movement came from. Only a thin layer of blood and tissue separates her hands from those of this real live thing growing inside her. "Safe," she says again.

She checks herself for some sign, some sense of loss but there is only a heavy stone of regret and longing in her chest. She can feel it sinking to some dark place inside of her, overcome by the pushing of small limbs. If she concentrates hard enough on the baby and Johnny, she can almost forget her father's face in those last few minutes.

When the baby shifts again, she tries to make the same soothing sound Charlotte whispered to her. "Shhh. . .mmm, shhh. . .mmm..." It makes her think of what the gathering sea must sound like rushing and retreating, rushing and retreating. She thinks of Johnny listening to that sound on the other side of the world.

Outside, Charlotte puts a finger to her lips as she comes to sit by Tommy on the porch. They sit in silence until he finally says, "You want to know what happened?"

"No. I only know something's broke in your family."

Tommy almost laughs, then blushes. He's felt it before, the embarrassing laugh that wells up at the wrong time, a laugh that was really meant to be a cry. His face settles into a kind of grimace, part sadness, part relief. They've made a pact, he and Ida. The story they will tell, if anyone bothers to ask, is one of suicide. A man blinded with grief after the death of his wife and the loss of his land. They've had time to rehearse it. First for the doctor, then the priest and finally, for their neighbors as they closed down the ranch, sold their livestock and signed the government papers.

"You can stay here. Lucy and Raymond will give you a place to sleep." Charlotte nods in the direction of Lucy who's coming from the garden with an armful of weeds.

"Time to clear out that mess and plant," she says, smiling at Tommy. "Come and help me."

That's when they hear the crash of the table. Charlotte's mouth flattens into a straight line and Tommy tries to joke his way past the fear that crawls up inside him as he rushes into the house. "Sounds like a buffalo got loose in there."

Ida is flat on her back with the table on top of her.

"Hey, you can't be pulling tables over," Tommy says. "You'll give that baby a tumble."

But as he tries to help her to her feet, she winces. It is then that she notices that her feet feel as if they are attached to nothing. "Oh . . ." she says as her knees give way.

"Run down and get Raymond," Charlotte whispers to Tommy.

The doctor with white hair clicks his tongue and tells her she has to be careful. "You, young lady, are going to have twins," he says. "This little episode, I'm afraid, could mean some difficulties in the future. From now on, only bed rest. No lifting of any kind." He looks around the small room. "You can't stay here on a dirt floor. " He closes his bag and frowns. "Is your husband in the service?"

The question startles Ida. Still taking in the idea that she's carrying twins, she mumbles, "He, he. . . uh, yes . . ."

"Well, then," the doctor says, "your mother and father will have to take care of you. It was good of *these* people to take you in but you need to be at home with your family in a proper bed."

Ida looks toward the door as if her parents might appear there but Tommy, who's been waiting outside, steps through the doorway. "I'm her brother."

The ridge between the doctor's eyes deepens. "Hmm...I see." He jots something on a piece of paper. "And are you going to take care of her and get her to the hospital in time?"

He speaks only to Tommy, looks right past Charlotte, Raymond and Lucy as if they aren't there. But Ida thinks about Raymond who cajoled his old sedan into making it to town to search for the doctor and Lucy, still holding the damp cloth she brought to put on Ida's forehead and Charlotte who cradled her until the doctor arrived.

She pulls herself up on her forearms, looks directly at the doctor and says, "All these people are my family."

Her tender breasts seem evidence of something she can't name. As she rolls over from her side to her back, the only two positions possible, she feels her youth, her innocence, the person she might have been, slipping away from the huge, unfamiliar woman's body she inhabits. Her sleep is haunted by the shifts and echoing sounds of her mother. But when she opens her eyes and listens hard, the only sound she hears is the occasional crack and spit of the wood stove.

Just before sunrise, with only the silence as a witness, in that place between sleep and dream, she can feel the butt of the rifle against her shoulder, can see the flicker of disbelief in her father's eyes as her finger on the trigger slowly beckons him toward his death. Only then does the word she and Tommy have carefully avoided drift up from where it's been hidden. *Murderer.*

She sits up with a start, lights the lantern next to her bed and pulls out the letter Lucy gave her and reads it again.

Dear Ida,

By the time you get this, I'll be somewhere over the middle of the ocean. I wish I could figure out a way to tell you everything I've seen

and been through but I'm not too good at letters. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't, everything being hush hush.

I've been thinking about you and our little baby. He will be a real little firecracker if I have anything to do with it. I just wish I could be there with you but I know Charlotte, Lucy and Raymond will take good care of you.

Some joker called me Geronimo the other day and now everyone calls me that. The guy was too dumb to know that I consider it an honor, even if it's the wrong tribe. Everybody keeps coming up to me and saying, "How!" and making war whoops.

Well, it's almost lights out. We get up even earlier than Charlotte. I hate the night the most. Too much time to think. Sometimes I just don't understand war at all. All these guys get real pushy and excited about when we start bombing the Japs but I just get scared. Does that make me a coward?

You're the only thing that gets me through this. We're going to make it—you and me and the kid. Do you have a name picked out? Me and Lansing and a couple of other guys are going to put a list together and I'll send it in the next letter.

Love,

Johnny

She lets out a large heavy breath as she folds the letter and puts it under her pillow. It occurs to her that she has been holding herself as tightly as she can away from him so that he won't see what is really inside of her. And now she's not sure if she will ever be able to tell him all that's happened since he's been gone. She hasn't even told him they're having twins.

She looks at the snapshot he has sent. He looks cocky and handsome, grinning with a couple of other guys in their leather flight jackets, pointing to the huge plane behind them. Someone has painted a picture of a woman in a bathing suit on the cockpit. It looks like Betty Grable but the writing under it says, "Georgia Peach".

When she finally falls asleep, she dreams again of horrible white light, walls of fire, the bones of animals, and the frightened empty eyes of nameless people running, stumbling, trampling those who fall. The sound of their footsteps rumbles and shakes the earth and she knows they are coming straight for her. She can feel a strange heat on her skin and when she looks down, she sees she is wearing a bathing suit. As the stampeding human herd gets closer, she sees her mother, then her father, then Tommy, all hurrying past her. She calls to them but they only stare blankly at her as they run from the billowing light.

15

"Go ahead and open it." Tommy stands over her grinning like he used to when he was a kid. "Birthdays only come around once a year and besides, with two screaming babies, you ain't likely to pay much attention to yourself for awhile."

Charlotte smiles too. She has worked all morning baking a small cake with the bit of flour and sugar she has combined with what Lucy brought over. They have eggs, at least, from her chickens. Norma Padilla still brings fresh milk around and, so far, she hasn't had to use the milk powder the government gives out.

Raymond and Lucy have pulled up a couple of chairs and they are all waiting for Ida to open her present. She is sprawled on the small wooden kitchen chair, her legs spread out in front of her. Tommy has positioned a pillow behind her back but it isn't doing much good; she can't get comfortable.

"You know," Raymond says to Lucy, "she reminds me of . . ." But Lucy frowns and his voice trails off. No one says Marie's name very often but sometimes Ida catches Lucy

or Raymond or one of the other women who come to visit Charlotte looking at her like she has just returned from the dead and she knows they are remembering Johnny's mother, wondering what became of her all those years ago.

"I wish Johnny was here," Lucy says.

"Soon." Charlotte nods her head slowly as if to affirm it. "Soon."

"Well, are you just gonna sit there and look at it?" Tommy asks.

"Okay, okay, you'd think it was *your* birthday or somethin'." Ida picks up the package from the table. It is a smallish box covered in yellow cloth from Charlotte's sewing scraps. The rest of the fabric hangs over the window in the kitchen.

"I hope this is some kind of magical cure for my backache. Now that would be the perfect present!" She carefully lifts the top off the box. Inside are more scraps of cloth of different colors. One by one she pulls them out until she comes to a small cloth tobacco bag. She unties the red string and takes out a necklace. It is her mother's emerald lavaliere. She hasn't seen it since she was a little girl. "Oh, Tommy, it's..." Tears fill her eyes.

"She told me you should have it but made me promise not to tell until...well..." Tommy looks down. "Sorry, I couldn't think of anything else to put it in."

She holds it out for Lucy and Raymond to see, then places Charlotte's fingers in her palm so she can feel it.

They laugh and sing "Happy Birthday" but, just as Lucy lights the one candle in the middle of the cake, the color in Ida's cheeks melts away and her body slides completely off the chair to the floor.

Tommy stares at her sprawled flat on her back with her head almost under the table but Lucy and Charlotte move fast, clearing away the chairs. Raymond nods to Tommy to help him move the table.

"It's your time," Charlotte says softly, holding Ida's head in her lap, as she strokes her face gently.

"What's that?" Ida points down at her wet dress.

"Just water. The babies have been swimming in it to get home."

Ida's face relaxes for a moment then tightens again. Tears squeeze out of her eyes and she groans.

"Do this." Lucy blows out her breath in sharp puffs.

The contraction subsides and Ida opens her eyes. She sees the heels of the men's boots heading for the door.

"Tommy," she says, "if anything happens to me, you've gotta help Johnny with the babies, okay?"

One pair of boots stops, then turns around. "Sure, sure, you know I would. But nothin's gonna happen to you. You'll be just fine. You're just havin' a baby . . .or two."

She knows he's smiling as he says this, though she can't see his face.

Lucy puts a blanket under her and shakes a towel toward the men, shooing them off. She has taken her place at Ida's feet.

Ida lets out a little laugh. Her body is a huge thing with a mind of its own; it has nothing to do with what she thinks. Even the smallest movements in the last few weeks have become so awkward and tiresome that she often gives up trying to move. The fact that Tommy got her out of bed and into a chair for her birthday seemed nothing short of miraculous. And look what happened . . .she is having her babies in the kitchen on a dirt floor.

Ida sees Tommy's boots step back through the doorway. "Should I go for a doctor?"

"She knows what to do," Charlotte says.

Lucy, kneeling on the floor next to Ida, looks up and says, "Go to my house and bring some blankets and more towels. Raymond will show you."

It takes all night for the first baby to show itself and Ida is so weak she can barely push. Lucy has tried to get her to squat but her legs are too shaky and she keeps falling backwards. Being on her knees is more comfortable than on her back, but as the hours pass, her arms keep collapsing under her so Charlotte constructs a pile of blankets for her to lie across.

As she hovers on the dirt floor panting like a dog, her father's surprised and defiant face floats up just like that day but, as she reaches up to wipe away the sweat trickling into her eyes, a contraction claws through her, crushing the memory. After the pain passes, she thinks of Johnny's cocky smile, his scruffy boots, his warm brown hands. She wants those hands, that smile here with her to get her through this.

Through the night, Lucy's breath becomes Ida's breath, the two of them inhaling and exhaling in unison. Charlotte's hands become the hands Ida no longer feels she has, softly soothing her body with their touch. It is as if the two women have taken over for her, have become the body that seems to be failing her.

"Again . . ." is all she manages to say as the next clenching wave moves through her. But this time is different. She feels something shift and open inside her and knows that this is it. This time there will be a payoff with the push. "Ahh!" She screams as she feels something tear.

"The head," Lucy says.

She listens for the angry little cry that is supposed to follow but all she hears is the whispering women, moving behind the table. "Is it okay? Charlotte...Lucy? The baby? Is it okay?"

No one answers but she can see Lucy's feet next to Tommy's

"It's so little," Tommy says. "I could hold it in one hand. "Why isn't it crying?"

Ida tries to sit up but collapses on the pile of blankets.

"It's a little tired," Lucy says, "but it's heart is beating. Sit down in that chair and give it your air."

There is a scraping of chairs as Raymond situates Tommy near Ida so she can see what's happening. She watches Lucy put the baby, wrapped in a dishtowel, in his arms. Tommy bends and put his mouth over its tiny lips. When she hears a choking sound and a tiny cough, and, at last, the cry she's been waiting for, she finally breathes again.

And then, suddenly, Lucy is at her side and there is only one quick contraction and she is pushing again. This time, the baby comes out so fast, Ida thinks there must be a mistake. But, there is no mistake about this big, healthy baby crying for all it's worth, and Ida hears Tommy say, "Well, I'll be darned! Two girls."

As Charlotte mops at her forehead with a rag, something hot slips out of Ida and she is suddenly holding her breath again, waiting for something else to happen. She looks up at Lucy, who is sitting at the end of the pallet, dabbing at the naked screaming baby.

"That was their food inside you," Lucy tells her as she puts the second twin on Ida's chest. "Now you will feed them yourself."

Charlotte pulls the sweaty strands of hair away from Ida's face. "They are good," she says.

"Where is the other one?"

"With her uncles."

The men have cleaned the first baby and Tommy brings it to her and, as she kisses the damp pink heads, she starts to cry.

"It is done," Lucy says as she mops up between Ida's legs.

August 11, 1975

My sister and I must have seemed distant and odd to her once we were out of her body, a burden released at the end of a difficult pregnancy. Her regret was probably there from the moment we were born, just like a birthmark. If she was honest with herself, it had probably been there from the day she realized she was pregnant, a nameless fear each time she looked at our small pink faces. It planted itself somewhere within her just like we did.

She must have been scared. Suddenly, there she was with two helpless, screaming human beings depending on her for everything. I guess she just couldn't cope. Lucy told me Charlotte mostly took care of us then, only bringing us to our mother to be fed.

Lottie and I may have been twins but we were nothing alike. She was tiny and weak and I was plump and demanding. I attached myself to my mother's nipple and didn't let go until I was full and satisfied. And I always let out a large happy burp when I was finished, screaming like crazy when Charlotte came to take us away. But not Lottie. It seemed like she didn't want to be here from the beginning. Charlotte said she didn't care a thing about my mother's breasts, always pushing herself away with her tiny hands until pretty soon she just wouldn't nurse at all. Charlotte and Lucy rocked her, cooed to her, bathed her in cool water but she screamed even louder and, like our mother, refused comfort.

Finally, Tommy and Charlotte decided to take her to the doctor. This was close to the end of the war and I always wondered if things would have been different if that trip had been just a few days earlier.

16

They've brought coffee and cornbread along and Tommy says he will pull off the road once it's light enough so they can eat breakfast. The air smells clean and new this time of day and, although it's still dark, Ida watches the sun moving up along the edge of the land to the east, a shimmering line of light about to burst onto the horizon. Charlotte sleeps with Lottie in her arms in the seat between Ida and Tommy, her head bobbing up and down with each bump in the road. Ida holds the other baby. Outside, she knows the shadowed houses are all soft edges and blends of the same dull brown. She closes her eyes thinking the houses are the color and shape of her life.

When the land turns suddenly flat, she lurches awake, rolls down the window, and smells rain in the air.

"The Jornada," Tommy nods toward the desert, still dark except when the headlights catch it just right. Then it is bone white. "All that white sand goes a long way up through the middle of the state. It's gypsum. You can only see a little of it from this end. It's

called the Jornada del Muerto. . .Journey of the Dead. Did Dad ever tell you that story?" He doesn't wait for her answer. It's a long drive and a story will pass the time.

"Some German trader tried to cross that stretch of desert . . .people thought he was a witch. Well, he and some Apache servant walked nearly a hundred miles across. Finally, the guy was so tired and thirsty, he had to stop. But he sent the Indian ahead for water.

"Anyway, the scout had to travel a full day to find a spring, then another day back to the water after he broke the gourd he was carryin' the water in. This time he soaked a saddle blanket, hopin' to squeeze it out later since he didn't have anything else to put water in. But when he got back, the trader was gone. Disappeared." He snaps his fingers. "Weeks later, somebody found his dead horse still tied to a tree along with some of his gear. Then they found what was left of him. Just bones, I guess. Probably picked clean. Over the years, they say hundreds of travelers died out there in those dry old gypsum beds."

"When did he tell you this?"

Tommy scratches his head. "I don't know...when we were movin' cattle one day I guess."

"He never talked to me. . .not ever. . .not after. . .Pat."

"He could hold a grudge, that's for sure. Worse than Ma even."

She is surprised by the softness in his voice. It's the first time they have spoken of their father since the day they left Rosebud. She looks out into the darkness toward the desert. "Maybe it's a reminder," she says.

"What is?"

"All that sand."

"Of what?"

"What we need." She looks over at Charlotte, her head lolling loosely, her mouth open as she snores.

"And what's that?"

"Rain. A wet place. Rivers, lakes, streams. Green. It's so dry here, so blank. It's like everyone who lives here keeps hoping there's something underneath. We keep trying to make the land something it isn't meant to be."

As she says this, she is aware that something has changed. She looks out the window toward the desert, watching the car's headlights dance like ghosts across the shadowed horizon. For a moment it seems eerily silent, then the sky lights up and in the distance something roars up across the sand. The truck begins to shimmy and, suddenly, huge layers of blue, purple, and red smoke swirl up into a gigantic ball outlined by a strange blue glow. Bright white heat fills the inside of the truck as if the sun has fallen to the earth. The babies scream.

Ida sees the moment perfectly: her brother's mouth open, eyes wide, hands palm out as if to press whatever is coming toward them away. Charlotte's face, a mask of white bone against the white desert now lit up beyond the windshield by the glow coming from the giant fist of smoke rising in the distance.

"Christ! Cover your heads! Cover the babies!" Tommy yells as he yanks the steering wheel hard into the soft shoulder of the road and turns off the engine. But they can't stop looking toward the huge purple-red cloud hovering in the sky, the fist opening and closing, spilling over itself in larger and larger layers of smoky blue, orange, yellow.

"What's that?" Charlotte points toward the sky.

Heat rushes in and fills up the cab of the truck but when Ida reaches for the door handle but it's too hot to touch. She yanks the blanket off Lottie and reaches again. The

baby yowls. Outside, the air quivers with heat. Even on the other side of the highway, the sky is strangely wrong, a bruised gray-blue.

17

"Get this." Tommy looks up from reading the local paper. "It says here that there was a big ammunition dump explosion near Alamogordo about the time that we were on the road. He reads aloud: 'F.E. Calkins, who is engaged in mining at the old Courtney Mine four miles south of High Rolls was awakened by a bright light which lit up his room about 5:30 Monday morning. He sprang out and saw what he thought might be a large airplane explosion...the light held for several moments before the sound arrived.'"

Ida looks up from the mending, surprised at Tommy's voice. Since the explosion, a silence seems to have draped itself across everything. They hadn't made it to the hospital. Instead, they headed back home and sent Raymond out for the local doctor who pronounced them all suffering from food poisoning, handed Ida some little vials of bicarbonate for nausea, some salve for the rash that had appeared on their skin, and some pills to help her nerves. He'd also given her a bottle of liquid medicine for the baby.

Baby. The singularity of the word drifts up, taps at some door she has closed inside of herself. *One baby now. Only one.* "And what about the other one?" She had wanted to scream as the doctor closed his black bag. No follow-up appointments needed, he had said as he hurried away from their questions, away from the dirt floors and the frowning hot faces.

How could he explain her dead baby? She couldn't explain it herself. How her little body grew stiff, her lips tightened, her tiny fists clenched each time Ida offered her breast. Did she die of starvation or from the blast? Did Ida expose her to the heat by yanking her blanket off? Did that kill her?

"I don't know," Tommy says, as if he has heard these unasked questions. "They must be usin' some powerful explosives out there. The light, the wind, never seen nothin' like it. And the heat. . .it don't make sense. It says here that the flash was so bright people seen it at Gallup over 200 miles away. Some blind gal says she could even see it.

Charlotte sits on the blue chair with the other baby who hasn't stopped crying since Lottie died, her solemn little mouth quivering as she searches for air. "I saw it too. Some bad thing has cracked the world and we don't have the medicine to heal it," Charlotte says.

Ida and Tommy exchange glances but Charlotte doesn't say any more. She takes this new experience the same way she might take a potato from a sack.

While news of the war in the Pacific cracks from the radio into the evening, Ida watches bits of ash hovering above her as she checks the stove one last time before turning in. Lately, she has been dreaming of fire.

The door of the house is open as are all the windows and the smoke floats lightly through the summer night air. She shivers. The gray haze lifting into space feels like her

life, something she can see but can't feel. She remembers Johnny building a fire outside when they first came to visit Charlotte, the way he circled his boot in the red dirt—now, it seems to her, nervously. She remembers the fire he stirred in her and wonders where he is, if he is safe.

At night, she waits, listening. But, for what, she doesn't know. She tries to remember what she had hoped for before she met Johnny, before the babies. But there is only her mother's tired face, her father's threats—all that she was running from. She hadn't really been running *to* anything, had just opened her heart and filled it up with something else. And now here she is, a mother, a wife.

Seventeen. She has counted them—the number of actual nights she has spent with Johnny. Her age when he picked her up on the highway. She sometimes feels that he is just someone she has made up, like one of the actors in her old movie magazines, now even more distant and strange than the babies. It has been so long since she last saw him. How young they both seemed to her then, and yet, less than a year has passed. She is only eighteen with two dead parents and a dead baby. She closes her eyes, wills Lottie's face into the darkness where her other secrets are kept.

Just before dawn, she dreams she is someone else. Another woman walking in a strange place. It's a city both familiar and alien, the morning street lit strangely from above and hundreds of people running again, outlined by the eerie light. She stands for a moment in a doorway, then plunges into the street carrying a child, running first toward a familiar building, then, seeing people stampeding toward her, turns and runs the other way. People shout and scream around her, bumping into each other, trampling those who have fallen to the ground. She searches for a way out, someone to follow. But no one seems to know where to go.

August 13, 1975

Mama kept a black lacquered box in the very back of the dresser drawer under four silk hankies she never used. I always felt a rush of shame when I opened it. I knew it was her only private place but I told myself I had a right to know about my parents, a right to find out what got between them. And I tried to be careful.

It seemed to me that their history, or what was left of it, was hidden inside that box. A pair of abalone earrings and a pearl necklace with a real gold clasp lay across the top. He had brought them back from Japan. Mama never wore them and I always wondered if that hurt my dad's feelings. I remember thinking that the earrings looked like rainbows under water but I loved the pearls the best. I used to let the silky roundness of them slip through my fingers, amazed that such beautiful things came from the sea. Now, I think that if I ever find you, I will give these things to you.

In that box, I found a snapshot of Daddy standing next to his plane, handsome and young in his leather flight jacket. Another one was of Mama and Aunt Silver arm-in-arm, smiling like friends who just had a good laugh. Mama's hair was tied up in a scarf and they were both wearing baggy trousers. It must have been taken when she went to Washington to get married.

And there was another snapshot. Someone had written, "Ida and Darcy, 1945" on the back. Mama's holding me on her hip. I'm wrapped in a blanket so you can't see my face and Mama's looking away from whoever's taking the picture. She's wearing a housedress that makes her look much older than she is at the time. I always wondered what she saw beyond the white borders of that picture, what filled her face with such longing.

1945-46

Half-Life

18

The smell of smoke still drifts above the scorched land. To Johnny, it feels like lives have been gathered up in a hurry and flung out to sea. Everything seems makeshift at first, since the barracks and the air field have been quickly constructed on newly plowed and flattened earth where the huts of families have been crushed and burned by the bombs and unrelenting attacks of ground troops. When he thinks about it, a lump rises in his throat, pushing toward something that he won't allow.

Before this, the familiarity of the other men in his unit and the routines of each base where they have been stationed have always made one place seem much the same as another. But this place is different. It's a place of new death. The land fought over and taken in a bloody battle so recent, stories of Jap soldiers and civilians hiding in the surrounding hills still circulate among the men. The residents had fiercely defended their island, taking up sticks, stones, kitchen knives to fight off the American troops who seemed to come from nowhere, rising up out of the sea and dropping from the sky.

Looking around now, he can see why some people had chosen the high cliffs and the leap to the rocks or water below over their unknown fate at the hands of an unseen enemy. Many had chosen, as their Emperor had commanded, to take their own lives rather than surrender. They threw themselves on swords, hanged themselves, slashed the throats of their families and then their own. If they couldn't find weapons, they picked up rocks and battered each other to a bloody death. Those who hadn't managed to take their lives before the enemy arrived headed for the caves that riddled the hills. But, by the time Johnny's unit got there, most of them had surrendered and were now imprisoned on their own island.

So, when he sees the kid, he gasps. He's just lit a cigarette and tossed the match down when there she is curled up just inches from his foot behind the latrine. Johnny jumps and drops his cigarette and the girl's small body lurches immediately into a cat-like pose, ready to spring, ready to run. He can see the terror in her eyes and he feels his own fear coiled, ready to strike.

When he realizes that she's only a kid, not more than seven or eight, he lets out a breath and takes a step forward. "It's okay. You're safe," he whispers, knowing that he's saying it as much to himself as to her. But she stays crouched.

He kicks the dirt lightly with one toe, then bends down slowly so that he isn't towering above her. But this only scares her more and she cowers back against the latrine, covering her head with her thin arms.

"Look." He holds up his hands. "I don't have a gun."

She moves into a squat and puts her head in her hands, a curtain of dark hair falling over them.

"Chocolate? You like candy?" He takes out a chocolate bar from his front pocket and tries to give it to her.

She turns away, putting a hand out, palm up, the way a traffic cop would, as if this gesture can protect her from the moment of capture.

"Hey, I don't want to hurt you." He puts both hands up again and she sniffs and pulls her hair away, a moment of dirty face, streaked by tears, before she looks back down. His eyes travel to her ragged shirt and the torn trousers that look like pantaloons. Suddenly, she seems to remember something. She raises one hip and jams her hand into her pocket.

When she does this, Johnny stands up and takes a step back; he's heard about kids carrying hand grenades. The kid seems to sense his nervousness and freezes. Johnny takes another step back but the girl keeps pulling at something in her trouser pocket. He holds his breath and is thinking about diving for cover when a piece of dirty white cloth appears in her grubby, small hand. She holds it in front of her, worrying it back and forth between her fingers.

Johnny lets out his breath and smiles. "Ah, I see. You're surrendering?" He steps forward and lights another cigarette, waiting for her to wave the bit of cloth as he's been told the children and old people who came down out of the caves above the camp did. One guy had a collection of these flags of surrender, had strung them together and hung them above his bunk like a trophy.

Now the kid begins whimpering behind her hair as her hand reaches out, the scrap of cloth still clutched tightly in her small fist. He reaches down, the tips of his fingers brushing the top of her hand and the edge of the cloth, but just as he is about to take it, she snatches it back.

He looks toward the center of the camp where the MPs are standing, knowing what he is supposed to do, but he doesn't want to scare the kid anymore than she already is.

Finally, he puts his hand out to help her up. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat." He pretends to put food into his mouth with an imaginary spoon.

She doesn't take his hand but she stands up.

"This way." He points and begins to walk. The girl hangs back, then, when he isn't looking, takes a few steps forward. They continue in this manner until they reach the steps leading to the mess tent.

A couple of guys having a smoke click their tongues. "Hey Geronimo, whatcha got there, a pet Jap?"

The girl turns to run but Johnny takes her hand. She tries to pull away but he won't let her. "It's okay. They're harmless." He knows she doesn't understand a word he says but he doesn't know what else to do. He also knows that what he has said isn't true. They stand there, stuck between where she has come from and where he wants her to go.

Finally, he says, "Look, I just want to get you something to eat." He holds up the imaginary spoon again and puts it to his mouth but she is looking past him at the MPs headed toward them.

"We'll handle this," a big guy who looks like a heavy-weight boxer says.

"She's starvin'. I was tryin' to get her some food."

The other MP pulls the girl's hands behind her back while the big guy frisks her.

"Hey...easy does it...she's scared to death! She's just a kid. She had a white flag."

But the big guy ignores him. "Scared, huh? Little kids got grenades. Blew a bunch of our guys to smithereens before we set up camp."

Although the frisk yields nothing but the dirty rag, they still yank the girl roughly between them and lead her away, head down.

He wants to call out, wants to stop them but knows it's no use. When she looks back at him as they pass the mess hall, he drops his head, filled with sudden shame. The men on the steps snicker as he hurries past them. "She your sister, Jap lover? You look a lot alike."

The next day Johnny walks along the fence, hoping to see the girl. Children, old men and women mill about or squat with their backs to the fence. They've been fed and washed and those in need of medical help have received it. Now, having ended their fight to survive the attack on their island, they find themselves with nothing to do. When they see Johnny, some of them bow and keep their heads down, others turn away. He finds the girl sitting by herself in a corner of the yard. "You look better. You've had food?" He squats down and does the eating imitation again. She looks at him shyly, nods her head. Her face is clean now and he can see that she has a scar on her cheek, a nasty tear that hasn't healed. He wants to tell her everything will be okay but knows it isn't a promise he can make or one that she is likely to believe or understand. Besides, he can't speak Japanese. As he stands up to leave, she tugs at his sleeve through the fence and bows but he can't see her eyes.

The men in his barracks have the jitters. Their orders have come and no one has slept more than a few hours. There has been talk that the war might end before they even fly a real mission. But now, with orders clear and in hand, the men have stopped making wisecracks about creaming the Japs.

Only the day before, they had all stood around smoking pipes, posing for snapshots in front of their planes. Now that they have their wings, they think they are men at last but

they still look like a bunch of kids with their hair cut short and their faces shaved bare. They smell like soap and water and inexperience. And they are supposed to bomb the crap out of Japan.

As they pack up their gear, Johnny watches the faces of the men he will be flying with, the men who could make a difference between life and death. There is Anderson, blonde-haired, blue-eyed; women love him and he has a girl in every city where he's been stationed. He played football in high school and plans to go to college when the war is over. O'Hara is from Boston and Johnny teases him about his accent, the flat a's and missing r's. He talks about how tough a kid had to be to make it in his old neighborhood. His nose is crooked from one too many fights. And there's Strickland, the guy they call "Bottoms" because he usually drains the last drop of booze from any bottle in sight. A poor kid from Mississippi, he joined up for the three squares and the promise of a job after the war. He is the one who yelled, "Geronimo!" the first time Johnny told him where he came from. Before that, Johnny felt that he was part of the crew, that he was moving closer to something he was supposed to know, close to who he really was, and that, maybe he didn't need to walk between two worlds. He thought maybe he could forget Johnny Rain, half-breed, and become Johnny Rain, bombardier. But then, he'd see the look in Strickland's eyes that said, *you don't belong here*, would feel that small knot of fear in his stomach and wonder why the hell he had ever joined up.

And then there's Lansing. They made it through training together, studying, talking, smoking. A college boy from Maine, older than the rest of the crew, he made it clear that his age brought him the right to leadership and authority. He is the navigator. His answer to everything is a joke but under it all is a streak of rage that usually shows up as slurred insults in the early-morning courtship of drunken airmen outside unfamiliar bars on

unfamiliar streets. Still, he had seemed curious about Johnny and asked him all about New Mexico and he'd never taken to calling Johnny Geronimo. That counted for something. After a while, they had become pals and Johnny had to hand it to him—he had pulled through for the wedding. Johnny wasn't pals with most of the crew but he'd managed alright.

The damp morning rises up around him as he heads toward the plane. Since he left New Mexico he has been walking in unfamiliar air. He tries to think about what it felt like standing by the morning fire in front of Charlotte's house. Closing his eyes, he sniffs as if he might call up the dry earth and wind thousands of miles away. If he can only remember, he thinks, this memory will bring him back safely to Charlotte, to Ida, to his new family.

Lansing checks coordinates and proudly shows the map to Johnny again. Their targets are clearly marked, perfect lines drawn toward a precise goal. Before the bombs were loaded, Lansing had written his wife's name on one—*For Irene*. And the others did the same, dedicating their mission by scrawling the names of mothers, lovers, wives, and children across the casings. When they were finished Strickland wrote on the last bomb, "Kiss my ass, Jap bastards!" Everyone had laughed nervously, hoping it wasn't the other way around. Johnny stood back and watched with the scared face of the little Jap girl still on his mind.

Once they take off, he can't get the thought of how the air smells in a particular place on a particular morning out of his head. Cold steel, fuel, and the damp canvas of the parachute packs fills his nostrils and he knows he will never forget that smell. Still, he reasons, if you can smell, then you're alive. Alive in this place at this moment. You're part of it because you're breathing it.

He looks down at the ocean below. When they're flying in the clouds, then, and only then, can he forget where they're headed, losing himself in the eerie whiteness where distance and landscape have no meaning. But sooner or later, they will drop down, check coordinates, and send their cargo of incendiary bombs to the cities and towns below.

He has to admit, on practice missions, he had yelled, "Bombs Away!" like a little boy with a toy. They had all whooped and hollered for the perfection of their maneuvers. But today is for real. Today, the bombs will slide out through the cold white air, down to those precisely mapped lines. A man plowing a field might look up when he hears the hum of the planes' engines, a horse might be startled and buck into a gallop. And just as some kids playing somewhere squint up to see where the noise is coming from, the penciled lines on the piece of paper will magically become roads, bridges, railroad lines, fences, and buildings. *Coordinates*, a word he had never heard before training, will become rubble and fire beneath the fleet of buzzing steel planes.

"C'mon Geronimo! Time to show your stuff." It is the scratchy voice of Strickland in his earphones. He lets out a war whoop. They are ready to drop down and give the Japs Hell.

19

Something in his stomach tightens as he picks up the envelope. It has several different addresses crossed out having followed him from base to base. He unfolds the letter. Parts of it have been blacked out and there is no date.

Dear Johnny,

I am sorry I haven't written sooner. I sit here and try to imagine you in the places you've been but I know that you're already somewhere else now.

How can you tell me what your life is like? How can I tell you what I'm going through? It's too much to say. I imagine you feel the same way. So many things have happened and by the time you get this, who knows where you'll be or what will have happened. Time plays tricks. I keep thinking about what it must feel like to be in an airplane—all that sky and the clouds. What happens when you fly through them?

Down here on the ground we battle on too, I suppose. Tommy and I are staying with Charlotte. I know you'll wonder why but all I can say is that _____ until the end of the war. In a way it was like he was fighting his own private war all his life. _____ I can't explain what happened in a letter. And Mama—I'm not so sure I'll ever be able to talk about it. It's too hard now. Maybe I'll feel different when you come back. Anyway, you have enough to worry about.

I don't know if you got my last letter but just in case, I have some good news. We're having twins! I can't really believe it myself but if you could see me you'd know it's true. So, I will have my hands full but Charlotte and Lucy will help.

I keep looking at the map and thinking of you somewhere over there _____. Are you changing, Johnny? Are you scared? Sad? Lonely like me? I try to remember our wedding and that keeps me going. What keeps you going? What can I do to make it easier? I am sending along a picture of me. It might be enough to scare the Japs.

Today, Charlotte is making a cake. Not enough sugar for frosting but we'll make do. I'll have a piece for you. It's my birthday. Did you know that? I didn't know yours till I asked Charlotte. Maybe you'll be back by then and we can have a real party.

Love,

Ida

He looks inside the envelope but there's no picture so he tries to remember her sweet, small face, her nervous laugh, her small white hands. He calculates in his head how far he is from home, thinks about Charlotte, Lucy and Raymond smiling proudly around the birthday cake. Thinks about being a father. He wishes he had pictures of his babies he

could put up in the plane. Then, he thinks about the little Jap girl. He hasn't been able to get her out of his head; she looks like kids he knows back home. Would his own kids look like her? He thinks of taking this picture out of his wallet to show his buddies; he'd be one dead bombardier.

He folds the letter, puts it back in its envelope, tucks it inside his jacket pocket, his hand shaking. He knows it's better not to think about his family or the Jap kid again. Not now when he is about to drop bombs on civilians who look like her, who might even be related to her.

"It's for them," Lansing says, maybe catching something doubtful in Johnny's expression. Nodding toward a snapshot of his own wife and two little boys, he says, "We've got to beat the Japs. Hell, if we don't they'll be crawling on our shores and we'll all be forced to commit hari kari just like they do. Look at Pearl Harbor; just goes to show you what a bunch of bastards they are."

What Lansing says isn't new. He's heard it over and over again. There's no room between right and wrong, enemies and friends. Even in training, he never understood the personal spite of many of the men. Skin, hair, eyes are their targets, not the decisions of the Japanese leaders.

He remembers a large poster he saw before he left the States. While Uncle Sam was reading a newspaper in a chair, behind him a man with huge buck teeth and angry slanted eyes threatened him with a huge sword. The other guys had laughed and whooped and said they couldn't wait to bomb the shit out of the little yellow bastards. But when Johnny thought about it, he just kept imagining erasing the sword and inserting a tomahawk and some feathers.

Once he's settled in the plane surrounded by the loud thrashing of propellers and the metallic cold air, he takes out the letter and reads it again, wondering if he'll ever see his own kids. He decides not to tell Lansing about the twins.

Sometimes they look down and see the farmland, the railroad tracks, the buildings that make a civilization and, maybe for a moment, see their own farms in Iowa or Kansas, or the tall buildings of Boston or Chicago. But then they begin to make a translation in their heads. The miniature markings of human inhabitants become targets circled in their crosshairs. Young officers shout out orders to the crew and the men become part of something bigger than themselves. They remember their training.

Johnny knows he is no exception. He has learned to follow orders. He has also learned that within the confines of the plane, he can almost belong because there are no real questions. They have one purpose. To hit the target. This is success. This is the badge of manhood.

They've been firebombing the hell out of Yawata, Wakamatsu, Tobata, Kurosaki, Kokura. None of the guys on his crew had suspected how much their lives would change with each mission but he has watched himself and them change with each bomb dropped, each target obliterated. They feel the adrenalin moving through their bodies as they become part of something that only they can understand; it is a private language. From the pilot to the co-pilot to the bombardier, the orders run like oil, loosening inhibitions, moving them all in a masculine dance toward the release of their deadly cargo. And when it works perfectly and they lift back and away from the smoky haze of their unified connection, some of them cheer.

On this day, though, they are feeling both relief and disappointment that their particular and precise work is over. They will, instead, see the handiwork of another crew's precision close up.

Johnny has dreaded this mission since he received his orders. They're flying over Nagasaki to have a look at where the second big bomb hit. As they drop down closer to the ground, over the thrashing of the engines, Strickland yells, "Holy Crap! Never saw nothin' like it!"

"There's nothing left," Johnny says, looking down at the scorched land. He can still make out some roads and railway lines but as he looks for the rubble of buildings, the air shimmers eerily above the burnt earth. Everything that had once had solid form seems like liquid from this distance, melted shadows of a city that had recently been full of life and movement.

"Do you ever wonder why?" he says, thinking about the flat mesa tops at home for some reason, forgetting for a moment the soldier's silence when it comes to orders.

"That's a hell of a question." Strickland looks at him like he's crazy. "If we hadn't a used it on them, they would've just kept at us. Killing everyone in sight, taking over the whole damned Pacific till they got right on our doorstep. They'd sure as hell have used it on us if they got it first." He shoves at Johnny's shoulder. "You ain't goin' soft are you, Geronimo?"

"No, no, just tired I guess." He thinks about all the days he's spent with Strickland inside the backside of a plane. "Homesick and tired." He swallows a wad of phlegm that has risen in his throat and squints out the window at the wasteland below.

August 13, 1975

I have tried to imagine the woman in the black kimono. I know I will get it wrong. I have nothing to go on but bad movies and the things my father brought back from Japan. Sometimes I've been tempted to draw her harsh and mean. Other times she floats through my mind, fragile and thin like the teacups he brought back. I know she was much more complicated and real than I imagine her and she was probably running too but she still haunts me.

It's always the same dream. I am crouching silently in the basement of the church across the street from our house. It's nothing like the simple white-walled chapel of the real church. Everything in the basement is covered in purple velvet, yet I know this place like it is my own. It is where I came to each summer for vacation Bible school. The place where a bunch of American kids sang "Jesus Loves Me" and "This Little Light of mine, I'm Going to Let it Shine." The place where we drank weak Kool-Aid, snacked on graham crackers and made little replicas of the church with Popsicle sticks.

But in the dream, there is no tinny piano music, no shuffling of chairs, no smell or movement of damp children having just returned from their hot play outside. There is only the silence and the waiting.

In my child's heart, I know it means something terrible and, when I hear the sound of the truck engine grinding down, coming to a halt just across the street, I know the terrible thing has arrived at our house.

I crawl along the purple velvet floor and think for a moment it must be the color of Jesus' robes before the crucifixion, although I do not know this for a fact. But somehow, the remembrance of this color marks my first knowledge of violence in the world. The first time I

wondered how someone could actually be so cruel as to nail a person to a cross—to actually put nails through the flesh of a living person.

As I finally reach the door to the street, I can hear my heart beating under my ribs and I fear it might be heard. Opening the door only wide enough for one eye to peek through, I have a clear view of the street. It too is silent, except for the idling engine of a huge flatbed truck. Not another kid in sight. Not a car. Not one neighbor leans across a fence to chat. And no one appears to be in the truck.

But then the screams slice through the silence and I know instinctively that they are my mother's. There are sounds of a scuffle on our porch but I can't see clearly what's happening, only the bent backs of men in uniforms the color of canned peas. They're shouting in a strange language full of short, sharp sounds. I push my eye up tight against the door crack as they drag my father down the steps and heave him like a sack of grain on to the bed of the truck. I know then that they are Japanese soldiers.

For a moment, as they drive past the church, I am uncertain whether their cargo is really my father. His bones gouge through his skin. The vacant black holes of his eye sockets stare blindly at the receding street.

My mama stands on the porch crying. Only, now, as I look closer, the figure holding her hand in the air, as if she might somehow stop the momentum of this sudden loss with a delicate wave, is not my mother.

As the truck disappears down the road, my father cries out. The name he screams is foreign. The woman on the porch turns away and the embroidered golden dragon on the back of her robe catches the sun, sending yellow threads of light into the still air.

20

A young woman listens to the GIs talking loudly in a corner of the gutted hotel. Their easy laughter and cigarette smoke float up to the ledge just above them where she's crouching. They seem comfortable in this husk of a crumbling building as if it has always been this way, as if the city didn't exist before they destroyed it.

That afternoon, when they first came there, she had held her breath, afraid they would look up and see her, but the light has faded and shadows have begun to fill all the ledges and corners. She covers her ears with her hands, trying to block out their voices, but one of them starts singing and the others join in. Soon, the hollow walls echo with a rowdy foreign song. She uncovers her ears and tries to make out the English words. They sound like "mygullsacutter" but as the men repeat one of the lines, she is able to understand certain words. "My gal's a corker, she's a New Yorker..." they bellow. Then they add a line: "She's got a pair of hips just like two battle ships, hey boys that's where my money goes."

She doesn't know what a corker is but she knows of New York and she's seen the GIs throwing money around showing that they can buy anything they want. And she's actually seen battle ships in the harbor. Her father's insistence on teaching her English before the war has given her a rudimentary understanding of their language but the American way of speaking is full of surprising words and odd constructions.

Her father. Where is he now? The last time she saw him, he was hurrying with all the others toward the school, calling to people to take shelter there. But suddenly there were hundreds of people running and people were falling and no one stopped and she lost sight of him. She pushes this thought away, knowing she must concentrate so the soldiers won't see her.

Despite her tiredness, despite her anger, despite her hunger, she finds herself smiling when the GIs belt out another line: "She's got a big fat nose, just like a fire hose, hey boys that's where my money goes."

She wraps the kimono around herself for a bit of warmth, although it is made of thin silk. It's the only thing of any value she's managed to find in all her days of wandering the streets. She had found it only this morning under a pile of broken vases and had pictured a beautiful woman frantically gathering up her favorite belongings just before the fire fell from the sky. Where is that woman now, she wonders?

As she curls into a small shape trying not to think about all that has been lost, the GIs continue singing, their strange voices drifting up past her to the empty sky.

It is sand that enters her dreams, great mounds of it from which she shovels exactly measured scoops into a cloth bag. Her sister helps and they chatter away, remembering sand near the sea, remembering the salty smell of seaweed in their noses, remembering

the lingering heat of the sun on their faces as they played under the clear, blue sky. Why they are shoveling sand into cloth bags, they do not know. Their chatter drops to whispers, then to silence when the man comes around the corner with his hands clasped behind his back, peering at them like a mean grandfather, as if they have been naughty, as if he can read their minds. The girl wonders why some men walk like that, why they pretend to be so important, even if they aren't. She knows this is a bad thought. The man begins to sing *My gal's a corker...*

A boy who looks like her father joins them in the factory of sand. "I was told to brush rice paper with glue," he whispers, "but no one will tell me what we are making." He is tall and thin. They walk and walk down the familiar street toward the school. She tells him they have been shoveling sand all day into this bag and that bag. A buzzing sounds breaks the quiet. They look up as the sound grows louder and louder like swarming huge insects. But they aren't insects. They are huge American airplanes dropping parcels of fire on the city.

She wakes with the rain leaking down the walls and onto her ledge and no matter which way she turns, she gets wet. Suddenly, fully awake, she stops moving and looks down into the darkness. The GIs have gone. She pulls herself back into a crouching position, gathers the damp kimono and begins the climb down and out of the roofless hotel.

On the street, she sees a light down by the river and follows it until she hears voices. A group of soldiers is gathered near one of the few buildings left standing in that part of the city. In the dim glow of an open door, a woman wearing a low-cut black dress takes one last draw on a cigarette and blows the smoke out of her pouty red lips. She tosses the cigarette to the ground, steps forward and snuffs it out with her red high-heeled

shoe, then lifts her index finger toward the men as if to pull them toward her. To the girl in the shadows, she looks more like an American movie star than a Japanese woman.

She glances down at her ragged trousers and the ugly gray shirt she has shoved into them. She had bartered her sash for a bit of rice that morning and now the pants are held up by a length of rope. She lifts the damp kimono to her face and breathes in the fading scent of sand and the sea.

"Hey Joe. You want very good girl. Very cheap.' The woman at the door has stepped fully into the light. The men snigger and push a fat, boyish soldier toward her. He holds his head down and his shoulders droop as if he is being punished but he shuffles forward, each step taking him closer and closer to becoming a man. One of the GIs hollers, "Jap girl. Velly good. Velly cheap. Just for you Joe." They all laugh and the woman flashes a fake smile.

The girl in the shadows feels her face turn hot in spite of the cold rain. The woman at the door is not really a woman at all but a girl, not more than sixteen or seventeen. The thought that she, Michi, is only a little older than this girl pretending to be a woman slips into her head and she realizes for the first time that she has changed. But when did she become a woman? One day she was running down the street toward the school with all the others and the next, she was alone, fending for herself. Her father's house was gone and so was the school, flattened to rubble and cinders. Her father and sister just disappeared. She had searched for weeks until she ended up here.

Now, with an empty stomach, no money in her pocket, no place to sleep, she thinks of the warmth inside the building as she creeps forward toward the open door, moving between blackened trees and piles of rubble. She waits until the girl and the man go inside

and the other men move off down the river. When the door closes, she waits a few minutes then makes a run for it.

One light push on the door and she is in a room surrounded by reddish-yellow light from the paper lanterns placed along the walls. The room is empty but there are doorways off each wall covered with rice paper screens. She stops. Listens. In the distance she hears music and the sound of muffled laughter, the deepness of a man's voice. She removes her dirty cloth slippers and tiptoes to the closest doorway. Pressing herself against the wall, she leans toward the screen to get a better look.

The room is filled with candles and the sound of American blues scuffs scratchy and full of longing from a hidden record player. A woman in a shimmering red dress is dancing with an American officer who is humming along with the music that seems familiar and sad. And then she remembers that her father used to play this same song on his phonograph before the war.

As she leans closer to listen, she knocks the screen over. Instantly, she freezes where she stands and the wet kimono she's been holding in a wad against her stomach drops in a splat to the floor. The woman turns. The GI laughs and says, "Come on in. Ain't you a pretty little thing."

Michi bows and tells herself it means food and a dry place to sleep.

21

He supposes he'd been lucky enough, entering the war as he had, at the tail end. No face to face combat, no leaping from a burning plane to the hands of the enemy. But now, as he walks through the ruined city, Johnny has to face what's been below him the whole time. Has to face what he has pretended not to see.

As he passes the shanties that have sprung up everywhere—makeshift shelters of tin, bamboo, and cloth—the old men and women in rags don't look up. Some of these men, former soldiers, still wear their dirty, torn uniforms and worn out boots. Johnny's seen them hunched over, guarding a few precious items to sell for food: a bowl, bits of cloth, chopsticks.

He hunkers down, walks faster in his clean, pressed uniform and polished shoes, heading toward the center of Tokyo—or what was once the center. As he turns a corner, he feels a tug on his sleeve. A little boy looks up at him. "Hey, Joe. Cigarette?" He has already given away the chocolate bars he stuck in his pocket before he left the base but he kneels

down and puts a dime in the grubby little hand and says, "No cigarette." He wants to apologize for so much more. The hunger that rises up around him as he walks. The question that pushes at him constantly: *Why bomb civilians? Why kids?*

As he gets to the heart of the city, these ghost-like children appear every few yards. They are almost always alone when they approach him and he wonders where they come from, where they live.

When he gets near the river, he sees a bunch of GIs leaning against the wall of one of the few buildings still standing. A woman's voice drifts from somewhere behind them. "GI boy!" She appears out of nowhere in a black kimono, her lips painted bright red, her eyes cast down. "I make you happy." She looks up shyly, smiles weakly, slides her hand down her belly, fingers the edge of the kimono.

"No. . .I. . ."

A couple of guys laugh. "Go on. She's not gonna bite ya. Even spics need to get laid."

"I am GI girl. I am corker," she says and takes his arm.

He can't help smiling at this sudden American word. "No,...I, I..." But she is leading him away into the shadows of an adjoining building. When they are alone, he says, "Look, you're very pretty but..." She reaches between his legs and runs the tips of her small fingers across his testicles. He feels himself harden. She continues to stroke him. "I, I can't do this...I'm..." He's breathing hard. It's been a long time.

Her small face looks desperate and hungry as she unbuckles his belt, unzips his fly, her sudden small hands cupping him, caressing him. She whispers, "I please you?"

Out in the sunlight again, he watches his own hands shakily tucking in his shirt. The two soldiers are gone and several others have replaced them. He keeps his eyes down and walks as fast as he can away from the scarred streets back toward the camp. On a corner, he sees the little boy he gave the dime to lighting a cigarette.

The next day and the next, he returns to the place where he first saw her. Sometimes she's with another GI and he thinks he can't bear another man on her, in her. He walks away angry, then comes back in only a few minutes. At these times, he tries to think of Ida waiting for him. But his mind has divided itself into two compartments—one for home and one for this place on the other side of the world. The line between the two is definite and can't be crossed. Ida on one side, so far away, sometimes he can barely remember her face. This other girl on this side, here and now, soft, warm, beautiful, alive. Sometimes, he chooses somewhere in between and goes off with any girl who happens to be available. But he always comes back looking for Michi.

One day, as she drops her robe and bends over him, she says, "You not like other GI." She strokes the skin of his shoulder. "Skin like me. See?" She puts her thin arm against his own.

Before, when he has tried to look into her eyes, she always looked down. Her face wears the same mask he has seen over and over on the streets: exhausted, distant, sad. Eyes too large for cheekbones, barely covered by the thin skin of hunger. And there is something else too that he has seen in the faces of the people on the streets. Now he knows it's despair.

But at this moment, she is looking at him closely, studying *his* face and he finds himself looking down, embarrassed by her scrutiny.

She touches his hair, his eyebrows, the shape of his eyes. "American Japanese?"

"No."

"Not American?"

"Yes. . . no. . .yes, I mean I'm American."

She frowns, confused.

"Negro?"

"No . . .not Negro. Indian. . .Mexican. . .some white." How could he explain?

She shrugs. "You want me be only one for you?"

"Yes," he says, "yes. . .only one."

He brings her gifts. Perfume, chocolate, a length of yellow silk from one of the street sellers. She takes him to her room away from the brothel. Paid for, she says by the Recreation and Amusement Association. "I have food and place to sleep. Better than streets." A flat mat and a rolled pillow are the only furnishings except for a bowl and chopsticks. "Other pan pan live here too." She points to the paper screens on either side of her bed.

"Your English is pretty good."

"Before war, my father teaches me and," she giggles, "I learn fast on street. GIs talk, talk, talk." She puts her thumb and fingers together and makes a chattering mouth.

Johnny smiles. "What did you do before this...?" He glances toward the mat as if it is her whole life.

"Ha! I run. Nowhere to go."

"No. . .I mean before the war."

"Ah. . .I study. When bombs come I run."

"Why did you come here?"

"My father and sister lost." She looks up. "Fire from sky." She turns away. "I make you tea."

22

The place is full of sailors and soldiers. Through a smoky haze, Johnny squeezes into a wall of white and khaki backs and takes two drinks from the bar. In a corner, sitting alone, Michi studies the initials carved in the table.

"Here you go," he says, putting the drinks in front of her. But she doesn't look up.

"Ah, come on now. Don't go all shy on me."

She takes the drink in her hand and lifts her head slightly, then looks from side to side as if she expects someone is watching her. She wants to leave Tokyo. She told him this the night before.

This declaration makes no real difference to Johnny, who, for that moment, just wants to forget that he is a long way from home. Who, in his own way, understands the blurred and arbitrary problems of crossing geographic and blood-born borders. In his drunkenness, he wants to forget America, wants to forget the woman he has left behind. His children. Another world.

"What does this mean?" She points to the carved letters on the table.

He puts down the beers and glances at the carved heart. "Bill P + Clara S."

"Why?" she asks.

"To remember, I suppose."

"Remember wife?"

"Yeh. . .or girlfriend." He leans across the table and lifts her fragile chin in his hand. "I'm never gonna forget you." He pulls out the pearl-handled knife she gave him as a present just the day before, traces the shape of a heart on the table, then carves "JR + M." He stops and looks at her. "What's your last name?"

She shrugs her shoulders.

"Your surname?"

She frowns and shrugs again.

"Your father's name?"

Understanding flickers across her face and she smiles but asks, instead, "You remember Michi?"

"You bet."

When he is finished, she touches the carved heart. "I not wife. . ." She looks at him, eyebrows raised, the question unasked.

"Come on. . .let's get outta here," Johnny says suddenly.

Outside, the sky is so clear, he can make out the Big Dipper. They walk silently along the river, repeating the steps they took the night before, walking until the lights from the waterfront seem like distant reminders of the temporary world they have found themselves in. Under the clear night sky, they repeat their lovemaking again and again.

Later, when they are laying next to each other, he points to a cluster of stars, tries to explain its shape but she seems sad and doesn't bother to look. When he tries to pay her, she stands up and runs away from him back toward the city.

Each day he promises himself that he won't see her again, will stay away from her for good. And each evening he finds himself wandering along the edge of the river until he comes to the building where she stays with the other pan pan girls. She is standing near the entry and this time she greets him wearing a pretty dress and high heels. From a distance, she looks like any American girl ready for a date.

In the quiet of her room, he is able to forget his part in the ruins outside, amazed at her ability to make order and beauty in the middle of destruction. The room's simplicity fills him with hope. A paper screen, a mat, a bowl, a tea set, a pair of chopsticks and a water basin. She survives with only these. He thinks of Charlotte then, her dirt floors and rickety blue chairs. Homesickness swims up.

Michi bows and hands him a leaflet.

He smiles and gives it back to her. "It's in Japanese."

"This tell me how to find family."

"But I thought your family. . ."

"Grandparents still in Nagasaki. I go there."

He thinks of the charred and ruined remains she will find. He wants to stop her, to protect her from the damage, wants to tell her it is too late, that she won't find what she hopes for. And, too, there is another feeling, something he's tried to push back each time it rushes through him. If it's love, he doesn't want to think about it. He has told himself the thing that every soldier does, that it's easy to be somebody else in war. He's told himself

that they're just two lonely people in a defeated, hungry country, trying to get by the best they can. He stays silent.

23

At first, he thought he had the flu. His glands were swollen, his head throbbed, his throat ached. When the rash appeared on Johnny's hands, Lansing told him it was too late, that you have to catch it early. Now here he is in the infirmary feeling like crap with a know-it-all doctor shaking his head. "You guys...don't you read? We've put out more leaflets on VD than we dropped on the Japs before the A-bomb."

Of course, he had seen the pamphlets and signs but, like a lot of other guys, reasoned that it couldn't happen to him. By the time the ugly boil of a thing hidden in the hairy folds of his scrotum appeared, he had forgotten the notices and pamphlets and, in a few weeks, it went away.

"You allergic to anything?" The doctor has prepared a syringe.

"Penicillin."

"How do you know?"

"I caught some bug before I shipped out and they gave it to me. I broke out in a bad rash."

The doctor looks at him over the rim of his glasses. "Hmmm..that's pretty unusual. Haven't seen much resistance to it so far." He puts the syringe down. "Look, I'll level with you. Penicillin is all we have to treat this thing. You're in the secondary stage of syphilis. The symptoms you're having now will probably come and go. They can last several months, though. If it's left untreated, it will move into a period of latency."

"What's that mean?"

"No real symptoms. You might feel vaguely uncomfortable; it's easy to assume you're okay."

"But?"

"But you're not. Sooner or later the disease starts to move into your tissue." The doctor washes his hands, picks up a sheet of paper.

Johnny shifts on the examination table, stares at the paper in the doctor's hand. "What happens then?"

"It varies from patient to patient. Sometimes it doesn't progress beyond the secondary stage. Sometimes it takes years, then...it can attack your organs, your bones, your skin. It can enter almost any part of your body. Read this." He hands him the piece of paper. "It should answer some of your questions. I'll leave some aspirin for your headache with the nurse."

As Johnny tucks his shirt in and buckles his belt, the doctor comes back in and tosses a yellow envelope on the examination table.

"What's that?"

"Prophylactics. You married?"

"Yeh. I'm shipping out in two weeks."

"That's too bad."

The last time he goes to her room, she isn't there. He's prepared to tell her about the VD. Even had it all written out in Japanese. He wants to be sure she gets herself checked out. He wants to believe she is not responsible for it, that maybe some soldier brought it with him and gave it to one of the other girls he was with earlier on when he couldn't find her. He thinks about where it came from, where it started. Was it something some whore gave a man or did some soldier give it to some girl? And where did he get it? How far back did he have to go in his blame for this thing that would lie inside him like a bad secret and then rear up and create havoc at some unexpected moment?

He looks around, scared that she will come back and scared that she won't. In the empty corner where her mat used to be is a shiny black box with an envelope on top. When he stoops down to look at it, he sees his name clearly written in swooping black letters. He thinks another American probably wrote it since the writing in the note is abruptly different from that on the envelope and he squints at the stick-like lines.

Dear Johnny Rain,

I try to write English. I am not pan pan. I will go to Nagasaki before you receive this. Do not worry. It is best. I have not forgotten you. These are for you.

Michi

He turns the envelope over in his hands. No return address. Inside the box is the tea set and her chopsticks in an ebony case wrapped in the yellow silk he had given her. The dragon kimono is folded neatly under the box.

As he gathers up the soft fabric and brings it to his face, he finds himself crying for the first time since he was a boy. He cries for Michi, for Ida. He cries for the dead. He cries for himself.

August 15, 1975

I've been thinking about war and how people begin to measure their lives by it. As they try to capture some moment in the past they mark it before or after whatever war their generation fought. Now my country is finally at the end of another one. The newspapers are full of hope again but the damage has been done.

As I watch the soldiers returning, I realize that this country is once again in that uncertain place where the past meets the future. For some, there's a margin of relief and possibility; for others, the beginning of long-delayed grief and terrible disappointment, the place where the person you've left behind, the person you've imagined in your most forsaken hours, stands before you, a flesh and blood reminder of the life you had or could have had before everything changed. It's a place where you decide to tell the truth about your separate lives...or you don't. It's the place where my parents found themselves in 1946.

I don't know, maybe my father didn't get the letter about the explosion or about how Mama's parents died. Maybe she never wrote it. But if she didn't write to tell him, I imagine she had probably rehearsed it over and over in her head, preparing for the day he would come home and find out the truth.

And what about him? Did he ever write and tell her there was someone else? Tell her he was bringing home a box full of memories she could never share? And later, did he ever try to find Michi or write to tell her the truth?

All I know is that there was a day when he came walking up the road and into our lives. When I try to locate the place where it began to fall apart, it must have been then, on the very day they both hoped to make a new beginning. The waiting wife, the returned soldier standing

there with their separate secrets, watching their future go flat, all the hope and possibility seeping out of it like a slow leak in a new tire.

24

It's a sunny day and Ida is hoping it will stay that way, at least until the clothes are dry. She looks at the cloudless blue sky as she sticks a clothespin in her mouth and stretches the next diaper tightly across the line, then pegs its corner firmly to the last one. As she bends down to the basket, she suddenly raises her head, alert, like a startled animal. But before she can turn around, he is behind her, covering her eyes with his hands, whispering into her ear, "I'm home."

She drops the clean diapers she's gathered and spins around. Before she can look into his eyes, he is laughing, picking her up by the waist, swinging her around. When Charlotte comes running out to the porch, he puts Ida down and picks her up and swings her around too. Then, Tommy appears and Johnny shakes his hand and asks where his babies are. Tommy tries to smile but just manages to look anxious. He waits until Ida is out of sight, then pulls Johnny away from the house to tell him the bad news.

They move through the afternoon like strangers, glancing at each other from short distances while the others make small talk. Lucy and Raymond have arrived and everyone has a million questions. What was the ship like? His plane? How long did it take to get there? What did he see?

Ida watches him switching a wooden match back and forth, back and forth, from one side of his mouth to the other. Chewing it to shreds. His answers are light-hearted and general. The ship was big, the weather was good. He was glad to be back on American soil.

He is still handsome, still trying to smile, but something had changed when Charlotte carried the baby out to where Tommy and he were standing, she had seen that look on Johnny's face, a cross between pure joy and bare anguish. She knew that look in all its confusion, knew it because she wore it every day.

And he watches her watching him, her face unreadable in the shadowed corners she seems drawn to. After Tommy told him about the explosion, when Charlotte put the baby in his arms, there was a moment when what was left might have been saved, when they might have shared their grief and their joy. Ida had stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder as he kissed the chubby cheeks of their daughter but when he looked at her, she turned away.

The next morning, a soft puff of his smoky breath escapes and drifts across Ida's cheek and that is enough to wake her. She isn't sure whether to be thankful or afraid now that her bad dreams have gone. They seem to have disappeared with his arrival. Now, lying so close to him, she wonders if it's some kind of sign, this dreamless sleep, instead of the confusing nightmare warnings that always left her restless and afraid.

Some time in the night, he has draped his arm cross her belly and she hasn't pulled away. She's willed herself to stay, wondering if this is the truth she's looking for, this waking security of his solid, brown skin against her own freckled whiteness. And there are the gifts: the perfect strand of pearls, the delicate tea set, the beautiful silk robe. He has offered her a future, told her they will buy a house on the GI bill, that he will find a good job. Surely these are evidence of something. Her acceptance of these things must be proof of her own love for this husband, this stranger, this man's naked easy body next to her own.

Another breath and he pulls her toward him. For a moment she allows herself to be held in his warmth, remembering his mouth hot on her skin, his hands on her breasts, the full weight of him rising and falling above her.

She waits.

"Michi," he whispers, "Michi..."

Her breath catches and she tenses into stillness until he turns back to sleep. She watches the thin skin of his eyelids quivering toward his dreams, toward the hidden things he has brought back from the war.

When, at last, he turns away from her, she slips like silk out of his arms and into the kimono waiting on the floor where she dropped it the night before.

1956-1963

Black Holes

25

This is the place where I enter the story. The place where my memories seem clearest. I am eleven years old, watching Silver and my mother sitting at her dresser outlining their eyes, swooping the corners up, then drawing their mouths into strange little red tulip shapes. I help Mama push the chopsticks crisscross through the tight bun she has pulled her hair into and Silver does the same to mine, then bobby-pins a plastic rose next to my ear. We giggle and bow and walk in short little steps and I hear my mother whisper to Silver, "That's what those Jap women did. I read that the men like that—their women following six paces behind."

When my dad comes home earlier than expected, Silver, Mama and I are drinking tea from the little Japanese bowls Mama usually keeps hidden. We are laughing because Silver says if any man ever expects her to follow behind him, she'll give him a boot up the backside.

I watch my father's face slide from hope to sorrow to anger as he looks first at Silver, then at me, then at my mother. Without a word, he yanks the chopsticks out of her hair then takes the bowl out of her hand and throws it against the wall and says flatly, "When are you gonna stop torturing yourself?"

With my mother's muffled accusations thumping against their closed bedroom door, Silver takes out the mixing bowl and tells me baking is a good way to get rid of the blues. As I sniff back my tears, she hands me a hanky and says, "Grown-ups don't have all the answers, kiddo. Your folks have been through a lot."

We mix sugar and butter, crack eggs, measure flour, add vanilla and take turns beating the dickens out of the batter. When we're done, Silver hands me the wooden spoon, sticky with cookie dough and tells me not to believe everything I read in the magazines about what makes a happy marriage. She has come for a Christmas visit all the way from Walla Walla, Washington and she is the most unusual person I've ever met with her silver hair in a French twist and her soft, round face; big laugh; and bright clothes. When we picked her up at the bus station, she took one look at me and declared we were "kindred spirits" and I knew it was true. Inside me was a big bold spirit just itching to get out.

"I don't get it," I say. "Aren't they supposed to love each other? What's wrong with her?"

Silver dries her hands on a tea towel and shakes her head. "With her? Maybe that's where you've got it wrong, kiddo. Marriage is a two-way street. If one person goes down the wrong side of the road, they're bound to get hit."

This is when I realize Silver knows more about my parents' past than just the teasing memories of their wedding that they have all laughed about since she arrived.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I say, hoping she will reveal some perfect truth that will help me understand.

"Look, I'll say this much. . .they loved you enough to stay together against some pretty tough odds."

"What odds?"

"Ah, well. . .now, that, you'll have to ask them." She pours me a glass of milk and puts a plate of cookies in front of me. "The war changed everybody, even people with the best intentions. Try not to be too hard on 'em."

But cookies don't dissolve my feeling that my family is different, that my parents aren't quite right. I only have to look at my feet to know that something is wrong. I have come to think of myself as the girl with no shoes. This is not quite true; I have shoes but often choose not to wear them because they are cheap and a size too big so that I won't outgrow them too quickly. My second-hand clothes hang on my thin body like bad curtains on a small window. Mama tries to make them fit by making me stand on a chair while she pins hems and seams but I can feel her anger as she pulls roughly at the fabric and orders me to stand still.

When the alterations are done, I always have a small clutch of hope as I try the re-made garments on like new skin. I want to be transformed, to find a version of myself that fits with the other kids at school. When we visit Charlotte and Lucy, they always try to add a bow or new button to cheer me up, but no extra trinkets can help me shake the feeling that I am inhabiting a part of someone else's discarded life. And clothes can't change the fact that I have crooked teeth and straight badly cut hair that always seems to be in my eyes. I am often afraid to go to school. Afraid that if the other kids look closely, they'll

recognize their own cast-offs. Afraid that they will see me naked and poor underneath the alterations. Afraid that they will see that my mother doesn't care.

Except for the clothes, our poverty is private. We could probably pass for any other struggling young family. We live outside Rio Rosa, not far from where Mama and Tommy grew up. They were never able to go back to Rosebud. The paper Tommy finally signed after my grandfather died said that Uncle Sam could keep the land until 1970, so Daddy borrowed on the GI Bill and together they bought ten acres that nobody seemed to want. The only buildings left standing were the remains of an old stagecoach stop and some broken down horse stalls.

Raymond showed them how to make adobe bricks out of mud and straw and pretty soon they had a regular production line. Even some of the neighboring ranchers came and helped out. By the end of 1946 Mama and Daddy had a house, and soon after, they knocked down the old stalls and built a little place for Tommy almost in our back yard. Even now, he jokes that he always feels more comfortable around horse manure than he does around most people anyway.

The land had some run-down orchards on it and Mama set out most mornings to tend to the twisted old trees, hoping that they would someday yield fruit. Tommy told me that when I was little she'd rig up a sash and take me with her balanced between the saddle horn and her stomach. Over the years, her attention to the trees paid off. The orchards started producing enough fruit for canning and every summer the kitchen fills with mason jars and the hot sugary smell of fruit syrup. After all the canning is done, the jars of apricots, peaches and cherries are lined up in the root cellar along with green beans, tomatoes, and bread and butter pickles from the vegetable garden. We have chickens and fresh milk from our own cow and, when he can, Dad brings home beef from one of the ranches where he

and Tommy fill in as ranch hands. And Mama is good at making ends meet. A frying hen for dinner stretches into soup or a casserole; a roast becomes stew.

On the outside, at least, we look hopeful, hard-working. But, while there is enough food, I can never shake off the other hunger that's hovered in our house ever since I can remember.

So now, in the kitchen with Silver's comforting words and the smell of fresh baked Christmas cookies still in the air, I want to tell her about the cold silences. I want to tell her that all the laughter and smiles are just politeness, that the light seems to sift away when my mother and father find themselves together. That what she's just witnessed between my parents is not surprising since they've been on their best behavior because she's here. Most of all, I want her to make it go away. To make them happy again like they were when they got married. But I don't say anything. Instead, I push my feet further under the table hoping Silver won't notice the run-down heels of my shoes.

I cut vegetables, peel potatoes, set the table under Silver's direction and eventually, Mama comes out of her room and sits down in a kitchen chair. Silver puts a cup of coffee in front of her but she doesn't seem to notice it. Daddy and Tommy have gone out to chop down a Christmas tree up toward Apache summit so it's just the three of us there in the silent warming kitchen. It feels like the moment just before a disaster when you know something bad is coming but you're just not sure what it is or when it will hit. I've felt it before but mostly it ends with Mama in the bedroom and Daddy slamming out of the house.

"Men. . . " Silver says, finally.

Mama looks up as if she's just realized we're there.

"It's hard to say what they want." Silver pours herself a cup of coffee and sits down by Mama.

For a minute, I think she's talking about herself. When she first arrived I heard her tell Mama that Lansing had promised he'd leave his wife and marry her but when the war was over she never heard from him again. But then I see the look on Mama's face and know that Silver's talking about what happened earlier. The chopsticks. The broken teacup.

I watch Mama, hoping maybe she'll laugh and she and Silver will go back to the light-hearted chatter they shared before Daddy walked in. But she doesn't laugh. She doesn't even smile. Instead, she cuts a look that says *not in front of Darcy.* It's the same look she uses when Daddy tries to talk to her about why she's mad at him.

When the men come back smelling of cold air and pinesap, bragging about the perfect tree they got, Silver and I go out to the porch to look at it but Mama stays where she is. Daddy proudly holds up the tree so we can see how big it is and I touch its cold prickling softness, the snowy air biting at my bare fingers. Silver asks if they're sure it will fit through the door and Tommy says, "Ye of little faith. . ." When we all go tromping back into the house talking about how we'll probably have to cut a good foot off the bottom of the tree so it won't scrape the ceiling, Mama doesn't turn around from where she is standing at the kitchen sink.

At supper, Tommy and Daddy pass bowls and plates and keep up a good stream of talk about their plans for extending the orchards. Mama mostly stays in the kitchen, coming to the table only to offer another bowl of mashed potatoes or a fresh plate of biscuits but she never looks at Daddy and pretty soon he stops talking. Silver tries to break the tension by joking with me and Tommy about snooping into our presents before Christmas morning and we play along.

By the time pie is served, something has changed. I can't name what it is but I can feel it and I know it has nothing to do with Mama and Daddy. It's like some kind of electric charge has seeped in and filled the space between Tommy and Silver. They're both wearing a peculiar expression as if they've just noticed the house is on fire but they're stuck in their seats and can't do anything about it. And it doesn't take long before they're spooning large bites of apple pie into each other's mouth and laughing like the rest of us aren't even there.

After supper, Tommy offers to help Silver with the dishes and I can hear them cutting up in the kitchen as I start to unwrap the Christmas tree ornaments Mama keeps in a cardboard box. But Mama disappears into the bedroom again when Daddy goes outside to saw off the bottom of the tree.

Once he drags the tree back in and props it up in the wooden stand he's made, Mama comes into the living room, her eyes puffy and red from crying. He looks up and says, "Does this look straight to you?" as if nothing happened.

Mama steps back and eyes the tree and says, "No, just a little more to the right."

After he adjusts it, he comes over and puts his arm around her and I hold my breath, waiting for her to shrug it off, waiting for her to turn around and head back to the bedroom. But she doesn't. She stands there with him and they look at the perfect tree and I let myself breathe again.

Just then, Silver and Tommy drift into the living room with a tray of small glasses and a bottle of brandy that Silver brought. As Tommy pours and Silver serves, their hands brush and my parents exchange a look of surprise. The house is filled with that piney Christmas tree smell and when everyone says "Cheers!" and "Merry Christmas!" and they all lift their glasses, I pray to God that this feeling will hold.

And it does, for a while at least. Daddy and Tommy circle the tree with lights, Mama and Silver hang the ornaments and I drape the tinsel. When it's all decorated, Daddy tops the tree with the angel I made when I was six and chases me around the room trying to toss leftover tinsel into my hair while Mama puts the presents out. Silver serves coffee and I get cocoa with marshmallows on top.

Mama tells me, as she always does, that I can only open one present but I have to wait for Christmas morning for the rest. And, as always, I choose Silver's. Even though she had never met me until this visit, she's been sending me gifts every Christmas that I can remember and she always seems to know just the right thing. There are three presents for me under the tree and I've already explored the shape, size and weight of the one from Mama and Daddy and I'm pretty sure it's a doll. Tommy, I think, has given me a new saddle blanket. But Silver's is a book. I feel its weight and edges through the cheerful wrapping paper covered in little Santa Clauses and I tear at the paper until the title is clear: *Star Gazing.* I thumb through the shiny pages full of colorful drawings and pictures of stars and planets.

"Astronomy. That's what they call it," Silver says. "Your Mama told me you're always looking out the window so I figured you might as well know what you're looking at." I trace my fingers over the rings of Saturn on the cover and open the book. On the first page, she has written:

Christmas, 1956.

Darcy,

Keep watching the sky!

Love,

Silver

After that, the adults seem to drift away and I'm lost in a sea of stars. I fall asleep wondering how some can gather on the same milky path. I don't understand what keeps them there when millions of others are scattered across the universe.

In the middle of the night, I wake to my mother yelling outside and when I rush to my bedroom window, I can see her standing in the snow in the black kimono, waving her arms wildly like an angry black angel, screaming, "Why don't you make love to me? *Me. . . Ida*? I'm not your God-damned geisha! I'm your wife!" But my father can't hear her; he is already in the truck coaxing the engine into a whining slow start.

After he is gone, she just stands there in the gathering cold, snowflakes drifting into her hair. I want to help, want to run to her, to tell her it is all a mistake, that Daddy loves her, that I love her. But before I can turn from the window, she drops the robe in the snow and runs naked into the house.

26

Christmas day comes and goes. Mama never comes out of the bedroom and Tommy's stuck doing the chores since Daddy hasn't come back from wherever he escaped to. Still, Silver carries on as if we will all sit down like a big happy family. She makes stuffing and puts the turkey in the oven. Then, she shows me how to make pumpkin pie and yeast rolls and teaches me how to baste the turkey. When the cooking is done we set the table with red Christmas candles and holler, "Dinner's ready!" but only Tommy comes stomping in from the snow-covered porch.

He makes a big deal of how good the turkey looks and how great everything smells and Silver gives him a big kiss on his cheek. I can tell they are trying hard to include me when all they want to do is look at each other. They ask about my presents but I haven't opened them since Mama and Daddy aren't around and anyway I don't want to talk, not with Mama closed in behind the bedroom door and Daddy somewhere out in the cold.

I spend the rest of the day reading the star book and worrying about where my father is. Tommy and Silver do the dishes again and then get out the checkers. I can hear them whispering, trying not to laugh. Pretty soon, Silver comes in and sits by me on the sofa and says not to worry, that grown-ups argue all the time but eventually come to their senses. She asks if I need anything and I shrug, thinking about what it would be like to have a family that holds to each other like the stars in the Milky Way.

After one more game of checkers, I hear the back door close and when I look out the window, I see them heading to Tommy's place.

Just before dark, Daddy comes swaying through the kitchen. When he tries to stop, he loses his balance and slides down to his knees next to the kitchen table. At first I think he's hurt, then I see the bottle in his hand. When I kneel down beside him, I can smell the beer on his breath. He has gone away before but I have never seen him drunk.

"Looks like your old man's in the doghouse again, huh, Darcy," he slurs.

This declaration is usually my cue to side with him like he's a naughty boy who's in trouble because of some mischief that only he and I understand. It has always been our connection. Us against her. But this time it's different. I remember what Silver said about the two-way street and going down the wrong side of the road. I remember my mother naked in the snow. I remember how he drove away.

The bottle falls from his hand and rolls under the table and he reaches up and touches my cheek with his cold hand. "I messed up Christmas."

I look closely at his face with its rough stubble and wind-burned crevices and the little lines at the corners of his eyes from squinting in the sun. When he says he's sorry I

know it would be hard for my mother to leave that face, those words. I take his hand away and try on my new-found boldness. "Tell Mama, not me," I say.

27

Somehow, Silver never manages to leave. It all happens so easy and natural, we almost forget that she hasn't always been with us. Two weeks after Christmas, Tommy carries her suitcase over to his place. In February, she sends for her things in Walla Walla and one weekend in the Spring, they drive down to Juarez and come back married.

Afterwards, while I am helping her rearrange Tommy's little place from a ranch hand's quarters into a home, she tells me that meeting him was like getting hit by a freight train; there was no stopping it so she decided if she was going to get flattened anyway, she might as well settle in and enjoy it.

In the early spring, when the earth begins to thaw and everybody gets busy with the orchards, I feel, for the first time, that we are a real family. Mama and Silver start taking early morning rides and they come in from the cold chatting and laughing. Dad, Uncle Tommy and I set out smudge pots under the cherry trees in case there's another freeze and I study the branches, thinking about the blossoms that will appear like magic one sunny

morning. But the air hovers somewhere between rain and ice and Daddy says it's a gamble growing fruit. Tommy jokes that it's cheaper than cattle and you don't have to herd the trees, then he lights a cigarette and hands Dad the flask from his back pocket and they both take a tug. As we walk back to the truck, Daddy puts his arm around me and says, "We've done all we can. Now we just have to wait."

When we go back the next morning to check on the pots, Daddy just shakes his head. The ice has won.

Not long after that, we have a family meeting and once we're all around the kitchen table, he stands up and tells us he's been offered a job with the government. He says his old buddy Lansing set it up and that he applied just before Christmas. He says there might be government men around town asking questions about him. It's called a security check, he says, standard government procedure.

I watch Silver and Tommy exchange surprised glances as he tells them we'll probably be leaving in August.

A silence settles into the house in the months that follow. Tommy stops joking around and Silver just seems sad. But there aren't any more fights between my parents until that day when we are cleaning and packing. I have beaten the dusty rugs, hung the mothballed clothes and I've found my father's pocketknife. I don't know it then, but in that finding, I've reopened the wound that had been bandaged over by the decision to move. The wound that had festered and infected our lives since Daddy came back from the war.

After Mama grabs it out of my hand and storms back into the house, I wait for the door to slam and begin folding and stacking the clothes. She tells me to put my father's uniform in the box for the Salvation Army. I lift it to my face and breathe in the cedar and mothball smell. Underneath is my father's scent, a blend of tobacco and sweat and I don't

understand how she can throw it away. I take the uniform into the house knowing she'll be mad but I don't care. Some things are meant to be kept.

There isn't any supper on the table and Mama has shut herself in the bedroom. Silver and Tommy made an excuse earlier and headed up to Charlotte's when Mama got on her cleaning rampage, so, the house is silent as I look back through the screen door at the failing sun gathering up the last of the day's dust. As the light seeps out of the house, I stay in the kitchen listening like a scared rabbit. That's when I noticed my father standing dead still, looking out the front window. The silence and smoke hang familiar and heavy in the air and suddenly I remember the knife and I know why she didn't want me to have it. The memory is as clear as can be.

I am only three or four and I am watching them even then. Daddy taking a long, deep drag on his cigarette, squinting into the sun toward the women. And Mama stepping back, looking at the knife, then at Daddy, her thin white arm rising toward him. And there I am, running out from behind a tree, my small bare feet moving fast on the hot dirt path to where my father stands just before he leaps like a dancer away from the thin, silver line stretching from my mother's hand toward his heart.

28

That year, we don't know that we are closing the ends of a circle, moving from the place where the atom first melted the earth to the place where a bunch of smart guys got together and created the recipe for destruction.

We travel like gypsies who pile everything they own into one vehicle, my mother having arranged for all bodily necessities so we won't have to stop anywhere and spend money. Food, blankets, first-aid kit, pee can. This way of traveling seems to be the one issue on which my parents agree. Daddy likes to drive without stopping and Mama likes to make a journey as cheap and conflict-free as possible.

I am stuck in the back with the traveling supplies and Daddy has his seat way back. Mama sits silent, her head turned toward the window. Except for the whine of the Studebaker's engine, there is nothing to break the monotony. When I kick the back of the seat to let them know I am crowded, Mama turns around to give me a whack but mostly misses, tangling her fingers in my hair. "Listen, sister, you're getting too big for your

britches." She looks at me for a moment as if seeing for the first time that I am not a little girl anymore.

I moan and make a big production out of shifting around the stuff piled up on the other side of the seat. I glance out the window, wondering if we'll ever get there and that's when I see that the road has narrowed to a skinny, treacherous zigzag, the edge of it dropping off into a deep red canyon. Brilliant and naked, its walls are layered in rusty red and purple like colorful folds of papery skin. Scrubby pines and sage dot the canyon floor and the top of the mesa. A perfect blue sky abruptly shoots out across the cliffs as we climb higher and higher.

"Didn't I tell you it was way up high? I'll bet it's eight or nine thousand feet. You can't see the town till you're in it." Dad lights a cigarette and tosses the match out the window. "You can see why they decided to make the A-bomb up here. Nobody would suspect. See them cliffs? Look way down there. That's where Indians used to live. They built apartment houses right into the cliff face."

I sit up then and pay attention since these are the only words he has spoken since we stopped for lunch three hours before. Then, he had told me that mesas were mountains with the tops cut off. I had watched him sitting on a big flat rock as Mama spread out a tablecloth on the cold autumn ground. She had got up before the sun to fry chicken and make potato salad and iced tea but Dad didn't seem to notice the picnic lunch as he leaned his head back and inhaled a deep drag on his cigarette, watching the smoke spiral off into the cold air. His bare left arm was reddish brown from leaning it out the window. He still refuses to wear a jacket although it is the end of September.

I feel carsick as I stare down into the canyon at the catacomb of the ruins of what looks like two or three story adobe buildings pressed against the cliff face. "Where did they go?" I ask.

"Who?" he says.

"The Indians."

"Nobody knows. Maybe drought or some sickness. Or maybe somebody attacked them. Some say the Indians in the pueblos around here are their kin. If you go on back in there, there's old ceremonial houses and stuff."

As the car continues to climb, I think about what my father knows and how little he says. I move my jaws up and down so my ears will pop. Although I make exaggerated teeth chattering noises, he seems to enjoy the mountain air as it snaps through his open window. The flat walls of the canyon spread out and deepen the gorge as we follow the curling road that seems to lead to the sky. The car kicks into a lower gear and the air changes to a cold, dry blue as the scrubby pines disappear into fat evergreens. We are almost at the top and still no town.

Then, suddenly, the road flattens and we slow to a stop at a chain-link fence with a big closed gate. It reminds me of a prison with its guard tower leaning toward us. A guy in a uniform comes over to the car and Dad pulls out some papers and hands them through the open window. The man looks them over solemnly then says, "Welcome to the hill."

Dad salutes and, as we drive off through the gate, he is suddenly talking as if we've been having a conversation all along, as if six hours of silence in the car hasn't made us all nervous. He is telling us that everything is top secret in this town, that everything's hush hush, that he'll need a badge to get into the area where he'll be working.

My mother turns toward me and says, "Everything will be different here. The government takes care of everything, even your house. Your daddy will have a regular paycheck. It'll be a new start."

The smoothly paved two-lane road is lined with tall pine trees and a small airstrip runs parallel to it. Just beyond it, rows and rows of houses, all lined up like soldiers. They look alike, small one-story frame tract homes, in varying colors of light green, blue, and gray.

Mama leans back again and pats me on the arm and Daddy grins at me through the rearview mirror and says, "Yeh, you'll be right at home with all them eggheads. I heard there is more nuclear scientists up here than you can shake a stick at."

I don't know what a nuclear scientist is and this sudden happy outlook of my parents only irritates me because I have no reason to believe it will last. I look out the window at the red and gold of autumn maples and aspens in the yards of the houses and I am overwhelmed with homesickness. I miss Charlotte, Lucy, Raymond, Uncle Tommy and Aunt Silver and the tears that I've been holding back all day finally come.

I hated everything about leaving. I hated the awkward handshakes and last-minute embraces of the men, the lingering hugs of the women. Most of all, I hated the look on Charlotte's face that said good-bye for good. It felt like somebody died but nobody could talk about it.

Everyone was standing in the early morning chill as Daddy closed the trunk and checked the trailer hitch. Mama was about to get in but turned back and grabbed Charlotte like she wanted to bring her along and I could see Charlotte's shoulders heaving. Then Daddy walked around the Studebaker and the trailer one last time with Tommy, checking to make sure nothing would fly off down the road. When the time finally came to leave and the

car was all loaded up and I was settling into my little corner of the back seat, Silver tapped on my window and handed me a twirling baton tied with red ribbons at both ends. "Early Christmas," was all she said and then she turned around and ran back in the house.

I swear, if that car had been a four-door, I would have jumped out right then and there and refused to leave. I had told her it was my secret fantasy. I figured that if I had to move to a new place, I could re-make myself into someone different. I would be a majorette and march proudly in front of the school band like I'd seen the girls do at the Mayday parade in Alamogordo.

The card attached to the ribbon said, "Be a star!" and as we finally drove off, I pulled a scratchy army blanket up over my head and cried like someone really had died. I just didn't know who.

29

Despite my homesickness, there is a certain kind of rightness about our move to a place so steeped in secrecy, a place where there is no room for shame or self-reflection. A place where silence is normal. In the secret city, children don't know what their fathers do each day, and wives, if they know, don't let on. Sure, there are rumors just like in any small town but they mostly sway toward the silly and strange. All the kids talk about the monster that's supposed to hang out at the cemetery, some mutation of man and beast, a lab experiment gone bad, a huge white hairy thing, that supposedly roams around scaring teenagers who are stupid enough to go parking in the graveyard. The kids laugh it off but most don't press their luck by going out there. Living in a place whose sole purpose is to create atomic weapons makes me think a lot about secrets and how destructive they can be and I can't help wondering if there is some truth in it.

Maybe that story started with a botched experiment of some kind. Maybe something went terribly wrong. Maybe there is someone out there, abandoned, wishing for

death. I keep thinking it might have started like my parents' story. Good intentions gone wrong, a mutation of lies and blame. A monster that roams the marriage.

I try hard not to hate this place. The odd thing is that Mama loves it. I watch her remaking herself on a street lined with cloned apartment houses, all painted the same ugly grayish green, all with the same floor plan and the same tiny patch of yard and I wonder if someday, some father will point to the ruins of this place and say that some people lived here but nobody really knows what happened to them.

But Mama can't get over the fact that she can just pick up the phone and call the government for a light bulb, that she has enough money to buy a new couch and a blonde veneer bedroom suite. She even dyes her hair blonde and buys pointy padded bras to wear under her cheerful new dresses. She has coffee with other women wearing the same hairdos, the same sweater sets. She seems to be happy as she lights her menthol cigarettes and reads her magazines. And she and my father manage to move past each other without too much static.

But to me, it sometimes feels as if no one really lives here on top of these mesas, that we are all just visitors. There are single houses for scientists, duplexes for professionals, quadruplexes and sundts for the worker bees like my dad. Little ghettos of order and position. I learn these categories quickly my first day of school when someone asks me where I live and then walks away when I tell them. The word *sundt* feels ugly and strange in my mouth. I find myself exaggerating the pronunciation with a German accent to indicate how silly I think it is. No one laughs.

The labs where all the scientists work are huge unpainted cement buildings that stretch beyond tall barbed-wire gates out onto the mesas. They are the place my father disappears into every evening. But he's no scientist, just a security guard. He seems to like

the privacy it gives him, and sometimes, I imagine him wandering alone along the gray cement hallways, peeking into secret rooms with his flashlight, checking secret locks with nothing but the sound of his own footsteps echoing off the blank walls and floors. Or maybe that isn't how he spends his nights; maybe he isn't a guard at all. It's hard to tell in the secret city.

Before we moved, neighbors in Rio Rosa had whispered quietly over their fences about strangers in dark suits coming around asking questions about our family. At first they thought Daddy might be in trouble but when they heard he was up for some kind of job with the government, everyone put in a good word. Our neighbor, Mrs. Chavez, said she told them that daddy was a war hero and that he deserved better than to be stuck in this dumpy old town for the rest of his life. Looking back, I think she was really hoping Mama's life would be better somewhere else. And maybe Mama and Daddy were too.

I remember when Lansing came for a visit, they didn't know I was listening but I heard my dad say he didn't think he'd pass the physical for the job. Lansing opened another bottle of beer and handed it to my dad and said, "I've taken care of that, pal. I have access to the records."

30

I stand shivering on the side of the road with the other majorettes, all of us wearing skimpy sequined leotards. The band, in green and gold uniforms, has begun to line up in the field on the side of the road behind us filling the air with squeaky clarinets and awkward trumpet blurts as they warm up. Occasionally, I step away from the others and toss my baton toward the cold, blue sky. I love watching it fall toward my waiting hand, a shiny instant of energy. I know it isn't the piano or violin, or ballet, the things most of the girls do, but I'm good at it. When I am alone practicing, I sometimes imagine throwing the baton so high that it stays up there and makes itself at home in a cluster of stars.

A kid with a trumpet blurts a loud announcing blast, the kind they play at football games just before everybody yells, "Charge!" and the band falls into place. A loud whistle draws our attention to the drum major, a tall skinny boy who seems to weave in the cold October wind in his high plumed helmet. The other majorettes and I form a straight line behind him as his white-gloved hand raises a large tasseled baton and he shouts smartly,

"Left, right, back, kick!" We all respond in unison, our bodies turning sharply to each command, then kicking forward and up as if to march grandly away. But, as we hear the snare drums' lead-in, we march in place.

The drum major, soldier-stiff, blows his whistle again and jabs his baton up toward the sky, a signal for the whole band to be ready. When he dramatically raises both arms, reeds and mouthpieces move to lips and a loud but slightly offbeat version of "Hail to the Chief" begins. The drum major,lifts his baton up, then down in time with the music and we majorettes begin our routine of figure-eights and cartwheel turns.

Though we have all practiced over and over for this moment, I am not prepared for the sight of the black limousine convertible moving toward us. When it stops in front of the band, my heart stops too. The President of the United States of America is only three or four yards away from us and even more handsome than we imagined with his thick red hair blowing in the October wind.

I forget my cold legs as I march in place with the other girls. Without thinking about it, I suddenly step forward and raise my baton toward the sky. Then I bow deeply and, as I raise my body back up, I toss the baton as high as I can. The President smiles directly at me just as the baton plummets toward earth and I forget that I'm supposed to catch it.

"Did you see him?" I holler as I slam the door. "He was so close I could have touched him." I put down my baton and take off my coat but Mama isn't there. I want to tell her about his red hair. I want to tell her that he looked right at me and smiled. Most of all, I want to tell her I'd missed the highest toss I ever tried, right in front of the President of the United States and I want her to hold me and tell me it isn't the end of the world. But I know

that even if she was there, she'd just look at me like she wanted to say something but couldn't think of what it might be.

I wash my hands, pour a glass of milk and plop down at the kitchen table. In my head, I am telling my mother the whole story, chattering away like I used to with Silver. When I pick up the newspaper proclaiming *Kennedy to Visit Hill*, a thin blue envelope slides to the edge of the table. It's addressed to my father but Charlotte's address has been crossed out and ours is scribbled next to it. The stamps are pictures of the Queen of England but the postmark is blurred so I can't tell when it was sent. The return address is from somewhere in Australia. My heart cartwheels and drops as I peek inside. But it's empty.

That's when I notice the bits of blue paper scattered on the floor. I bend and gather them up, clear the table, and begin piecing them together into the shape of my father's past.

28 Allington Street
Katoomba
NSW, Australia

4 August, 1962

Dear Mr. Rain,

It is my sad duty to tell you of Michi Mitsu Walker's death last April. I don't know if this will reach you but I wanted you to know that she remembered you fondly. Her last wish was that I send this photograph.

My mother and I came to live in Australia in 1955 when she married my stepfather, William Walker. He has helped me find you.

We live in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. My mother told me the red cliffs here would have reminded you of your homeland, a place I have often imagined.

I wish you and your family only good will and would welcome a letter from you.

Best Regards,

Hoshi Walker

I look inside the envelope and search the floor and the wastebasket but I can't find the picture.

31

There is a brief moment of fury as my mother slams around in her grief. Cupboards, dishes, furniture, doors are not safe. And I stay clear too, hiding my head under my pillow, biting back my own naked fear. As for my father...he just gets in the truck and we don't see him again for days.

Then, one afternoon, I see the omen I have somehow been waiting for: my father's car in front of our building, abandoned at a strange angle, half on the scruffy grass, half on the road.

I take the front stairs two at a time and, when I open the front door, I hear him saying, "I didn't know, Ida . . .I swear I didn't know. How many times do I have to tell you, for God's sake?"

He looks up at me from where he is kneeling in the bathroom, his eyes filled with shame. As he closes the door, I can see my mother's hand rise up from the linoleum floor

as if to wave him away. "I always knew," she screams. "I always knew!" And the snapshot floats past him and lands at my feet.

The face looking shyly back at me could be my own, a girl with dark straight hair, her eyes mostly covered by her bangs. She's wearing a white blouse and a pleated skirt but she's too thin and the clothes hang on her like they belong to someone else. On the back, someone has printed neatly. *Your daughter, Hoshi, 1962.*

That night I lie awake, guarding my mother's sleep, imagining her rising, moving to the bathroom, closing the door. When I finally do sleep, I dream the same dream over and over, a continuous loop of silent walks down a long, white hallway to the smudgy crimson imprint of her body. When I reach it, I kneel and begin scrubbing. The brush makes no noise. The water in the bucket turns black red. When I wake up, I know I have to leave.

1975

Collapsing Stars

32

Silver waves her large hand across the concourse crowded with arriving and departing passengers. She is plumper than I remember but her face is still the same, soft and full of hope. It's the face that seemed to be always there when I skinned a knee, needed to talk, or had to hear bad news. It's the face that should have been my mother's.

"Sorry I'm running late, Hon." Flushed and out of breath, she pushes at an escaping strand of silver hair. Then, suddenly, she looks at me as if we haven't missed a day in all the years that have passed. "Skinny and freckled just like when you was a kid. Except for that wild hair and that short skirt." She takes my arm in hers and picks up my suitcase in her other hand and we move through the crowds making slight adjustments to our path as if she carries a map that always takes her the best way.

As we weave through the crowd, she squeezes my arm. "Darlin' I'm sorry this was such short notice. I know the way you always were a worry wart just like your mama. It's just that he's been havin' these spells. Can't sleep at night, he sweats so much. But you

know how he is . . .he wouldn't go to the doctor until I threatened to go up there myself and tie him up and haul him to the hospital in the pickup."

She catches me looking around like we've forgotten someone and stops in her tracks. "He's home now with your mama. That's why she's not here."

Before I have time to take in this fact, we are out the glass doors, across the parking lot, and in the pickup.

"Where's Tommy?" I ask as Silver leans her head out the window to pay the parking fee.

"Broken leg, wouldn't ya know? We got rid of the horses; mostly they died of old age, except for Elvis, the last to go. Tommy fell with him. He never should've been ridin' him . . .they were both too old and just about as ornery as each other. They both broke a leg. I still tease him that it might have been better if I shot him instead of the horse." She laughs her big full laugh and I settle into the old comfort of our friendship.

We move out on to the highway where patches of snow spring up here and there along the scrubby, red earth. The sky rises, achingly blue at the edge of the land just as it had as the plane arched over the Sandias.

This is not the trip home I had planned for so long. I won't arrive with a life full of stories to tell the family I have left behind. Charlotte, Lucy and Raymond are all gone now—lost to cancer. And my dad is next. I have come home divorced and jobless to watch my father die.

"So, the old coot's still full of piss and vinegar?" I ask about Uncle Tommy, hoping to cover up my guilt for wishing this a different visit.

"Oh, yeh. He's full of that and some of the other stuff too. Still hides cigarettes all over the place like I'm some kind of fool and won't find them."

We bump along in silence until Silver turns on to a four-lane interstate that used to be two-lane.

"So the marriage thing didn't work out?" There is no judgment in her voice. "Some kind of doctor wasn't he?"

"Astronomer."

"Like you? Two people in the same profession is trouble. He hurt you?"

"We hurt each other." I want to tell her my generation is different, that we know nothing lasts forever. We know when to get out. But for me, none of it's true and that's what ended my marriage. I wanted what Tommy and Silver have but I always ran when it got too hard. My voice comes out desperate and small like it did when we left Rio Rosa all those years ago. "Could we drive back through the orchards?"

"Oh, sure." Silver looks over at me. "We can do that after you get unpacked and have a nice bath."

"No. I mean before we go in." I look down at my hands shredding the Kleenex I've been holding since I got off the plane.

When we finally slow down at the rusting metal sign marking the turn-off to "Drea Orchards," I realize I haven't asked a single question about my father.

Silver reaches across and pats my hand. "You look a little pasty. You gonna throw up?"

"No, I'm fine . . . it's just that I'm not quite ready to face everybody." What I really mean is that I'm not ready to face why I've returned.

"It's only Tommy there now. He's not gonna bite. I'll take you up to your folks tomorrow."

"It's just. . . I've just been away so long and now Dad's so sick . . ."

"You feel guilty?"

As we lurch over the rough dirt road, I look at her blotchy brown hands on the truck's steering wheel, her neck arched forward as if to give her momentum. "God. How do you do it? You read my mind. It used to freak me out when I was a kid. You just always seemed to know exactly what I was thinking before I could even open my mouth."

"It's not that hard with you, Darcy. You're not as complicated as you like to think, even with all that education. You've got that frightened deer look like you done somethin' wrong. Guilt's pretty easy to guess. You looked that way a lot when you was a kid."

"I did?"

Suddenly, we turn sharply over a cattle guard and into the oldest orchard on the property. Silver pulls up between two apricot trees and turns off the motor. "Uh huh. And you know somethin else?" She lifts my chin in her large hand and looks directly into my eyes.

"What?"

"There's not a thing in the world for you to be feelin' guilty about. You had to get away. There was nothin' here for you. And your mama . . . well, let's just say that she could rub a wound to the bone. All that stuff that happened during the war. . . she just never seemed to get over it."

"What about Dad?"

She shakes her head. "That's a whole other story, Darcy. After you left, we didn't hear much from either of them. Then, one day, I looked out the window and there he was. Said Ida had kicked him out. He only stayed a few days but he was on the phone to her every chance he got and pretty soon, he headed back home. Never did tell us much about

what happened but he did tell me he was proud of you. You know him, though, he was never one to talk much about his feelings."

We get out of the truck and walk slowly, winding through the trees, their branches knobby and gnarled from years of pruning.

"These old trees don't produce much anymore. We just can't keep up without help. Sometimes they remind me of myself." Silver lifts a brittle branch and snaps it off. "Remember when we used to pick fruit and spend hours canning. We'd laugh and work and eat together day after day, one day just running into the other?"

"Yeh, I remember," I say and I have to turn away so she won't see my tears. I feel suddenly more homesick than I have ever admitted.

"You're Mama means well, you know. So does your Daddy. Here." She hands me a clean hanky and I blow my nose. "Oh, and before I forget, she asked me to give this to you. Maybe she thought you'd chicken out and not come to see them." She paws through her purse and comes up with a small leather pouch.

"It's for safe travel over the sea, or so she tells me."

"Am I going somewhere?" I open the pouch and there is the little glass bird I dusted every Saturday.

She doesn't answer, just says, "There's something else in there too."

I put my finger in and come up with what looks like a piece of jerky and I know immediately what it is. "A caul, but how could. . ."

"Lottie's," she says. "Charlotte saved it for your mama."

"But why couldn't Mama give it to me?"

She stops walking and I take her arm, remembering the way her solid warmth could make everything seem possible. "Honey, he ain't got long and she's got a lot on her mind."

"How long?"

She looks back over her shoulder as if someone might be behind us and I watch her chest heave under her heavy wool poncho. "Okay. The truth?"

I nod. "I can take it, I promise."

"Well, it's at the end stage now, Darcy. They say most of his organs have failed."

"The cancer. . ."

She looks down, studies the frozen ground. "You mean you don't know? Lordy, that's just like your mama. I shouldn't be the one to tell you this."

"I just assumed it was cancer from what she told me."

"Look, Kiddo, it's nothin' to be ashamed of. Lot's of men came back with it after the war."

"With what?"

"VD. They didn't catch it in time when he first got it. Your mama's known about it for years; that's what half the fightin' was about. I just thought she would've told you by now."

Through the winter-gray orchard, I can see the house, its dirty white stucco, its leaning porch. When I turn back to the truck I feel as bare as the trees.

33

I don't know what I expect when Silver brings me to my mother's door. For so many years I wanted her to leave him in peace, move somewhere else, get a job. But she didn't. There was no liberated Ida briskly walking into an independent future. There was only that short separation that Silver told me about. Instead, she had discovered Valium and stayed right there to haunt my father. And, I suppose I've come to believe that in some strange revengeful way, this was her own brand of gumption. She had always been more like her own mother than she would ever admit.

Somewhere in my mind, I think I expect that she has been sitting in the kitchen the whole time, smoking silently, wrapped in her grief, like she was the day I left. But when she opens the door, I know instantly that something has changed. Her dark hair is streaked with gray and has been cut stylishly short. She is wearing large silver earrings and a heavy turquoise necklace with a black sweater and jeans. She looks like a woman who knows who she is and when she smiles and takes me in her arms, I am suddenly pulled back into

all that old longing for the mother she had never managed to be. I feel my body tighten, waiting for her to break the moment. And when she doesn't, I am suddenly embarrassed.

I try to ignore the wounded disappointment that moves across her face as I step back. "How is he?" I ask as I look past her toward the bedroom.

She puts out her hand and touches my arm. "He won't be like you remember him."

"I know," I say.

"No, you don't," she says but she steps aside and lets me go just as she always has.

When I get to the bedroom door I stop, afraid that she is right, afraid that I won't recognize him, afraid that he won't even know who I am. I stand in a rectangle of dim light in the hallway, a patch of empty space somewhere between them. I can feel her watching me and I have to fight the urge to turn and run.

"Go on in. He'll know you're there," she says.

As I push the door open, I say, "Daddy? It's me, Darcy."

He is lying there looking up at the empty ceiling and, as I move closer, I can see the ruined skin stretched across the sharp edges of his cheekbones. The dark sockets of his eyes.

He turns his head toward me and his lips open and close like some kind of dying fish fighting for air. I force myself to sit down in the chair next to the bed, fighting the gag reflex in my throat. I put my hand out to touch him but he moans softly and I can't help myself, I have to turn away.

"He's in a lot of pain." My mother stands in the doorway watching me. "Even the slightest touch seems to hurt."

"How long has he been this way?"

"A few days. I give him the morphine but it doesn't seem to help much. He refused to go to the hospital again." She puts down the clean sheets she's holding. "I was just going to change the bed. Can you pick him up?"

I look at my father, remembering his sturdy, muscular body. "I don't think I could lift him."

She comes over and pulls the covers down and I gasp. He can't weigh more than sixty or seventy pounds and I feel the memory of that old dream I used to have slide into place: his emaciated body, the Japanese soldiers, the woman in the kimono calling his name.

"You take one side and I'll take the other. We'll put him on the cot." She nods toward a fold-up bed in the corner of the room and I wonder if she sleeps there.

"Okay, on the count of three," she says, "one . . . two . . . three!" And then we are lifting him in our arms like some starving child and I feel his fragile bones against my skin. He moans in pain as we put him on the cot and I can't look at his face.

"Is this Grandma Drea's star pattern?" I ask, fingering the quilt folded at the foot of the cot.

"Yes, you always liked that pattern. It's held up pretty well. Cover him up. He gets chilled."

She strips the sheets and stuffs them into a pillowcase, then swiftly makes the bed but I can't move from where I stand. I watch her bring a warm washcloth and a bowl of clean water to the table next to the cot. I watch her wash my father's face and comb his hair. I watch her remove his pajama top and bath his torso with a gentleness I could never have imagined.

When she starts to remove his pajama bottoms, she looks up at me and says, "You better go get cleaned up yourself. I'll call you if I need you."

When I come out of the bathroom she's standing in the hallway holding the pillowcase filled with the soiled sheets. She seems to be staring at the open bedroom door as if she's listening for something and I wonder if she ever stood like that, waiting for my sleeping breath and the quiet rustle of the sheets as I moved toward more warmth.

But there is no reassurance coming from that open door as my father worries the air in and out of his lungs like some expiring old engine. I watch her take a step back and put the pillowcase down. Her hand shakes as she pulls a hankie out of her pocket and mops at her eyes.

When she looks up and sees me, she picks up the pillowcase again and brushes past me. "I hate this," is all she says as she goes into the room and closes the door.

Later, she comes into the kitchen where I am sitting, reading the newspaper. She has one of Dad's old hats in her hand, the gray felt one I had sent him for Christmas the year I left home. She puts it on the table and sits down.

"He wore this every day."

I know she's looking at me but I don't think I can face her sadness. Not when I haven't faced my own. "Sandwich?" I say as I stand up and fiddle with the bread bag sitting on the kitchen counter.

"He loved you, Darcy. You know that, don't you?"

She has never said anything like this to me before so I refill my cup and sit down again. She's kneading the hat between her fingers and I watch her lift it to her face, letting the smell of the stained leather band sink into her. I watch her sob into its soft darkness, lost in the scent of hair cream and sweat.

When she finally looks up, she says, "I want you to have this." She pushes the hat across the table. "He would have wanted you to have it."

As I touch the brim, I suddenly see his face grinning at me clear as day and, without warning, the ugly sound of my own grief rises up through my throat again.

She stands up then and moves behind me. When she puts her hands on my shoulders, I shrug them off; I know what is coming and there's no stopping it now. "It's a little late isn't it? All this sentiment? Where were you when I needed you? When he needed you? And why do you talk about him as if he's already dead?"

I expect her to answer but she doesn't. She just sits back down and waits.

"All you ever did was disappear. Every time anything got hard, you'd just close the door and leave Dad and me to deal with it. You want to know what I learned from you? Do you?"

Her voice is barely a whisper. "Darcy, I know you're upset . . ."

"I learned to close the door and I learned to leave. That's what you taught me. That's what I do best. In fact, I'm surprised either of us is still sitting here."

She stands up then and opens a cupboard door. She takes out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and I watch her light one and pull the smoke up through her nose.

"Two sides," she says.

"What?"

"Two sides to every story. Did you ever bother to think about mine?"

"If you were so unhappy, why didn't *you* just leave instead of hiding away from us. You *made* me take sides."

She walks over to the table and slides a fat envelope toward the hat.

"This is for you. Go ahead. Open it."

Inside is a stack of hundred dollar bills and a folded snapshot. It's the girl in the school uniform.

I don't know how long I sit there staring at it but when I look up, she has already turned to leave. "Mom," I say, "I can't take it."

"You go find her. Maybe you two can put things right even if we never could."

August 20, 1975

Maybe it's wrong to tell you the end of their story. I just hope you will understand when I tell you that what follows is written with the raw taste of grief still in my mouth. After your mother died, when you wrote that letter to your father—our father, I know that you must have tasted it then. We have this in common.

After all this time, maybe you don't want to know. But like I said before, I can't stop thinking about you on the other side of the world with your story and me over here with mine. We're like separate galaxies that can only be seen from a particular planet. What would happen, I wonder, if we each took a step beyond our own cluster of stars? Would we both become more certain about the past? This is what propels me into an unknown future. It's a romantic notion, I know—this hope that I will somehow find you and that together we might become part of something more complete—but I am coming, Hoshi. I am coming to you.

Love,

Your Sister, Darcy Rain

Epilogue

Neither of us said a word on the way down the hill but it took most of the night to get to where we were going and eventually she began to talk. She told me that when they first met he had taken her to this secret place, a pool of clean water in the middle of the desert at the end of the Jornada del Muerto. It was fed by an underground spring, she said, and he thought it was the purest place on earth. She told me they went back there right after he returned from the war but it was fenced off by the government and they couldn't get to it He had wanted to say good-bye to Lottie there. She told me about leaving home and meeting him on the road, about their quick romance, about their wedding. About her journey back home, about waiting out the war with Charlotte. She didn't let me ask questions but just kept up a steady stream of memories and pretty soon I understood that she was telling me the good things she remembered and leaving out the rest. This was her way of saying goodbye to Johnny.

He hadn't opened his eyes since we left and his breathing was even more shallow than the last time I checked. We had wrapped him in Grandma Drea's quilt and I sat in the back seat, cradling him in my arms, wondering if he could hear her recalling the past.

It was still dark when we came to a cairn strewn with the feathers and stones of previous visitors. She pulled off the highway and drove a few miles down the soft dirt of a side road, then stopped and switched on the inside light. "We're here Johnny," she said.

I can't be certain but I thought I saw a slight smile cross his lips and I felt my heart crash against my chest. I suddenly remembered how, when I was little, he would lift me into his arms and carry me into the house after we'd driven home from visiting Charlotte.

Sometimes I'd play possum just so I could nuzzle against his whiskers and he'd carry me in and put me to bed.

When she got out of the car and opened the rear door, I watched her take his hand in hers. The hand that had long ago grown too thin for its wedding band, the hand that had once lit a cigarette, repaired a carburetor, and tickled me until I rolled on the floor giggling. The hand that had once touched her like a lover.

"Johnny?" she whispered, but we both knew he couldn't answer. "Remember, you said if the truth was known and we dug deep enough, we'd end up on the other side of the world? You said this was the place you wanted. . ." The words caught in her throat and she looked up as if the dark sky might suddenly fall.

He was never one for ritual but he wanted to be washed clean. She told me she had promised. And, no matter how much my heart protested, I couldn't refuse. So, I watched her gently push the quilt around him, then lift him up into her arms. When I tried to help, she just looked toward the fan of flat rocks in front of us and said, "No. This is between him and me."

So, I picked up the pillows that had dropped to the ground, shook them off and closed the car doors and waited. I could hear the soft crunch of her boots on the gravel as she walked in short fast steps like people do when they're hurrying to put down a heavy load.

When she got to the edge of the stones, I heard her say, "Oh, God. . . I forgot the other blankets."

I pictured them sitting in a stack on the kitchen table where we had put them the night before and I felt myself smiling. I think he would have laughed at her if he could have. He would have laughed at the absurdity of worrying about keeping him warm given what he

had asked her to do. Maybe we all would have laughed together if the picture of a woman walking on the cold edge of darkness with her dying husband in her arms weren't so pathetically tragic.

I could see her kneeling on the bank and I imagined how she could feel him shivering in her arms just before she offered him to the black water. I wanted to stop her. Wanted to ask her if she was doing the right thing. But I couldn't move. I knew that if she had suddenly dropped him before she reached the edge, we all would have shattered like glass.